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Preface

In the words of Yuval Noah Harari, a famous historian and thinker, “Humans think in stories rather than in facts, numbers, or equations, and the simpler the story, the better. Every person, group, and nation has its own tales and myths.”

Of course, the nation of China is no exception.

The Story of Chinese Philosophy is an exploration of Chinese philosophy, crafted to inspire readers to read, reflect, and share this intellectual heritage with the world, fostering a deeper understanding of China and its vibrant cultural traditions.

The book offers a concise representation of the profound ideas that have shaped Chinese philosophy over thousands of years—from ancient sages to modern intellectuals. It captures pivotal moments in the evolution of Chinese thought, exploring the origins of these ideas and their historical significance.

As stated in *The Book of Changes*, “We look at the ornamental figures of the sky, and thereby ascertain the changes of

观乎天文，以察时变；观乎人文，以化成天下。

——《周易·上经》

the seasons. We look at the ornamental observances of society, and understand how the processes of transformation are accomplished all under heaven.” Chinese philosophy has long sought answers to life’s mysteries. Its ultimate aim—to help humanity achieve “the highest excellence” and “universal harmony”—resonates deeply within the heart of Chinese civilization.

Chinese philosophy stands among the world’s most profound intellectual traditions, addressing fundamental questions of existence. Its great thinkers have influenced not only Chinese history but also global thought, offering unique perspectives on ethics, metaphysics, governance, and human betterment.

Regarded as one of the most cherished parts of China’s contribution to the world, Chinese philosophy bridges cultures and fosters meaningful dialogues. German philosopher Hermann Keyserling believed that it is vital for Chinese thinkers to share their wisdom, fostering cultural exchange between China and the world. This book is an effort to contribute to this grand narrative and to tell the stories of China well.

The book weaves the tales and ideas that have defined China’s intellectual legacy. Each chapter is thoughtfully structured to:

- (1) introduce the philosophers or classics with a brief overview in Chinese, providing readers with essential context for the discussion that follows;
- (2) unfold a thematic narrative, revealing the historical background, reasoning, and development of key doctrines at critical junctures in China’s intellectual journey;

- (3) present original Chinese quotations, allowing readers to engage directly with the brilliance and essence of these ideas in their native form.

We believe that the timeless wisdom of Chinese philosophy can help navigate the complexities of the modern world, offering valuable insights into sustainable living, social harmony, and personal cultivation. By sharing this vision globally, Chinese philosophy can contribute to a brighter future for all, as has long been aspired to by Chinese philosophers like Zhang Zai, a scholar of the Song Dynasty, who once wrote, “To ordain conscience for heaven and earth, to secure life and fortune for the people, to continue lost teachings for past sages, and to establish peace for all future generations.”

为天地立心，为生民立命，
为往圣继绝学，为万世开
太平。

——张载《横渠语录》

The Chinese Philosophy

China is a story—a story of its land, its people, and its history. At the heart of this story lies its philosophy.

“Heaven gives birth to the
multitude of people.

天生烝民，有物有则。

As there are things, there are
their specific principles.”

——《诗经·烝民》

For millennia, the Chinese people have embraced the belief that existence is governed by universal principles—eternal laws that shape all things and their interconnected relationships. Central to this worldview is the recognition that every being and every phenomenon carries within it an inherent order, a principle that reveals profound correlations between the natural world and humanity.

This holistic perspective gave rise to a philosophy deeply rooted in the foundation of Chinese civilization—a timeless wisdom that celebrates the harmonious interplay of the Dao of heaven, the Dao of earth, and the Dao of man, often referred to as “heaven and man being united as one.” It reveres the balance between humanity and nature, cherishes the interconnectedness of all things, and upholds moral virtues such as integrity, benevolence, and righteousness.

哲，智也。

——《尔雅·释言》

Generally speaking, the concept of philosophy, while originating from ancient Greece as “the love of wisdom,” found its parallel in ancient China. Classical Chinese texts refer to this pursuit as *zhe*, which similarly concerns wisdom. However, Chinese philosophy distinguishes itself through its theoretical and practical approaches, born from the crucible of the social, political, and existential questions of its time. It seeks not only to unravel the mysteries of the cosmos but also to plumb the depths of humanity and illuminate the path to an ideal way of life.

