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Numerical lists of foundational knowledge in early Chinese and early Buddhist traditions

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Abstract: In this paper, I compare the material in the Pāli canon of Theravada Buddhism, a textual tradition famous for the abundance of numerical lists, with certain chapters of the *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書 and chapter “Hong fan” 洪範 of the *Shang shu* 尚書, where numerical lists are equally important. I propose a classification of the insufficiently studied numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* and point out the divergences in them, suggesting that they were produced by competing communities that developed slightly discordant systems of knowledge. I compare the evolution of complex frameworks of numerical lists in the Buddhist traditions and in early China, arguing that both created comprehensive systems of knowledge-practice out of simpler lists. The peculiar form of numerical lists as vehicles of systematised knowledge-practice attested in both cultures may have originated in hierarchical communities with indisputable knowledge authority. Such communities are known to have existed in early Buddhism, and they have convincing parallels in China’s contemporary political practice, where numerical lists are used to unify the patterns of thinking and behaviour in hierarchical groups.

Keywords: numerical lists, *Yi Zhou shu*, Pāli canon, “Hong fan”

1 A once influential practice

One of the notable features of the textual collection *Yi Zhou shu* is the prevalence of numerical lists, which arrange bits of knowledge or instruction in numerical sequences such as the “nine causations” (*jiu yin* 九因) or the “four proximal

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relations” (*si qi* 四戚).¹ Such lists often constitute the core part of the text, while the patterned opening and closing passages seem to play a subordinate role. Therefore understanding such lists may be essential to understand the texts in which they appear. The numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* represent a widespread practice in ancient China around the fifth-second centuries BC.² The most famous example of this practice is the “Hong fan” chapter of the *Shang shu* 尚書 (*Venerated Scriptures*), a text that equally abounds in numerical lists. Unlike the *Yi Zhou shu*, where the significance of numerical lists is often unclear (see examples below), the “Hong fan” is less difficult to interpret because a continuous hermeneutic tradition readily provides extensive commentaries. In what follows, I attempt to explain the numerical lists of the *Yi Zhou shu* from two novel angles. First, I discuss their structural similarity with the *suttas* of the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism. Inspired by this parallel, I attempt to view the numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* as artefacts of an orderly practice of knowledge transmission in hierarchical groups similar to the one at the heart of the teachings of the Pāli canon.³

2 The numerical lists of the “Hong fan”

Chapter “Hong fan” of the *Shang shu* is one of the most influential texts of Chinese antiquity, commonly seen as a condensed outline of traditional Chinese cosmological and philosophical notions.⁴ According to the entry corresponding

1 For an informative discussion of numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu*, see Zhou Yuxiu 2005: 236–250. Zhao Fengrong’s 2013: 42–73 study covers such aspects as the different compositional strategies of employing numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu*, their mnemonic function, role in oral transmission, as well as similarities between the *Yi Zhou shu* and other texts, such as the “Hong fan”, the *Guanzi* 管子 and the *Hanfeizi* 韩非子.

2 This paper only covers a small part of texts where this phenomenon is attested. The essays collected in vol. 14 of *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* (1994) ed. by Alexei Volkov provide a diverse perspective on the use of numbers in early China, as well as some comparative insights. See also Granet’s 1968 [1934]: 127–248 discussion that emphasises the cosmological aspect.

3 There is rich literature on the subject of numerical lists (and lists in general) in the fields of Biblical and rabbinic studies. For some insightful works, see Jacobs 1983; Neusner 1990; Jaffee 1994; Lehmhaus 2015; Pasternak and Yona 2016.

