

No Fear from Heaven: How Song Confucian Classicists Discredited the Omenology of the Five Phases

Lan Xing

College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University,
Chengdu, China

lxgoalsky@gmail.com

Abstract

This article employs Tzvetan Todorov's 'triggers of interpretation' to examine how Song Confucian classicists disproved the omenology of the Five Phases. Since the first century, the omenology has shifted to being the paradigm of interpreting omens and disasters. However, many Confucian classicists during the Song dynasty grew dissatisfied with this paradigm and offered arguments to challenge its authority and validity. A few studies have noted this but have not dissected why Song Confucianists could discredit the system deeply ingrained in the Chinese intellectual landscape. To address this gap, I first revisit the omenology of the Five Phases and identify that its feasibility rests on the authority of Confucian learning and the analogy between signs and interpretants. Next, I discover that the counterarguments of most Song Confucianists not only elucidated this omenology as a misinterpretation of Confucian classics by Han Confucian classicists, but also found the analogy unreasonable and devoid of any ground.

Keywords

Confucianism – semiotics – the Five Phases – commentary – intellectual history

1 Introduction

This article aims to discuss how Song Confucianists discredited the omenology of the Five Phases, which was deeply ingrained in Chinese intellectual history. At the end of the Western Han, the omenology of the Five Phases rose and

transitioned into the paradigm of interpreting and decoding disasters – until it was interrupted by Song Confucianists in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Zhang, 2017: 1).

Although the counterargument is believed to be a milestone in Chinese intellectual history, it has not been adequately studied. To date, few studies, if any, have examined why Song Confucianists' counterarguments could successfully weaken the feasibility of the omenology of the Five Phases. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap. In addition, it treats the decline of the omenology of the Five Phases as a milestone in Chinese semiotics; it is a correlative system comprising signs and interpretants. Today, most published studies on Chinese semiotics and symbolism are more interested in the construction and development of symbol systems. For instance, Wang Aihe (2000) examines the rise of Chinese correlative cosmology, and A. C. Graham (2016) traces the construction of Chinese correlative thought. The decline of such systems also affords great potential. As John. B. Henderson (1984: 92) illustrates, the decline of one correlative mode is worth studying because it is often accompanied by the development of other modes. However, in contrast to the construction and development, the decline of such symbol systems has drawn much less attention, and this article aims to fill the gap.

The present study can be divided into three parts. The first constitutes a preparation that briefly introduces the omenology of the Five Phases, its construction and the foundation of its feasibility. The second part reviews the unsuccessful criticism by Liu Zhiji, a famous historian in the Tang dynasty (618–907). The third part, as the main body, assembles the counterarguments of Song Confucianists to illustrate how they disprove the omenology of the Five Phases. Here, it should be clarified that the Song Confucianists discussed here refer not only to Neo-Confucian philosophers, such as Cheng Hao and Zhu Xi, but also to other Confucian classicists in the Song dynasty.

2 A Brief Introduction of the Omenology of the Five Phases

The omenology of the Five Phases is a huge correlative system that attributes all disasters and omens to the dysfunction of the Five Phases caused by the misbehaviours of sovereigns or high officials (Zhang, 2017: 1–3). The system's construction is accomplished by four textual layers: *Hongfan* (洪范) (the first layer); *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* (洪范五行传) (the second layer); subsequent interpretations of *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* by Liu Xiang, Liu Xin and some anonymous Confucianists at the end of the first century BC (the third layer),

and numerous documents events in official history that function as factual evidence (the fourth layer) (Wang, 2013: 148).

Hongfan is a chapter of *Shangshu* (尚书), one of the five Confucian classics, and is commonly believed to be the earliest textual reference of the Five Phases (Ban, 1962: 1315). In the omenology of the Five Phases, *Hongfan* is also the foundation. Written as a conversation between Ji Zi, a prince of the Shang dynasty, and King Wu of the Zhou dynasty, the volume introduces nine administrative terms (The Five Phases, The Five Duties, The Eight Policies, The Five Regulators, Royal Perfection, The Three Powers, Testing Doubts, Verifications, The Five Happiness and Six Extremities; Nylan, 1992: 13–21). Although *Hongfan* was subsequently adopted as the foundation of the omenology of the Five Phases, it neither mentions nor indicates anything about omenology; furthermore, the Five Phases here merely refer to five ordinary substances: water, fire, wood, metal and earth. Simultaneously, the nine terms show little relation between each other.