Over thousands of years, Chinese philosophy has cultivated a profound wisdom that permeates every aspect of life. This wisdom, nurtured by the adaptability and ingenuity of the Chinese people, unfolds as a grand narrative of human thought, encompassing the subtleties of behavior, the art of living, and the complexities of governance, while showing their pursuit of tranquility and cultivation of love and benevolence. It stands as a testament to the best of humanity, embodying the essence of a civilization that not only fosters harmony in its coexistence with other civilizations, but also thrives in its own right.

With philosophy at its core, Chinese civilization flourished along the life-nourishing banks of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers, which parallels the development of other great ancient civilizations. From the Stone Age through the Bronze Age and the Iron Age to the modern era, China’s intellectual journey not only parallels but outlives those of other ancient civilizations

such as Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, and the Indus Valley. During the transformative “Axial Age” (approximately the 8th to 2nd centuries B.C.E.), a period identified by German philosopher Karl Jaspers as a time of profound philosophical and spiritual awakening across multiple civilizations, China laid down its distinctive spiritual and philosophical foundations. This era, marked by the emergence of great thinkers like Confucius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi, contributed significantly to the grand panorama of human wisdom while shaping China’s enduring cultural and intellectual identity.

The story of Chinese philosophy is more a grand drama of intellectual thought played out on the ancient soil of China than an academic pursuit. It is characterized by various universal themes, vivid personalities, and intricate conceptual debates. This philosophical tradition is at once historic and timeless, idealistic and pragmatic, a metaphysical exploration that touches the very core of human existence.

Background and setting

On the vast central plains of East Asia, China stands as a geographic marvel.

In ancient times, as elsewhere in the world, life flourished on Chinese soil. The early Chinese, roaming forests and swimming rivers in search of sustenance, observed celestial movements and developed an understanding of day and night. They came to understand the world around them and began to master their environment through symbolic language and collective wisdom.

As hunter-gatherers transitioned to farmers, they set the stage for expansion and innovation. Agriculture necessitated timekeeping, spurring intellectual inquiry and technological advancement. Seasonal cycles shaped social life and agricultural practices, fostering concepts of cyclical change, balance, and harmony with nature. Innovations flourished in various fields.

Pottery was developed for a variety of practical applications, such as

cooking and storage. The silkworm, the world's only fully domesticated insect, was cultivated for silk production, earning the land the name "Seres" among distant traders. The casting of bronze vessels, including the legendary nine *ding* (ceremonial bronze wares), marked a key development in Chinese Bronze Age culture.

As communities grew more complex, states began to emerge. Calendars became instruments of social regulation, while increasing populations witnessed the formation of cities, states, and eventually empires. The need for governance gave rise to early law codes and social structures. Legendary figures like the Yellow Emperor and Yao became synonymous with progress and virtue, credited with numerous inventions and the establishment of rules for cultivation.

Most importantly, Chinese characters, known as the "art of line," were born, marking a significant milestone in Chinese civilization. As time went by, these characters came to carry symbolic meanings beyond the objects they depicted, laying the foundation for a rich communicative culture.

Amidst this diverse yet complementary landscape, a trend toward unity and cohesion developed. People cultivated ideas of cooperation, social order, and harmony with nature. They found virtue in observing the cosmos and understanding the laws that governed all things under heaven. As the ancient text states, "By looking at the stars above and the earth below, one can see what

is implied and what is obvious."

Thus, people understood that all things around them were governed by some laws, and they observed and followed the laws.

Order was established, with production and daily life guided by both practical and ceremonial considerations. As the ancient wisdom counsels, "A man of virtue pursues Dao, practices virtue and

仰以观于天文，俯以察于地理，
是故知幽明之故。

——《周易·系辞上》

志于道，据于德，依于仁，游
于艺。

——《论语·述而》

benevolence, and engages extensively in the six arts.” The concept of “universal harmony” also emerged, fostering a sense of shared destiny.

With a vision of a harmonious world, the Chinese named themselves and their territories Huaxia with pride. “Since the ancient Huaxia people practiced grand and elaborate rituals, they called themselves Xia (great). Their dresses were resplendent, so they were referred to as Hua (splendid). Therefore, Hua and Xia are one and the oneness.” This demonstrates how aesthetic satisfaction and ethical principles are profoundly interlinked, grounded in traditions that cherish both beauty and morality.