4 For a comprehensive discussion of the “Hong fan” and its evolving reception in the Chinese tradition, see Nylan 1992.

to the “Hong fan” in the “Shu xu” 書序 (“Sequential outline of the Scriptures”), the text was created by the sagely Jizi 箕子 after his release from prison by King Wu 武王 (mid. 11th century BC) soon after his victory over the last wicked king of the Shang 商 dynasty (ca. late 13th century–mid. 11th century BC). At the beginning of the text, King Wu humbly asks Jizi about the principle(s) that Heaven follows when bestowing harmony upon people. Before presenting the main part of his response in the form of an extensive numerical list, Jizi mentions that the “nine divisions” (*jiu chou* 九疇) of which the list is composed were originally revealed by Heaven to the founder of the Xia 夏 dynasty, Yu the Great 大禹, as he succeeded his father Gun 鯀 who had failed in taming the flood (The text claims to have a very impressive pedigree, and its counterpart in the Biblical tradition would be God's testament to Noah given immediately after the flood!). The “nine divisions” apparently correspond to the nine regions that Yu put in order as he tamed the waters. The “Hong fan” does not dwell on the exact nature of these divisions, but the commentarial tradition – apparently originating from Liu Xin 劉歆 (50 BC–23 AD) – identifies them with the magical diagrams *he tu* 河圖 (Yellow River Chart) and *luo shu* 洛書 (Writ of the Luo River).⁵

After this brief narrative introduction, the text proceeds with enumeration of the “nine divisions”:⁶ the “five phases” (*wu xing* 五行), the reverent use of the “five [personal] matters” (*wu shi* 五事), the earnest use of the “eight objects of government” (*ba zheng* 八政), the harmonious use of the “five dividers of time” (*wu ji* 五紀), the establishment and use of “August perfection” (*huang ji* 皇極), the discriminating use of the “three virtues” (*san de* 三德), the intelligent use of the “[means for the] examination of doubts” (*ji yi* 稽疑), the thoughtful use of the “various verifications” (*shu zheng* 庶徵), the hortatory use of the “five [sources of] happiness” (*wu fu* 五福) and the awing use of the “six [occasions of] suffering” (*liu ji* 六極). Having initially enumerated the components of the “nine divisions”, the text goes on to discuss the contents of each one of those divisions, most of which are also numerical lists composed of a certain number of items.

I shall provide the text of the first two divisions to give a better idea of how numerical lists are organised in the “Hong fan”:

一、五行：一曰水，二曰火，三曰木，四曰金，五曰土。水曰潤下，火曰炎上，木曰曲直，金曰從革，土爰稼穡。潤下作鹹，炎上作苦，曲直作酸，從革作辛，稼穡作甘。

- i. ‘First, of the five elements. The first is water; the second is fire; the third, wood; the fourth, metal; and the fifth, Earth. (The nature of) water is to soak and

⁵ See Nylan 1992: 58–59.

⁶ Here and below, I rely on James Legge's 1879: 140–141 translation with minor modifications.

descend; of fire, to blaze and ascend; of wood, to be crooked and straight; of metal, to yield and change; while (that of) Earth is seen in seed-sowing and in-gathering. That which soaks and descends becomes salt; that which blazes and ascends becomes bitter; that which is crooked and straight becomes sour; that which yields and changes becomes acrid; and from seed-sowing and in-gathering comes sweetness.’

二、五事：一曰貌，二曰言，三曰視，四曰聽，五曰思。貌曰恭，言曰從，視曰明，聽曰聰，思曰睿。恭作肅，從作又，明作哲，聰作謀，睿作聖。

- ii. ‘Second, of the five (personal) matters. The first is the bodily demeanour; the second, speech; the third, seeing; the fourth, hearing; the fifth, thinking. (The virtue of) the bodily appearance is respectfulness; of speech, accordance (with reason); of seeing, clearness; of hearing, distinctness; of thinking, perspicaciousness. The respectfulness becomes manifest in gravity; accordance (with reason), in orderliness; the clearness, in wisdom; the distinctness, in deliberation; and the perspicaciousness, in sageness.’

The overall structure of the “Hong fan” is schematically represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Recursive structure of the numerical lists of the “Hong fan”.