In the second century BC, *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* by Xiahou Shichang (fl. the second century BC) connected some of the nine terms in *Hongfan* to create two correlative systems. The first one argued that the misbehaviours of sovereigns would cause the dysfunction of the Five Phases (Fu, 1986: 14), as illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1 The alignment between the misbehaviours and the dysfunction of the Five Phases

The Misbehaviours of Sovereigns	The Dysfunction of the Five Phases
Hunting out of season; failure to present ritual offerings of food and drinks; unregulated exiting and entering; depriving people of time for farming; the existence of treacherous plots	Wood
Disregarding the law; expelling meritorious ministers; killing the heir apparent; taking a concubine as the principal wife	Fire
Constructing palaces and terraces; sexual licentiousness within; transgressing the relation between relatives; insulting the father or elder brothers	Earth
Indulging offensive warfare; ignoring the well-being of the people; transgressing the borders	Metal
Negligence in attending to ancestral shrines; failing to pray at altars; abandoning ritual sacrifices; going against the temporal order of Heaven	Water

Moreover, *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* singled out five of the nine terms (The Five Phases, The Five Duties, Royal Perfection, Verifications, and The Five Happiness and Six Extremities) to construct the second correlative system. Here, these terms are briefly addressed. ‘The Five Duties’ refers to five behaviours demonstrated by human beings: demeanour, speech, sight, hearing and thought. ‘Royal Perfection’ means the administrative principle of monarchs. ‘Verifications’ refers to auspicious and inauspicious omens, such as timely rain (auspicious) and constant rain (inauspicious). Additionally, ‘the Five Happiness’ refer to ‘long life’, ‘riches’, ‘prosperity and ease’, ‘love of virtue’ and ‘a natural end’, and the Six Extremities refer to ‘premature death’, ‘sickness’, ‘sorrow’, ‘poverty’, ‘illness’ and ‘weakness’. Next, the correlative system assumed that if sovereigns and high officials failed to perform any one of the Five Duties, corresponding disasters would occur, and the Five Phases would be jeopardised (Fu, 1986: 9–10). The system has been tabulated in Table 2.

TABLE 2 The alignment between the failure of the Five Duties and resulting disasters

The Five Duties	demeanour	speech	sight	hearing	thought
The Five Phases	wood	metal	fire	water	earth
Guilt	wildness	assumption	indolence	haste	foolishness
Punishment	constant	constant	constant	constant	constant
	rain	sunshine	heat	cold	wind
Extremity	evil	sorrow	sickness	poverty	shortening the life
Abnormal	in clothes	in poetry	in grass	in drums	in lard and night
Plague	of tortoises	of shell insects	of worms	of fish	of flowers
Disaster	in chickens	in dogs	in sheep	in pigs	in oxen
Illness	lower parts	in mouth	in eyes	in ears	in heart and
	of body growing upward	and tongue			belly
Inauspicious omens	in blue	in white	in red	in black	in yellow

As the table may seem rather complicated, here I briefly illustrate how it works. As *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* supposes, the demeanour of a sovereign should be respectful. If a sovereign failed to do so, a series of disasters would prevail: someone would become wild, and there would be constant rains, weird clothes, plagues of tortoises, disasters in chickens, illness in lower parts growing upward, and inauspicious omens in blue. At the same time, as the demeanour corresponds to wood, its failure would jeopardise wood and destroy wooden buildings and woodworks.

Hongfan wuxingzhuan not only established causality between misbehaviours and disasters, but also presented an analogical model in which each misbehaviour was linked with resulting disasters.

Moreover, the third layer refined and sacralised the correlative system in *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*. A notable improvement is that Liu Xiang clarified the dysfunction of the Five Phases, which is an abstract concept in *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*, into specific disasters. For instance, Liu Xiang interpreted the dysfunction of fire as conflagrations (Lan, 2021: 99). Moreover, as the link between the Five Phases and the Five Duties was unsourced, Liu Xiang produced an approach to bridge them (Lan, 2021: 99). Furthermore, Liu Xin supposed *Hongfan* was Heaven-delivered, probably because he thought *Hongfan* to be too plain and never mentioned any resonance between Heaven and human beings (Chen, 2015: 124).