中国有礼义之大，故称夏；有服章之美，谓之华。华夏一也。

——《春秋左传正义·定公》

They also referred to their land as Tianxia or Sihai. In *Strategies of the Warring States*, there is a comment about *zhongguo* or the Middle Kingdom: “*Zhongguo* is an area where wise people congregate, various assets conglomerate, wise and capable people extend their teachings, principles of benevolence and righteousness are advocated and practiced, *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Rites*, and *The Book of Music* are taught, and the feats of the talented people are exhibited. Moreover, people of distant places observe and mimic our customs, and the minority peoples regard us as paragons.”

中国者，聪明睿知之所居也，万物财用之所聚也，贤圣之所教也，仁义之所施也，诗书礼乐之所用也，异敏技艺之所试也，远方之所观赴也，蛮夷之所义行也。

——《战国策·赵策》

Characters and themes

An era of turmoil dawned as the ruling Zhou Dynasty disintegrated. The entire land was engulfed in disorder and bloodshed, with wars

and conflicts erupting, bringing misery across the state. A poem of the time vividly captured this chaos:

𠄎 𠄎
烨烨震电，
不宁不令。
百川沸腾，
山冢萃崩。
高岸为谷，
深谷为陵。
哀今之人，
胡憯莫惩！

——《诗经·十月之交》

“Lightning flashes, thunders roar;
Disturbances and unrest upsoar.
The flood overflows the rills;
The crags roll down the hills.
The hills subside into vales;
The vales rise into hills.
Alas! For those who hold the power,
Why are they not alert now!”

These images, while seemingly describing natural upheaval, actually mirrored the social chaos of the period.

As moral degeneration worsened, thinkers and scholars, whom we now call “philosophers,” emerged one after another in an attempt to save the

𠄎 𠄎
士不可以不弘毅，
任重而道远。

——《论语·泰伯》

world. They believed that “intellectuals should be strenuous, for their duty is heavy and their journey will be long.” The masters of A Hundred Schools of Thought began to think, debate, and argue about the trends of the world and

humanity.

Building on the foundation set by the Duke of Zhou, who had earlier maintained rites and music to stabilize the Zhou Dynasty, new thinkers emerged with fresh perspectives. Laozi, Confucius, Mozi, Han Fei, Zou Yan, and others put forward their outlooks and doctrines, and established schools such as Daoism, Confucianism, Mohism, Legalism, and the Yin-Yang School. These masters vied with one another to expound their views and proposals for attaining a harmonious social and political order.

The schools of thought varied widely in their approaches: Some stressed

social responsibility, while others praised spontaneity and naturalness; some focused on human affairs, while others sought to transcend the human condition; some engaged deeply with society, while others advocated for withdrawal; some urged a return to the teachings of ancient sages like Yao, Shun, and Yu, while others sought better conditions through radical changes.

Their philosophical inquiries spanned humanism, aesthetics, morality, and the unique Chinese concept of Dao, forming a Chinese worldview that harmonizes heaven, earth, and man.

In the political realm, philosophers explored ideal social structures, from monarchy to meritocracy, always with an eye toward a more orderly society. Aesthetically, these thinkers plumbed the depths of beauty, finding it not only in the tangible world of literature, painting, calligraphy, and architecture, but also in the ineffable realms of thought and spirit. Ethics occupied a central place, as thinkers grappled with questions of moral conduct and the nature of good and evil. Metaphysically, they sought to reconcile the practical and the ideal, probing the ultimate nature of reality and the interplay of mind and matter.

Such active theory-building and academic debating marked the golden age of Chinese philosophy, establishing a rich tradition that has influenced thinkers for millennia. Subsequent generations either built upon these classical foundations or forged new paths, always keeping an eye on shaping a better future for the country.

Chinese philosophy stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of a great civilization. From Confucius' emphasis on virtue and social harmony to Laozi's vision of natural simplicity, and from the cosmic wisdom of *The Book of Changes* to the synthesizing efforts of modern thinkers, it embodies a rich treasure trove of ideas. These philosophies continue to shape China's spirit and destiny, embodying a living legacy that pulses with the wisdom of the ages.