Main list	#	First-level elements	Second-level elements
Nine divisions (<i>jiu chou</i> 九疇)	1	Five phases (<i>wu xing</i> 五行)	
	2	Five personal matters (<i>wu shi</i> 五事)	
	3	Eight objects of government (<i>ba zheng</i> 八政)	
	4	Five dividers of time (<i>wu ji</i> 五紀): year; moon; sun; stars, planets and zodiacal spaces; calendric calculations	
	5	August perfection (<i>huang ji</i> 皇極)	
	6	Three virtues (<i>san de</i> 三德)	
	7	Examination of doubts (<i>ji yi</i> 稽疑):	Five indications by turtle plastron (<i>bu</i> 卜) Two indications by stalk divination (<i>zhan</i> 佔)
	8	Various verifications (<i>shu zheng</i> 庶徵):	Five timelinesses (<i>shi</i> 時) Examination of year, month (moon) and day (sun)
	9	Five sources of happiness (<i>wu fu</i> 五福) and six occasions of suffering (<i>liu ji</i> 六極)	

This complex system was probably compiled from several earlier lists, rather than composed at once. The way the structure is packaged into the “nine divisions” is suspicious: each of the last three divisions consists of two separate lists, and it would have been more logical to extend the “nine divisions” to twelve. Instead, the contents seem to have been forced into the straitjacket of a predetermined number. Besides, the repetition of the tripartite sequence of year, month and day in the “five dividers of time” and in the second part of “various verifications” is contradictory and redundant. Likewise, the re-occurrence of the same character *ji* 極 (extremity) in the titles of the fifth and the ninth divisions is clumsy, but it can be explained if we assume that the “Hong fan” is a patchwork of earlier lists.⁷

Despite such inconsistencies, the “Hong fan” is a dynamic system whose elements are meant to interact with one another.⁸ There is an explicit link in the fifth division (“August perfection”) to the “five sources of happiness” from the ninth. More such links between the different divisions of the “Hong fan” can be derived implicitly, as has been done in traditional commentaries.⁹ Thus, the “Hong fan” represents a complex matrix of elements that amplify one another by explicit or inferable cross-referencing. It appears to combine pre-existing lists from earlier traditions, attempting to create an epistemological system that integrates various subject-specific catalogues. This attempt proved to be successful, and it was accepted by the Chinese tradition as the most authoritative knowledge framework of universal applicability.

Despite the authority and influence of the “Hong fan”, it is not the only interlinked knowledge framework built around numerical lists that we know from ancient China. Similar knowledge frameworks have been preserved in the *Yi Zhou shu*, but they were not accepted into the mainstream and survived as peripheral texts, apparently having fallen out of practice at a relatively early stage.

Outside of China, interlinked lists are preserved in abundance in the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism. The quantity of numerical lists there is striking, and the way in which they are presented is surprisingly similar to ancient Chinese counterparts. Importantly, the Buddhist numerical lists survive in a continuing tradition, accompanied by sufficiently consistent interpretations and still used by contemporary practitioners. The insight from the Buddhist tradition may help

7 Nylan 1992: 125 mentions several examples of the linguistic heterogeneity of the text, as well as compositional inconsistency, such as alteration of prose and rhyme and abrupt rhythmic breaks.

8 Cf. Nylan 1992: 126.

9 Nylan mentions an example of Zheng Xuan's 鄭玄 (127–200) fragmentarily preserved commentary on the *Shang shu*. In his interpretation of the fifth division (“August perfection”), puts an emphasis on the “five phases” (first division), “five personal matters” (second division) and the “verifications” that, for him, would encompass not only the eighth, but also the ninth division.

us to reconstruct the role of numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* and understand their importance for ancient Chinese audiences.