The last layer employs numerous documented events in official histories to support and justify the validity and authority of the system. According to *Wuxingzhi* of *Hanshu*, Han Confucianists spared no efforts to interpret every documented disaster as the result of some misbehaviours of sovereigns or high officials. For instance, Liu Xiang argued that a conflagration in the region of Song State that occurred in 543 BC emanated from a murder: when the reigning duke of Song killed his crown prince (Ban, 1962: 1326). According to the correlative system between misbehaviours and the dysfunction of the Five Phases, murdering the crown prince causes the dysfunction of the fire phase, which commonly turns out to be a conflagration.

Since the four layers were constructed, Ban Gu edited them to *Wuxingzhi* in *Hanshu*; the text marked the completion of the system. The omenology of the Five Phases then immediately became the paradigm of Chinese omenology and an indispensable part of Chinese historiographical writing (Wang, 2000: 131–133).

The high feasibility of the omenology of the Five Phases largely rests on two conditions. One is the authority of Confucian classics; as Confucianism has elevated to be the national ideology since the middle of the second century BC,

accordingly, Confucian classics have become sacred. In addition to being constructed in *Hongfan*, the omenology of the Five Phases was also sacralised by its authority. The other condition is the all-inclusive and refined analogical model of the system. Almost every disaster could be analogically interpreted as the result of some misbehaviours by emperors or senior officials. In other words, the analogical connection between signs and interpretants in the system is clear and always plausible. Unless both conditions are disproved, the feasibility of the omenology of the Five Phases is undeniable in theory.

3 Liu Zhiji's Criticism of *Wuxingzhi* of *Hanshu*

Although the omenology of the Five Phases maintained its stance until the Song dynasty, there had been indeed disagreements before. For instance, Liu Zhiji (661–721), a prestigious historian of the Tang dynasty, found *Wuxingzhi* of *Hanshu* rough and erroneous. Specifically, Liu (1978: 533) detected numerous errors and problems in the text and attributed them to four main shortcomings: inappropriate sources, abnormal narration, strained interpretation of disasters and unrefined knowledge of classics.

Liu's criticism to *Wuxingzhi* of *Hanshu* is undeniably fierce; however, it hardly weakened the feasibility of the omenology of the Five Phases, which, as discussed before, largely rested on the authority of Confucian learning and the refined analogical model. Liu's criticism targeted neither of the two but underlined some technical or formatting problems in historiographical writing, such as the genuineness of sources or the narrative styles. In other words, Liu's fierce criticism merely debunked *Wuxingzhi* of *Hanshu* but hardly challenged the omenology of the Five Phases. Therefore, no matter how many factual errors, far-fetched interpretations and unsourced claims were pointed out, Liu's counterargument was unlikely to even remotely weaken the omenology of the Five Phases.

As demonstrated by results, the Five Phases continued to be the paradigm of Chinese omenology after Liu Zhiji. For instance, *Wuxingzhi* of *Jiutangshu* considered the omenology of the Five Phases as the primary method of decoding and interpreting omens (Liu, 1975: 1345). Likewise, *Wuxingzhi* of *Jiunwudaishi* reiterates that this omenology was as an essential part of *Hongfan* and persuaded monarchs to correct their misbehaviour to mitigate disasters (Xue, 1976: 1881). The tradition remained unchanged until it was interpreted in the Song dynasty.

4 Song Confucianists' Counterarguments and Strategies

Since the middle term of the Northern Song (960–1127), Song Confucianists became increasingly disproving of the omenology of the Five Phases for two reasons. One, Wang Anshi (1021–1086), who was the chancellor from 1070 to 1076, considered that the system obstructed his reformation (Zhang, 2007: 97–102). Since Wang had performed the reformation, his opponents often employed the omenology of the Five Phases to attribute some disasters to this reformation to outrage it. As a response, Wang and his advocates spared no efforts to discredit the system. For another, some other classicists disagreed with the system because they disliked the hermeneutics style of Han Confucianists. As the preface of Confucian classics in *Sikuquanshu* illustrates, Confucian learning witnessed a turning point in the Song dynasty, and Song Confucianists abandoned all Han commentaries (Yong, 1965: 1).