《周易》是中国最古老的典籍之一，被视为儒家“五经”之首。

《周易》由“经”和“传”两部分组成。“经”包括六十四卦，每个卦由六爻组成，用来描述宇宙万物的变化规律。“传”包含解释卦辞和爻辞的七种文辞共十篇，统称《十翼》。作为中国传统文化的重要组成部分，《周易》对中国哲学、科学、文学、艺术等诸多领域都产生了深远影响。它不仅是一部占卜之书，更是一部哲学著作，探讨了宇宙、人生和社会的根本问题。

CHAPTER

1

The Great Code in the Making

The Book of Changes

The story of Chinese philosophy takes off with *The Book of Changes*. This is a story of stories from ancient China, unfolding and showcasing that our world is constantly changing. It is a story of words and symbols from the sages, teaching us how to understand and align ourselves with changes. It is a story told and retold by countless people, both ancient and modern, from both at home and abroad. It is a philosophical story of Chinese wisdom, decoding the world and showing how change transforms both us and the world anew.

The Book of Changes is exalted as “the Great Code of China for

deciphering the meaning of change in natural events or human affairs.” It embodies the formative philosophical ideas of the unity of nature and man, emphasizing how human actions and natural processes follow the same principles of change. It is a philosophical kaleidoscope, offering new perspectives with each turn.

Legend has it that the creation of this great philosophical code begins with Fuxi, who, in a moment of divine inspiration, gazed upon the patterns of nature and conceived “the eight trigrams.” These trigrams are the building blocks of a profound system for understanding the world.

Centuries passed, and the wisdom of Fuxi found new life in the hands of King Wen of Zhou, who was then imprisoned by a tyrannical ruler. In his cell, King Wen pondered the trigrams, expanding them into “the 64 hexagrams,” each a key to unlocking the mysteries of change and circumstance. His son, the Duke of Zhou, continued this work, adding layers of interpretation to his father’s insights.

As the ages turned, the great sage Confucius encountered this evolving text. Recognizing its profound importance, he added his own commentaries, *Ten Wings*, elevating the work to new heights of philosophical exploration.

Thus was born *The Book of Changes*, a living philosophical document that grew with each passing era. It became a guide for the ancient people to live good lives, for rulers to govern wisely, and for the world to operate in harmony.

Fuxi: The eight graphic symbols

In the ancient land of China, where fertile plains were nourished by the mighty Yellow River, the people, following the rhythms of nature, toiled ceaselessly. As they did, they observed the world around them—the sun rising anew each day, the cyclical dance of life from birth to death, the perpetual shifts from night to day, and the grand procession of seasons from summer to winter. Amidst this constant flux, they began to conceive the dual

forces of yin and yang, recognizing their ceaseless transformation from one into the other. Their hearts and minds yearned for understanding and solving the mysteries of the cosmos.

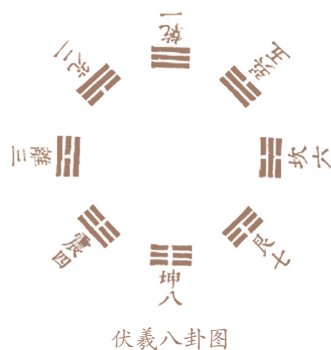
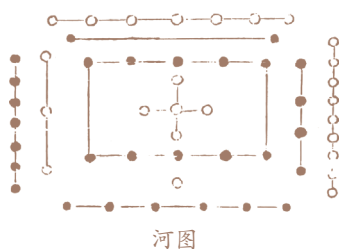
Amidst their wonderings, a wise man named Fuxi, also called Taihao, meaning “the great bright one,” appeared to decode these mysteries. While teaching his people to tame animals and catch fish with nets, Fuxi “looked up into the sky to observe celestial phenomena and looked down on the land to observe geographical features and examine the images of birds, beasts, and all other things that existed on the earth. He selected symbols from the human body close by and from various objects far away, and then invented the eight trigrams to explain the miraculous nature and distinguish the states of all things.”