3 Numerical lists in Pāli *Nikāyas*

Although numerical lists are already frequent in the Upanishads, they become particularly abundant in Buddhist texts.¹⁰ Already in the earliest parts of the Pāli canon (believed to have been recorded around the first century BC), the important bits of the Buddhist teaching are neatly packaged in numerical lists that are presented in a very similar way to the “Hong fan”. I shall predominantly focus on the Sutta Piṭaka, mainly because this part of the Pāli canon is easily available in translations and has been covered the most extensively in Western scholarship, although numerical lists also abound in the Vinaya Piṭaka and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

The massive corpus of the Pāli canon makes the *Yi Zhou shu* appear more than modest. For example, the recent English translation of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (*The Long Discourses of the Buddha*) is printed on 648 pages, and the *Majjhima Nikāya* (*The Middle Length Discourses*) on 1420 pages.¹¹ This wealth of material in the Pāli canon is another reason why it is attractive as a comparative counterpart: while the *Yi Zhou shu* gives the impression of a fragmentarily preserved tradition, the vastness and even redundancy of the Pāli canon makes it a more reliable corpus for the study of the inner workings of a textual tradition that relies on numerical lists.

In my attempt to understand what numerical lists were used for in ancient communities, I have chosen a text whose heterogeneous nature and complexity are comparable to that of the “Hong fan” in the Chinese canon. It is the *Mahāsa-tiṭṭhāna Sutta* (*The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*) of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, which contains a systematic outline of the meditative practices necessary “for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the disappearance of pain and sadness, for the gaining of the right path, for the realisation of Nibbāna”.¹²

The text begins with a brief narrative introduction mentioning how the Buddha addressed the monks with a sermon while staying among the Kurus (descendants of the legendary Kuru tribe known from the Vedic texts) in a market-town of

¹⁰ For some remarks on the indebtedness of early Buddhist texts to earlier Vedic traditions of textual composition and performance, see Lévi 1915; Frauwallner 1956: 60–63; von Hinüber 1996: 13–18.

¹¹ Walshe 1987; Ñāṇamoli/Bodhi 2009.

¹² Walshe 1987: 335.

Kammāsadhama. Apart from this brief introduction and the formulaic ending mentioning the monks' delight in hearing the Buddha's words, the rest of the text is an abstract instruction entirely disconnected from this narrative. It starts with an outline of the four foundations of mindfulness: contemplating body as body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind and mind-objects as mind-objects. Like the nine divisions of the "Hong fan", these four units determine the structure of the text, which is presented in the order of its units and sub-units, with occasional intermittent sections describing the monk's contemplative state. In the part dedicated to the *contemplation of body*, the text contains sub-units dedicated to: breathing techniques, bodily postures, clear awareness of one's actions, reflection on the repulsive parts of the body, reflection on the body's composition out of the four elements, reflection on the consecutive stages of the body's disintegration (charnel-ground contemplation). The part dedicated to the *contemplation of feelings* is a short one and consists of an enumeration of the possible combinations of feelings, sensual feelings and non-sensual feelings: pleasant, painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant. The part covering the *contemplation of mind* is also very brief, and it contains an enumeration of the different kinds of mind (lustful, free from lust, hating, free from hate, etc.). The part on the *contemplation of mind-objects* is the most extensive and arguably the most important one. It includes: the five hindrances (sensual desire, ill-will, sloth-and-torpor, worry-and-flurry, doubt), the five aggregates of grasping (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness), the six internal and external sense-bases (eye and sight-objects, nose and smells, ear and sounds, tongue and tastes, body and tangibles, mind and mind-objects), the seven factors of enlightenment (mindfulness, investigation-of-states, energy, delight, tranquillity, concentration, equanimity) and the four noble truths (suffering, origin of suffering, cessation of suffering, the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering). The last part represents an extensive discourse with its own sub-units, where the fourth sub-unit (the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering) contains an exposition of the noble eightfold path (right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration). The structure of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhana Sutta* is schematically outlined in Table 2.

Similar to the "Hong fan", this text is a combination of different lists merged into a comprehensive system of contemplative practices. We have even stronger reasons to suspect that it consists of pre-existing elements because many individual lists mentioned in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhana Sutta* frequently appear in other parts of the canon. Similar to the "Hong fan" where the contents of the system do not fit very neatly into the chosen framework of the "nine divisions", the framework of the "four foundations of mindfulness" is equally unbalanced, with most of the frequently mentioned numerical lists appearing in the fourth section

Table 2: Recursive structure of the numerical lists of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhana Sutta*.