However, instead of Liu's argument merely focusing on the technical shortcomings of the system's textual vehicle, most of the Song classicists' criticism sharply targeted its feasibility. More importantly, instead of straightforwardly challenging the system deeply rooted in the Chinese intellectual landscape, Song Confucianists first stressed that the system was a product of *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* but not of Confucian classics. Next, they tested its two theoretical cornerstones. One, Song Confucian classicists argued that Han Confucianists and *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* misunderstood or failed to grasp the meaning of *Hongfan*. This deliberation separated the authority of Confucian classics and knowledge from the system and then reduced the system to an ordinary and cursory prognostication. Moreover, they found the primary analogical model of the system unsourced and unfalsifiable and disproved it. In doing so, Song Confucian classicists discredited the two cornerstones of the omenology of the Five Phases.

Since the materials to be examined are plenty, I employ Tzvetan Todorov's 'Triggers of interpretations' to construct the following argument. Todorov suggests that even the biblical text remains obscure forever, and thus, an interpretation is needed to understand it (Todorov, 1982: 99). Todorov then lists three triggers for interpretations – 'doctrinal implausibilities', 'material implausibilities' and 'superfluities' – and unfolds them in the Christian landscape. The first one, doctrinal implausibilities, refers to the writings in biblical texts that openly contradict Christian doctrine (Todorov, 1982: 99). Todorov suggests that even the biblical text may contradict ordinary good sense or common knowledge, and that this shortcoming is a material implausibilities (Todorov,

1982: 99–100). ‘Superfluities’ refers to biblical text that can ‘contain fragments whose usefulness for Christian doctrine is not evident’ (Todorov, 1982: 100). Although Todorov’s deliberation of the three triggers is based on Christianity, the three triggers also apply to Confucianism and Song Confucianists’ counterarguments to the omenology of the Five Phases. In fact, their counterarguments can be divided into three approaches as three triggers. First, the omenology of the Five Phases contradicts Confucian doctrines, such as *Hongfan chapter* and Confucius’s words; second, the system’s analogical model was unreasonable and violated ordinary good sense and common knowledge; third, the system manifested little Confucian learning but no more than a vulgar and superficial prognostication.

4.1 *Doctrinal Implausibilities*

Doctrinal implausibilities, as Todorov suggests, refer to the writings in canonical texts that contradict doctrines. As such, Song Confucian classicists argue that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* and related interpretations are often against Confucian doctrines and authorities.

Ye Shi (1150–1223) questions whether the omenology of the Five Phases contradicts Confucian learning.

夫以数术占灾异，自古已然，惟不可出于洪范尔，况其中者，皆极于神明，圣人亦未尝废也，惟不可出于儒者尔。洪范运道而细术，儒者任理而遗数，故以洪范占灾异未有能中者也。（Ye, 1977: 583）

Employing the numerology to predict disasters and omens can be traced to ancient times, but [this] is unlikely to be attributed into *Hongfan*. Those who learn the omenology are close to immortals, and sages have not abandoned them. [Those who learn the omenology] cannot be attributed into Confucianists. *Hongfan* interprets principles and underplays occults, Confucianists are engaged in doctrines and overlook numerology; therefore, employing *Hongfan* is unlikely to predict disasters and omens.

As the quoted section illustrates, Ye Shi underscored that *Hongfan* and Confucianists were unlikely to study or develop the omenology. This indicates that the omenology of the Five Phases residing in *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* contradicts Confucian doctrine. Additionally, because *Hongfan* never indicated anything of omenology, it was inappropriate to employ the text as a reference to predict omens. The criticism notably separates the omenology of the Five Phases from the authority of *Hongfan* and Confucian learning.

Moreover, Ye Shi (1977: 313) challenges Liu Xin's sacralisation to *Hongfan*. As clarified before, Liu Xin sacralised *Hongfan* as a Heaven-delivered text; Yu was the first one to obtain it, but Ye Shi found the supposition contradictory to some historical sources. If the supposition was true, as Ye Shi argued, there seemed to be no way to witness any knowledge in *Hongfan* before Yu. However, as other writings addressed the Five Phases and other concepts of *Hongfan* before Yu's reign, Liu Xin's supposition became indefensible and contradicted Confucian classics.

