Yijing, the core divination text of Zhouyi, Harrington and Adler devoted to convey Cheng Yi’s (程頤, 1033–1107) and Zhu Xi’s (朱熹, 1130–1200) specific understandings of the Yijing, which to a certain extent consolidated Edward Shaughnessy’s claim that Chinese commentarial tradition has become a legitimate field of study in its own right, instead of being just an aid or adjunct to the study of the classics themselves. (Commentary, Philosophy, and Translation: Reading Wang Bi’s Commentary to the Yijing in a New Way, Early China, Vol.22, 1997, p.221)

The title of the book is quite misleading. What Alder strives to explore is the “original meaning of the Yijing” understood by Zhu Xi, not the original meaning of the oldest core text as Redmond attempted to translate. Adler clarifies it in his book: “The ‘original meaning’ that Zhu Xi discerned, however, is quite different from what historically oriented modern scholars understand as the original meaning of the Yi in the context of Bronze Age statecraft and ritual.” (21) This historically oriented understanding of the Yijing was promoted first by the gu shi bian school (古史辨派) led by Gu Jiegang (顧頡剛, 1893–1980) and then found its way in an article written by Arthur Waley (1889–1966) entitled The Book of Changes. They used either oracle-bone inscriptions or anthropological evidence to reconstruct and reinterpret the historical context of the “original Zhouyi”, focusing only on the meaning of the hexagram and line statements, and separating them completely from the later commentaries, including the earliest Ten Wings supposedly composed from about 600 B.C. to 136 B.C. Waley instilled many fresh and novel ideas into the explanation of the basic texts. An good example is that he read the name of hexagram #33 as 豬 (young pig) instead of 遁 (to hide), thus the somewhat arcane and awkward phrases 遁尾, 系遁, 好遁, 嘉遁 and 肥遁 in line statements were conveniently interpreted as “the pig’s tail”, “to tie up the pig”, “a good pig”, “a lucky pig” and “a fat pig” (“The Book of Changes”, Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities 5, p.124). This explanation was so alluring that it attracted almost all later translators devoted to reveal the “original meaning” of the Bronze Age documents, among whom are Richard A. Kunst, Richard Rutt, Richard Gotshalk and Redmond. With slight adaptions they willingly accept Waley’s seemingly plausible but highly comprehensible interpretation. As Redmond said, “since it must have made sense to those who composed it and to its early readers, it should be possible to translate it so that it makes sense to us” (p.xi). In contrast, Adler adopted the more traditional interpretation and translated the name of #33 遁 into “withdrawing”. The above-mentioned phrases became respectively “the tail of withdrawal”, “being attached to withdrawal”, “to like withdrawing”, “admirable withdrawal”, and “comfortable withdrawal”. (169–170) Since Zhu Xi explained very clearly that 遁 means tui bi (退避), “withdrawal” is a suitable choice. We may compare it with Richard J. Lynn’s translation, which is based on Wang Bi’s (王弼, 226–249) interpretation and reads the name of #33 also as
“Withdrawal”, but accommodates the context to make the line statements more understandable. The corresponding phrases are translated as “at the tail of Withdrawal”, “to be so attached here at a time of Withdrawal”, “one should withdraw from that of which he is fond”, “praiseworthy Withdrawal” and “flying Withdrawal” (The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.8). Unlike Redmond, Adler cares less about the meaning of the Zhouyi at the time of its composition but more about how Zhu Xi understands and explains the meaning of the Yijing, as he said, “the focus of this book, then, is really Zhu Xi more than the Yijing itself.” (21)

According to Adler, Zhu Xi insisted that people in his time needed the assistance of the ancient Sages in their efforts of moral self-cultivation, and so they should take into account the Sages’ “original intention” in creating the Yijing. (13) Zhu firmly believed that “he had grasped the authorial intention of Fu Xi and the other Sages who had created the book; that the key to that intention was the use of the book as a divination text; that this method of divination provided access to the minds of those Sages.” (21) In a word, “Zhu Xi’s fundamental hermeneutic principle regarding the Yijing was that ‘the Yi was originally created for divination’.” (11) Zhu undertook the project of elucidating the Yijing with the hope to understand the natural/moral order and learn to become a Sage himself (21). Therefore, the element of divination is repeatedly stressed in the interpretation, which distinguished Adler’s book from those of other translators. We can find a lot of evidence to support this argument. For instance, the hexagram statement yuan heng li zheng 元亨利貞, as it first appeared in hexagram #1, it was translated into “Supreme and penetrating, appropriate and correct.” Here is the translation of Zhuxi’s explanation:

Yuan heng li zheng is the remark appended by King Wen to judge whether the hexagram is auspiciousness or ominous... King Wen considered the Way of Qian to be greatly penetrating and perfectly correct. Thus in divination if one gets this hexagram with all six lines unchanging, we say that the prognostication will be greatly penetrating, and it will surely be appropriate to be solidly correct; only then can [the course of action being considered] be maintained to its end. This is why the Sages created the Yi: their essential idea was to teach people to divine so that they can “reveal things and complete affairs.” (53)

Now it is generally agreed that the earliest core text of the Zhouyi was used as divination manual and translators working at reconstructing the “original meaning” of the oldest text generally had similar mindset with Zhu Xi and took the divination-oriented approach as the right way to understand the book. So Rutt translated yuan heng li zheng 元亨利貞 as “Supreme offering. Favourable augury.” (The Book of Changes: A Bronze Age Document, Surrey: Curzon, 1996, p.224) Richard Gotshalk
translated it as “(The occasion calls for) a grand sacrifice. A beneficial divination.”

(Divination, Order and the Zhouyi, New York: University Press of America, 1999, p.117) Redmond’s interpretation is “Begin with an offering; beneficial to divine.” (63) They all read heng 亨 (success) as the variant form of xiang 享 (sacrifice). Zhu Xi’s disciples recorded similar remarks of him in Zhuzi Yulei 朱子語類 (Classified Conversations) which deemed the two words synonymous and interpreted heng as “offering”, “sacrifice” or “pilgrimage”(Zhuzi Yulei, Vol.5. Compiled by Li jingde 黎靖德, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986, p.1661). But Zhu Xi deviated from this genuine divination-oriented approach by combining moral order with natural order in his interpretation. Therefore, we may find that his translation of yuan heng li zheng 原亨禮正 bear more resemblance with some early versions. For example, James Legge (1815–1897) translated the phrase as “Khien (represents) what is great and originating, penetrating, advantageous, correct and firm.” (The I Ching, New York: Dover Publications, 1963, p.57) In Wilhelm-Baynes’ translation it is “The creative works sublime success, furthering through perseverance” (I Ching or Book of Changes, New York: Penguin Books, 2003, p.4). To summarize, in Adler’s view, what Zhu Xi meant by the “original meaning” was the “the original intention” or “authorial intention” of the Sages, namely Fuxi, King Wen, Duke of Zhou and Confucius, in creating the Yijing. “Their essential idea was to teach people to divine so that they can reveal things and complete affairs.” That is why so many moral teachings, ethical standards and political principles etc. were integrated in Zhu Xi’s interpretations of the Yijing. That is possibly the reason why Adler abandoned Zhu Xi’s original arrangement of the Zhouyi benyi 周易本義 which separated the core text from the Ten Wings and adopted the collated arrangement which appended Tuan 彥 (Commentary), Xiang 象 (Commentary on the Images) and Wenyan 文言 (Commentary on the Words of the Text) to the related parts of the core text, because the collated arrangement seems to provide more workable connections for Zhu Xi’s understanding of the “original meaning”.

It was recorded in Zhuzi Yulei that Zhu Xi distinguished very clearly three levels of the Yijing:

In the beginning when Fuxi drew the images, he might have only used yang to indicate auspiciousness and yin ominousness. There were no words. Later King Wen found Fuxi’s intention incomprehensible and wrote hexagram statements, or in actual divinations the line image became inexplainable, and so Duke of Zhou wrote line statements. Later King Wen’s and Duke of Zhou’s intentions became inaccessible, and Confucius wrote the Ten Wings. All of them were devoted to explain the original meaning. (Zhuzi Yulei, Vol.4, p.1622)