Main list	First-level elements	Second-level elements	Third-level elements
Four foundations of mindfulness	Contemplation of body	Breathing techniques Bodily postures Clear awareness Reflection on the repulsive parts of the body Reflection on the four elements Charnel-ground contemplation	
	Contemplation of feelings	Enumeration of the possible kinds of feelings	
	Contemplation of mind	Enumeration of the possible kinds of mind	
	Contemplation of mind-objects	Five hindrances Five aggregates of grasping Six internal and external sense-bases Seven factors of enlightenment Four noble truths	Noble eight-fold path

(“contemplation of mind-objects”) while some less important lists in the first three sections do not even have titles (cf. the non-titled lists in the eighth division of the “Hong fan” under the “Various verifications”). The simple enumerations of the second and the third sections also contrast sharply with the more extensive lists in the first and the fourth sections, suggesting that the contemplative practices related to the body and the mind-objects have more importance. Overall, the composite list assembled in this text represents more than just an orderly conceptual matrix but an interactive structure, with some of its elements linked through internal referencing. In fact, the system of this *sutta* is effectively circular, as one of the elements of the eightfold path, right mindfulness, lists the four elements corresponding to the main list of this *sutta*: contemplating body as body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind and mind-objects as mind-objects. The composite lists in the “Hong fan” and the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhana Sutta* therefore seem to work in a similar way as interlinked knowledge frameworks, despite the obvious differences between the two traditions.

The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhana Sutta* is not the only attempt to provide a systematic outline using a combination of numerical lists. It has a very close relative in the

Satipaṭṭhana Sutta (*The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*) of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, which is nearly identical, only lacking the detailed exposition of the four noble truths. Other individual lists mentioned in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhana Sutta*, such as the four noble truths and the eightfold path, re-occur multiple times in the Pāli canon, and it is impossible to point out the “original” *sutta* from which they come.¹³ The Pāli canon contains many repetitions, and the idea of textual exclusiveness is alien to it.

The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhana Sutta* is just one knowledge framework created for a specific purpose, and the *Nikāyas* preserve more such systems designed for other ends, such as, for example, the *Sigālaka Sutta* (*To Sigālaka*) which contains a system of ethical prescriptions for lay people. The contents of this *sutta* are mainly prohibitive: the four defilements of action, four causes of evil, six ways of wasting one’s substance. In addition, the *sutta* offers a Buddhist re-interpretation of the popular practice of veneration of the six cardinal directions, presenting them as relations towards parents; teachers; wife and children; friends and companions; servants, workers and helpers; ascetics and brahmins. In this way, the Buddhist tradition re-defines a pre-existing religious practice, subsuming and integrating it into its own teaching using the familiar instrument of numerical lists.

4 The impact of numerical lists on the Buddhist textual tradition

In understanding the historical developments behind the numerical lists in the Pāli canon, Rupert Gethin’s analysis is particularly insightful. Gethin’s approach is continued by Bart Dessein who further investigates the role of lists as a fundamental tool in the development of Buddhist textual and philosophic tradition.¹⁴ Even though Gethin’s study has been criticised, from a somewhat dogmatic perspective, for not paying sufficient attention to the stability and consistency of textual transmission in the Buddhist community, his argument seems justified for the early period when the texts had not yet been canonised and presumably remained more flexible.¹⁵ Gethin suggests that early Buddhism was a gradually unfolding tradition whose teaching and texts developed simultaneously with the maturing of the Buddhist community itself, a suggestion that agrees with the evidence from other traditions.¹⁶ He also argues that numerical lists originated in

¹³ For a systematic study of the four noble truths, see Anderson 1999.

¹⁴ Dessein 2013.

¹⁵ Wynne 2004.