Furthermore, Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) illustrated that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* violated Confucius's purpose. In the introduction of *Wuxingzhi* of *Xintangshu*, Ouyang Xiu (1975: 873) first affirmed Confucius's cautiousness in writing *Chunqiu*, for Confucius merely documented disasters and omens but refused to speculate the reasons for their occurrence. Consequently, sovereigns would immediately introspect their behaviours when observing disasters. In contrast, when both reasons and disasters are documented together, as in *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*, some disasters would be untraceable or unexplainable. Such disasters would make sovereigns conjecture that disasters were entirely accidental, causing them to lose awe of the Heaven. Following this comparison, Ouyang Xiu concluded that the *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* should be abandoned for it violated Confucius's prospect and engendered negative impacts. Confucius's authority was evidently unchallengeable for Confucian intellectuals. Because Ouyang Xiu compared the different styles of historiographical writing between Confucius and *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* and then underscored the shortcoming of the latter, *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* and the connection between signs and interpretants were proven unauthorised.

Su Xun (1009–1006) noted that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* falsely added some words to develop the omenology of the Five Phases and then repudiated it (Su, 1986: 888). For instance, *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* falsified two new disasters *Mao* (眊, dull) and *Yin* (阴, cloudy) that were unseen in *Hongfan*. Compared to Ye Shi and Ouyang Xiu, Su Xun's repudiation was far more straightforward because tampering with Confucian classics is evidently intolerable for Confucian intellectuals. The shortcoming, therefore, led the *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* to not only lose the authority of Confucian classics, but become a product of distorting classics.

In summary, the aforementioned four arguments targeted the doctrinal implausibilities in *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*. They demonstrated that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* contradicted Confucian doctrines, involving the writings in Confucian classics and Confucius's purpose. By doing so, the authority of Confucian classics, a cornerstone of the omenology of the Five Phases, was therefore significantly weakened.

4.2 *Material Implausibilities*

Material implausibilities refer to the writings that contradict ordinary good or common knowledge. Song Confucian classicists identified that the analogical model was derived from *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*, and that related interpretation was unsourced, unfalsifiable and implausible. These counterarguments mirrored the analogical model as sometimes against good sense and common knowledge.

As discussed above, the omenology of the Five Phases is a correlative system, and a primary rule thereof is the analogy between the Five Phases and the Five Duties. If the sovereigns failed to perform any of the Five Duties, the corresponding one of the Five Phases would dysfunction, causing related disasters to consequently occur. However, *Hongfan* never indicated any relation between the two terms, and the alignment in *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* was created by Han Confucianists. For Song Confucianists, creating such an alignment was far from contradicting Confucian doctrines, while the alignment itself was baseless.

For instance, Su Xun argued that the alignment between the Five Phases and the Five Phases Duties was strained and contradictory (Su, 1986: 890). Xun believed that there was no way to connect speech and metal phase. In fact, as mentioned above, Liu Xiang provided an analogical approach to piece the two terms together. However, Su Xun never mentioned Liu's argument, probably refusing to consider it at all. Moreover, several classicists, such as Su Zhe (1039–1112), Wang Anshi and Lin Zhiqi (1112–1176), observed this shortcoming (Zhang, 2007: 111–113), arguing that the alignment between the Five Phases and Five Duties was flimsy. Likewise, all of them refused Liu Xiang's interpretation and endeavoured to terminate the analogical connection between them.

The counterargument to the analogy of the two terms, as I suggest, could significantly undermine the feasibility of the omenology of the Five Phases. As discussed above, the gist of *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* can be summarised into an 'if P, then Q' model: if sovereigns breached the Five Duties, the Five Phases would be jeopardised, and corresponding disasters would be delivered by the Heaven. As can be seen, the analogy between the two terms is the primary condition of the model. However, the analogy did not have any textual reference in *Hongfan*, but was coined by *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*. The lack of the textual support of Confucian classics gave rise to the disagreements of Song Confucianists. Once this analogy was proven groundless, all further deductions relying on this became meaningless.

Next, as mentioned above, *Hongfan* manifested nine terms, but *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* merely selected five of them. This triggered a wave of criticism by

Song classicists, who argued that if any two of nine terms could be connected, so should all nine. That is, if all could not be connected, every connection between any two of them was not allowed. Therefore, Song's classicists concluded that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* violated common knowledge. Here I take the discussion of Lin Zhiqi to exemplify this.