Zhu Xi warned scholars that they should not mingle different levels of the Yijing together and attempt to fabricate an integrated thought. King Wen’s and Duke of Zhou’s interpretations already departed from Fuxi’s original intentions and
addressed their own ideas, but these ideas were still based on divinations. Confucius departed again from King Wen’s explanations and indulged in moral teachings, though they were developed out of divinations. In Adler’s view, Zhu Xi’s commentary “did not prevent him from using the text to express his own philosophy—as every commentator inevitably does. The Chinese commentarial tradition was, in fact, one of the major modes of philosophical writing.” (20) This justifies the studies of the Yi jing in history, that is, how the Yi jing was understood by particular people at a particular time. Adler, among a group of western Yi jing scholars, has virtually promoted this approach. He co-authored a book entitled Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching (1990), which sought to demonstrate how a particular subject “brought a set of specific historical questions to bear on the I (Yijing)”. In doing so, they attempted to show “how a classic was appropriated by later thinkers, how a single text could be taken to mean many different things.” (vii) The general assumption is that “the meaning of the I has always changed as the needs and applications of its users changed”. (ix) As Lynn puts it: “There is no one single Classic of Changes but rather as many versions of it as there are different commentaries on it. The text of the classic is so dense and opaque in so many places that its meaning depends entirely on how any particular commentary interprets it.” (The Classic of Changes, p.8)

In the English-speaking world, the popularity and fame of the Yi jing has been established by the Wilhelm-Baynes translation. Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) started the “Book of Wisdom” approach and believed that “the Yijing had something important to say to all humankind”, regarding the book “to be a global property and a work of timeless wisdom”. He tried to domesticate the Yijing by “calling on the authority of classical philosophers and literary figures like Kant, Goethe”, and citing the Bible for the same purpose (Richard Smith, The I Ching: A Biography, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012, pp.189–190). The domestication, together with Baynes’ Modern English and Carl Jung’s influential introduction, made their I Ching an immediate success and won it millions of readers. Wilhelm’s Book of Wisdom approach has sustained the quasi-canonical status of the I Ching for many years without meeting any real challenge till the appearance of the historical way to interpret the book, which we named the Book of History approach for the convenience of discussion. It can be divided into two trends. The first one tried to trace the book back to its earliest composition time and attempted to reconstruct its original meaning. The leading scholars are Edward Shaughnessy (The Composition of the Zhouyi, PhD dissertation done in 1983), Richard A. Kunst (The Original Yi Jing: A Text, Phonetic Transcription, Translation and Indexes, PhD dissertation submitted in 1984), Richard Rutt (The Book of Changes: A Bronze Age Document Translated with Introduction and Notes, 1996), Margaret Pearson (The Original I Ching: An Authentic Translation of the Book of
Changes, 2011), and the latest Geoffrey Redmond (The I Ching or Book of Changes: A Critical Translation of the Ancient Text, 2017). All of them strive to reconstruct the original meaning of the Yijing text in the era of Shang-Zhou transition, viewing the book as a divination manual as well as a historical document. The second trend, as we discussed above, aimed at study the Yijing in history. The leading scholars include Edward Shaughnessy, who translated the Mawangdui version of the Yijing (I Ching: The Classic of Changes, Ballantine Books, 1996) which was based on a manuscript copied in the Han dynasty (about 190 B.C.). His latest book was based on the Shanghai museum Zhouyi, the Wangjiatai manuscripts and the Fuyang Zhouyi (Unearthing the Changes, New York, 2014). Lynn’s translation of Wang Bi’s commentary to the Yijing, as Shaughnessy said, has legitimized the study of the Yijing commentaries. Harrington and Adler joined this trend, regarding the Yijing as a source of history of thought, who highlighted the historical direction in the Yijing studies among scholars in the English-speaking world. They were dissatisfied with the Book of Wisdom approach assuming that the Yijing transcends human culture or contains a timeless wisdom, and attempted to pin down the textual uncertainties of the book by either locating the book in specific time or interpreting it from certain perspective.

Li Xueqin, one of the leading Yijing scholars in China, once warned researchers against the “danger” of studying the Yijing: “The meaning of the Zhouyi text is not only terse and archaic, but also subtle and abstruse; it seems plausible to explain it this way, and not hard to speculate it that way. There’s no need to argue if the terminology of the Yijing is borrowed to develop one’s own ideas, but if you want to find the original meaning of the Yijing, it is really too difficult.” (Preface to boshu zhouyi yanjiu 册書周易研究 written by Xing Wen 邢文, Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1992, p.2).

Whether the Yijing studies are centered on the classic itself or focusing on the commentaries for their own sake, if the researchers seek to reconstruct the original meaning in the earliest period or to reveal the individual understanding of the book in specific time and context, historical evidence always takes precedence over theories and interpretative perspectives. Since we still know so little about the Zhouyi and the world that produced it, it seems to me that Adler’s approach is more applicable and more productive, and represents the future of the Yijing studies in the English-speaking countries.