古者包牺氏之王天下也，仰则观象于天，俯则观法于地，观鸟兽之文，与地之宜，近取诸身，远取诸物，于是始作八卦，以通神明之德，以类万物之情。

——《周易·系辞下》

One day, according to legend, Fuxi saw a dragon-horse emerge from the Yellow River with a map on its back. The map, later known as *hetu*, inspired Fuxi. It was formed by numbers one to ten. Based on the symbols, Fuxi created the eight trigrams. Each trigram consists of three stacked lines, which could be either broken or solid, representing the cosmic duality of yin and yang. In his wisdom, Fuxi decoded the cosmic codes of change and arranged them into these eight trigrams, concluding that the universe was composed of these opposing forces.

Fuxi’s eight trigrams symbolize the eight fundamental elements or factors of



the universe. Each trigram corresponds to a direction, a natural element, and a moral quality. *Qian* is heaven, *kun* is earth, *zhen* is thunder, *xun* is wind, *kan* is water, *li* is fire, *gen* is mountain, and *dui* is lake. It was told that Fuxi hung the eight graphic symbols on trees for his people to consult; hence they were called *bagua*. Thus, the eight trigrams emerged, giving the people of ancient China a profound tool for navigating the ever-changing currents of life.

The trigrams offered a unique lens through which the interplay of yin and yang could be understood, emphasizing the importance of balance and harmony in both cosmic and human realms. They later evolved into *The Book of Changes*, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the natural world and human behavior, and interpreting the complexities of the universe. These symbols lay the groundwork for the rich development of Chinese philosophical thought that would follow.

King Wen of Zhou: The 64 hexagrams and judgments

Another span of thousands of years passed, to the founding period of the Zhou Dynasty, during which the second edition, or “layer,” of *The Book of Changes*, was developed by King Wen of Zhou.

King Wen of Zhou is regarded as the founder of the Zhou Dynasty. Before the Zhou Dynasty was established, King Wen was imprisoned in

Youli by the Shang ruler for suspected treason. During his imprisonment, he speculated on the shifts of day and night, life and death, and other changes in human life and the natural

world. Through this contemplation, he believed that he had come to understand the Dao (Way) of heaven and earth. During his seven years in prison, he rearranged Fuxi’s eight trigrams by coupling them to form the 64 hexagrams, where 384 lines were included.

盖文王拘而演《周易》
——司马迁《报任安书》

In the 64 hexagrams, King Wen expanded on Fuxi's theory on the movements of the vital yin-yang forces of nature under the conditions of each hexagram. To each hexagram, King Wen gave a name and a thematic text, later called Tuan or the Hexagram Judgment, which presents a summary of the hexagram's chief attributes, the expected impact upon the person involved, and related advice.

The 64 hexagrams and hexagram judgments formulated "the second layer" of the work, which has since become an integral part of the book and the basis of divination. It is said that his son, the Duke of Zhou, added additional interpretative text, bringing the book closer to its current form.

With the contributions of King Wen, this book of divination evolved into a book of wisdom. King Wen's arrangement of the 64 hexagrams and his insightful interpretations provided a structured framework that allowed the hexagrams to be used to predict one's future actions based on the correct actions one should first take. It showed that when things were controlled at their beginning, actions could be taken with foresight until consequences manifested. It was at this time that a guidebook of divination turned into an advisor on how to behave, govern, compete, find tranquility, and contemplate the future—how harmony can be found between nature and man, and man and man.

Confucius: *Ten Wings*

History progressed into the Spring and Autumn Period, where a philosopher named Confucius, the great Chinese thinker, added his intellectual "wings" to *The Book of Changes*, allowing it to "fly" into the realm of profound philosophy.

Sima Qian wrote in his *Records of the Historian* that in his old age, Confucius was fond of the hexagrams and devoted himself to a thorough study of them. He spent so much time on the book that "the leather thongs binding the wooden strips wore out three times." Confucius recalled that he

孔子晚而喜《易》……读
《易》，韦编三绝。

——《史记·孔子世家》

had continued to teach his disciples the doctrines of the classics when they were trapped between the State of Chen and the State of Cai, much like the days when King Wen was imprisoned in Youli. And just like

King Wen, it was during the most challenging time in his life that Confucius came to believe that he understood the Dao of heaven and earth.

加我数年，五十以学《易》，
可以无大过矣。

——《论语·述而》

The Analects says that Confucius loved the book and expressed his wish: “Grant me a few more years so that I may study *The Book of Changes* at the age of 50 and I shall be free from major errors.” He

wrote his commentaries on the book, later known as *Ten Wings*, which is considered the “third layer” of the text.