若五事果可以配五行, 则自八政以下, 皆各有所配, 岂止于五事? 而皇极庶征福极犹可条而入. 至于其余不可以穿凿通者, 则舍之不论, 此悖岂自然之理哉?

If the Five Duties could be aligned with the Five Phases, (all other terms) after The Eight Policies should be aligned with the Five Phases too but not merely the Five Phases. Huangji, are classified into the system, while the others cannot be abandoned. Does not this violate the natural principle? (Lin, 1986: 460)

As the quoted section illustrates, Lin Zhiqi criticises that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* only selected those compatible with the Five Phases but discarded those incompatible. Lin Zhiqi indicated that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* committed the one-sidedness fallacy and violated logical reasoning.

In addition to Lin Zhiqi, Su Xun and Zhao Shanxiang (?–1242) proposed an identical argument (Zhang, 2007: 128–130; 150–151). The analogical system of the omenology of the Five Phases was largely built on the connection; so when this connection was proven illogical, the analogical system was significantly weakened again.

Moreover, Chen Shunyu (fl. the eleventh century) pointed out that the beliefs of *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* usually contradicted factual events (Chen, 1986: 457–458). For instance, *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* assumed that floods and droughts were caused by the reigning ruler's misbehaviours. Chen, however, employed the floods in Yao's reign and droughts in Tang's reign as anti-evidence because the two were flawless sages in Confucian learning. As the phoenix and unicorn were believed to be two legendary creatures that only appeared when the reigning sovereign was benevolent, Chen noted a few appearances of the two in some most turbulent ages, such as the reigns of Emperor Ai (6–1 BCE) and Emperor Ling (168–189) of the Han and Emperor Yang (605–618) in the Sui. Chen's argument drops the belief of the omenology of the Five Phases into a dilemma: if it was true, how could it explain why disasters occurred in the reign of sages and the appearance of auspicious omens during the most

turbulent times? Chen's argument, therefore, also significantly weakened the feasibility of the omenology of the Five Phases.

Additionally, Hu Yin (1098–1156) did not believe *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*, because he considered it unfalsifiable:

五行传牵合附会，以某异应某事，泥而不通，然亦不能言其应之迟速久近也。

Hongfan wuxingzhuan is far-fetched and strained in connecting some omens with some documented events. [The connection] is rigid and unreasonable, and [it] fails to demonstrate the exact time or duration of the omens caused by the events. (Hu, 2002: 625)

Hu's argument first observes the strained connection of *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*. *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* assumed every omen to be a response to an event; Hu was disappointed with this assumption because he thought it could not offer the exact time of the occurrence of omen or any information on its duration. Referring to *Hongfan wuxingzhuan*, the present study seconds Hu's criticism: *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* never predicted the exact time or the duration of any disaster or omen.

In summary, the group of counterarguments indicate that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* contradicted common knowledge and logical reasoning. If the first group removes the authority of Confucian learning from *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* and the omenology of the Five Phases, it significantly debunks the analogical model of the correlative system.

4.3 Superfluity

Instead of these two groups, the third group of counterargument concerns not how *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* contradicted Confucian doctrines or the common knowledge, but how the text failed to discern the sacred knowledge in *Hongfan* and downgraded it to a superficial and cursory prognostication. The counterargument in the group is simple and straightforward, and it is manifested by the following two instances.

First, Wang Bai (1197–1274) argues *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* is too superficial to mirror the profundity of *Hongfan*:

愚窃谓洪范之经，六十有五字，谨严精密，所以为圣人之格言……穿凿附会，援据支离，使造化之机果如是，不几于浅乎。

I think the sixty-five words in *Hongfan* chapter are compact and refine, so they are identified to be the aphorism of saints. ... [*Hongfan wuxingzhuan*] is strained and groundless, and its references are scattered and flimsy. If Heaven's principle was what manifested in these commentaries, [Heaven's principle] is too superficial. (Wang, 2002: 402)

First, Wang highly regards *Hongfan* as the aphorism of saints and is then concerned that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* is too superficial to deliver the profound doctrines of *Hongfan*.