Ten Wings consists of 10 pieces of writing that deduce philosophical insights from the hexagrams and judgments. They provide a framework for interpreting the hexagrams not just as tools for divination, but as profound symbols of the dynamic interplay between fate and free will, and between the individual and the cosmos. They are profound and significant, transforming *The Book of Changes* from a handbook of divination into a work of philosophy and exercising an ever-increasing influence on its interpretation. With these wings, *The Book of Changes* began to shed new light on many secrets hidden in the often-puzzling modes of thought of the ancient thinkers. Many of its ideas were further developed in later Confucian texts, such as *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, two of the revered Four Books.

Confucius’ contributions added a new dimension to the classic, emphasizing the importance of ethical conduct, self-cultivation, and the harmony between human actions and cosmic principles. The philosophical elements introduced by Confucius ensured that *The Book of Changes* would endure as a timeless source of guidance and inspiration.

Decoding: The wisdom

“Compiled by three sages of the ancient dynasties,” *The Book of Changes* stands as the pinnacle of Confucian classics. It crystallizes ancient Chinese thought on universal phenomena and decodes the rhythms of change in nature and human affairs.

人更三圣，世历三古。

——《汉书·艺文志》

As the foundational proclamation of Chinese philosophy, *The Book of Changes* explores the interplay of yin and yang, as well as the relationship between nature and humanity. It posits that change is both inevitable and beneficial, urging us to “do away with the old and set up the new.”

革，去故也；鼎，取新也。

——《周易·杂卦》

The book’s wisdom lies in understanding the cyclical nature of change. It suggests that when things reach their extreme, they inevitably transform, often in the opposite direction. Human insight, it implies, comes from recognizing these turning points and facilitating smooth transitions. It beckons us to glimpse the immutable beyond the ephemeral. “... when things reach their extreme, change occurs. After the change, they evolve smoothly, and thus they continue for a long time.” Here lies the essence of Dao, inviting us to align with the natural rhythms of beings in the world. Harmony with these rhythms brings divine favor: “Heaven bestows help to the human world and benefits all.”

《易》穷则变，变则通，通则久。是以“自天祐之，吉无不利”。

——《周易·系辞下》

The philosophy of change, as articulated in this revered classic, permeates every aspect of life, from personal conduct to governance. It emphasizes the

importance of flexibility and acceptance, guiding humanity to find peace amidst constant flux and to shape our destinies through adaptability.

The Book of Changes, in essence, empowers us to pursue our goals by harmonizing with our environment. It portrays the universe as a self-transforming system, urging us to embrace ceaseless change. As the classic states, “The alternation of yin and yang constitutes Dao. Following Dao is virtuous, and it is in human nature to work in accordance with Dao.”

一阴一阳之谓道，继之者善也，
成之者性也。

——《周易·系辞上》

As an all-encompassing classic, *The Book of Changes* has profoundly influenced Chinese philosophy and culture for millennia. At its heart lies a profound truth: Change is inevitable, simple, and constant.

逝者如斯夫！不舍昼夜。

——《论语·子罕》

Confucius, who gave us *Ten Wings*, captured this essence as he stood by a river. He said, “It passes on just like this, no ceasing day or night!” This observation embodies the eternal dance of the universe, where all things flow and transform ceaselessly. The insight forms the bedrock of Chinese philosophical tradition, where change is not to be feared but understood as the natural order of all things, a dynamic equilibrium where yin and yang perpetually interact and transform.

Beyond China, the analogy of the flowing river finds kindred philosophies. In Greece, Heraclitus echoed, “Change alone is unchanging,” and “You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.” These parallel revelations, emerging independently across civilizations, suggest a profound universal truth about reality that

transcends geography and culture.

Though ancient, the wisdom of *The Book of Changes* remains eternally young, living on in our thoughts and actions. Its original texts preserve early Chinese worldview, while its interpretive traditions reveal cultural evolution. The book's emphasis on foresight and adaptive action continues to inform modern decision-making in fields from psychology to management. Its wisdom continues to guide us, offering a timeless compass for navigating human experience across generations. In an era of rapid change, the book's insights into transformation patterns remain relevant, helping us harmonize with life's constant flux while maintaining the core values of our civilizations.