Likewise, Ye Shi finds *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* superficial:

汉儒不识箕子之指，方以五事配合五行，牵引周衰春秋已事往证，分别附着，而使洪范经世之成法，降为灾异阴阳之书。

Han Confucian classicists fail to discern Ji Zi's meaning. Consequently, [they] but aligned Five Duties with the Five Phases and employed documented events in the end of Zhou to support [their suppositions] and attached these events to *Hongfan*. Such an approach downgrades the profound principles in *Hongfan* into a volume of divination and Yinyang. (Ye, 1977: 314)

As demonstrated before, Ye Shi suggested that Han Confucianists failed to discern Ji Zi's meaning, but consequently reduced the great knowledge in *Hongfan* to an ordinary prognostication.

In summary, the group demonstrated that *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* failed to grasp the profound meaning of *Hongfan* and forged a superficial and strained model of prognostication with little knowledge of Confucian learning. This separated *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* and the omenology of the Five Phases from the authority of Confucian classics and learning.

After highlighting the shortcomings of *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* and related interpretations, Song Confucianists argued that such misinterpretations should be immediately abandoned because they gravely jeopardised Confucian learning. By doing so, their counterarguments to *Hongfan wuxingzhuan* would serve to defend Confucian learning. An instance in point is found in Wang Anshi's *Hongfanzhuan*:

予悲夫《洪范》者，为传注者汨之，以至于今冥冥也，于是为作传以通其意。呜呼！学者不知古之所以教而蔽于传注之学也久矣。

I am so worried that *Hongfan* is confused by previous commentaries and remains obscure even today. Therefore, [I] write an exegesis to unfold the meaning [of *Hongfan*]. Alas, scholars are ignorant about traditional teachings but have been blinded by commentaries for a long time. (Wang, 1986: 594)

As the quoted section illustrates, Wang Anshi was worried that *Hongfan* was confused by previous commentaries, and that he had to reinterpret *Hongfan* to liberate students from the confinement of such commentaries.

The examination of the three triggers of interpretations and materials provides an in-depth understanding of Song Confucianists' disproof of the omenology of the Five Phases. Instead of Liu Zhiji's criticism, Song Confucianists deliberately focused on the two cornerstones of the omenology of the Five Phases: the authority of Confucian classics and the analogical model in the system.

This article demonstrates that the counterarguments of Song Confucianists notably weakened the omenology of the Five Phases. Intellectuals commonly adopted the Five Phases to interpret omens since the first century; this tradition, however, gradually declined after the Song dynasty. Although *Wuxingzhi* continued to be a part of official history, intellectuals stopped trusting or adopting the omenology of the Five Phases, and *Wuxingzhi* of *Yuanshi* straightforwardly contended that Han Confucianists failed to grasp the primary idea of *Hongfan* (Song, 1976: 1049–1050). Furthermore, *Wuxingzhi* of *Mingshi* suggests that the omenology of the Five Phases be discarded and potential reasons for any disaster should not be searched for (Zhang, 1974: 425–426). Seconding *Wuxingzhi* of *Mingshi*, *Zaiyizhi* of *Qingshigao* argued that the omenology of the Five Phases was a misinterpretation of *Hongfan* (Zhao, 1977: 1487). Clearly, the three texts consistently disputed the omenology of the Five Phases and refused to adopt it. While it is not to say the result was fully triggered by the counterarguments of Song Confucianists, it is undeniable that their deliberation notably weakened the omenology of the Five Phases.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study first collected a number of materials to show how and why Song Confucianists disproved the omenology of the Five Phases, which helped understand this contentious debate in Chinese intellectual history more clearly.

More importantly, Song Confucianists were deliberately dissatisfied with the omenology of the Five Phases but not their whole system. When disproving the omenology of the Five Phases, they simultaneously broadened the correlative system of the Five Phases. For instance, Wang Anshi considered that each of the physical features of the Five Phases could generate an unlimited chain of interpretations (1986: 527–528). In addition, owing to the decline of the omenology of the Five Phases, Zhu Xi and other Song thinkers related to his school endorsed and developed many numerological correspondences based on the Five Phases (Henderson, 1984: 129–130). Therefore, the decline of the omenology of the Five Phases fairly indicates some new developments in the correlative system of the Five Phases.

References

- Ban, Gu (1962) *Book of the Han* (汉书, *Han shu*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Chen, Kanli (2015) *Confucianism, Shushu and Politics* (儒学、术数与政治, *Ru xue, shu shu yu zhengzhi*). Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Chen, Shunyu (1986) 'Collections of Duguan' (都官集, "Du guan ji"), in Ji Yun (ed.), *Photocopied Edition of Wenyuange Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (影印文渊阁四库全书, *Ying yin wen yuan ge si ku quan shu*) (Volume 1096). Taipei: The Commercial Press.
- Fu, Sheng (1986) 'Great Tradition of the Book of Documents' (尚书大传, "Shang shu da zhuan"), in Ji Yun (ed.), *Photocopied Edition of Wenyuange Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (影印文渊阁四库全书, *Ying yin wen yuan ge si ku quan shu*) (Volume 68). Taipei: The Commercial Press.
- Graham, A. C. (2016) *Yin-yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking*. Melbourne: Quirin Press.
- Henderson, John B. (1984) *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lan, Xing (2021) 'Semiotic Study of the Five Phases from the Perspective of Roman Jakobson's Model of the Functions of Language', *Signs & Media* 22: 94–104.
- Hu, Yin (2002) *My Humble Opinions while Reading History by Zhitang* (致堂读史管见, "Zhi tang du shi guan jian"), in The Committee of Xuxiu sikuquanshu (ed.), *The Supplement to the Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (续修四库全书, *Xu xiu si ku quan shu*) (Volume 448). Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.
- Lin, Zhiqi (1986) 'Full Understanding of the Book of Documents' (尚书全解, "Shang shu quan jie"), in Ji Yun (ed.), *Photocopied Edition of Wenyuange Complete Library*

- in the Four Branches of Literature* (影印文渊阁四库全书, *Ying yin wen yuan ge si ku quan shu*) (Volume 55). Taipei: The Commercial Press.
- Liu, Xu (1975) *Old Book of the Tang* (旧唐书, *Jiu tang shu*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Liu, Zhiji (1978) *Complete Commentary to History Critique* (史通通释, *Shi tong tong shi*) (interpreted by Qilong Pu). Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.
- Nylan, Michael (1992) *The Shifting Center: The Original "Great Plan" and Later Readings*. Sankt Augustin: Steyler Verlag.
- Ouyang, Xiu (1975) *New Book of the Tang* (新唐书, *Xin tang shu*). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Song, Lian (1976) *History of the Yuan* (元史, *Yuan shi*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Su, Xun (1986) 'Collections of Jiayou' (嘉祐集, "Jiayouji"), in Ji Yun (ed.), *Photocopied Edition of Wenyuange Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (影印文渊阁四库全书, *Ying yin wen yuan ge si ku quan shu*) (Volume 1104). Taipei: The Commercial Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan (1982) *Symbolism and Interpretation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Wang, Aihe (2000) *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, Anshi (1986) 'Collections of Linchuan' (临川文集, "Lin chuan wen ji"), in Ji Yun (ed.), *Photocopied Edition of Wenyuange Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (影印文渊阁四库全书, *Ying yin wen yuan ge si ku quan shu*) (Volume 1105). Taipei: The Commercial Press.
- Wang, Bai (2002) 'Doubts on Classics' (书疑, "Shu yi"), in The Committee of Xuxiu sikuquanshu (ed.), *The Supplement to the Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (续修四库全书, *Xu xiu si ku quan shu*) (Volume 42). Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.
- Wang, Mingsheng (2013) *Towards the Seventeen Histories* (十七史商榷, *Shi qi shi shang que*). Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.
- Xue, Juzheng (1976) *Old History of the Five Dynasties* (旧五代史, *Jiu wu dai shi*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Ye, Shi (1977) *Contents to Notes and Comments on Classics* (习学记言序目, *Xi xue ji yan xu mu*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Yong, Rong (1965) *Annotated Catalog of the Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (四库全书总目, *Si ku quan shu zong mu*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zhang, Bing (2007) *On the Hermeneutics of "The Great Plan"* (<洪范>诠释研究, *Hong fan quan shi yan jiu*). Jinan: Shangdong Qilu Press.

- Zhang, Rongting (1974) *History of the Ming* (明史, *Ming shi*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zhang, Shuhao (2017) *Annotations to the Book of the Han, the Five Phases* (汉书·五行志疏证, *Han shu wu xing zhi shu zheng*). Taipei: Student Book Publishing House.
- Zhao, Erxun (1977) *Draft to a History of the Qing* (清史稿, *Qing shi gao*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.