¹⁶ Carr 2005; Makeham 1996; Hunter 2014.

an oral tradition and that they served a mnemonic function. The Nikāyas contain multiple instances of the same lists in various degrees of detail: mentions of list titles without enumeration of constituent items, lists with brief enumeration of items and elaborately expounded lists where their items receive further explanation. Gethin suggests that this diversity may have been caused by the difference in contexts: depending on the text, the same list would be unwound to different degrees, which “highlights the difficulties about entering into arguments about the ‘original’ version of a sutta, for example, in the context of comparative research between the Pāli Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas.”¹⁷ Particularly noteworthy is the observation regarding the integration of simple numerical lists into composite ones, following the doctrinal developments and the debates that arose within the Buddhist community. Such composite lists eventually became interwoven with one another, so that all the major doctrinal points became interlinked, jointly forming a structured web of knowledge. At this stage, the mastery of lists would not only help to memorise individual bits of the teaching, but also serve as a convenient point of entry into the body of knowledge accumulated by the Buddhist community: every individual list would raise in mind the numerous connections that relate it to other parts of the teaching. The example of the *Mahāsati-paṭṭhana Sutta* is one instance of such interwoven discourse where links between different elements can be traced already at the level of a single *sutta*. However, if we start considering other *suttas* mentioning individual categories of the *Mahāsati-paṭṭhana Sutta*, we will be able to extend greatly its web of interlinked categories, thus encompassing a significant part of the Buddhist teaching. The application of this vast, virtually unrestricted web of interlinked categories would, in addition to the reproduction of pre-existing knowledge, become a productive tool to help the practitioner understand the inner structure and dynamic of the Dhamma.¹⁸ The resulting interlinked structure, according to Gethin, served as a “flowchart for the composition of the discourse” and helped educated practitioners to structure their debate along well-defined and familiar lines of numerical lists.¹⁹ This created a firm ground for improvisation and creation of new texts that from the very inception were sufficiently consistent with the existing body of knowledge. However, this framework still allows for some human error, and indeed, there are

¹⁷ Gethin 1992: 156.

¹⁸ Gethin 1992: 156, 161–162.

¹⁹ Cf. the “discourse machine” that Stephen Owen 2001 identifies in the early mediaeval Chinese literature.

instances of diverging systems of numerical lists that have been preserved in different parts of the Buddhist tradition.²⁰

Gethin shows how this uniform approach to composition and structuring of texts resulted in works that consist of a large number of repetitive blocks. In his opinion, the common technique of abbreviations (*peyyālas*) where the large repetitive fragments of texts are omitted and the reader is invited to reconstitute them according to the pattern of the initial pericope, constitute evidence for such a form of textual production and transmission.²¹

At a later stage, the Buddhist tradition moved on to develop numerical lists into even more elaborate tools of textual production, the *mātikās*, related to the practice of *vibhaṅga* (“breaking up”), a specific kind of analysis that is based on systematic decomposition of phenomena into their constituent parts.²² *Mātikā*, according to Gethin, is “any schedule or table of items or lists – but especially one built up according to a system of numerical progression – that acts as a basis for further exposition”.²³ Often such *mātikās* are produced by applying one list on another list, for example, the *mātikā* of 144 variations of dependent-arising formula is constructed out of 16 basic variations applied to further nine variations.²⁴

20 Alexander Wynne 2004 is unsympathetic to the idea of an extended productive period in the early history of the Buddhist textual tradition. He suggests that such divergences can be equally explained by conscious editing of original texts that had thereto been preserved verbatim. Wynne prefers to see the history of Buddhist textuality as that of a set of “original” texts that were gradually dispersed and modified in various traditions. In other words, even though the transmission was oral, the accuracy was such an important concern that textual transmission worked virtually in the same way as in manuscript traditions. Wynne’s criticism does not address Gethin’s discussion of the gradual formation of complex lists out of pre-existing simple linear lists. Furthermore, it seems to be based on the assumption that the only possible model of oral transmission is that outlined by Albert Lord (1960) [2000], which does not seem to accord with Gethin’s argument in which he traces a different model of oral transmission specific to the early Buddhist community. Rejecting Gethin’s reconstruction of the productive transmission in early Buddhism, Wynne is forced to offer an alternative hypothesis regarding the texts’ initial composition. According to this alternative model, the numerous repetitive pericopes in the Buddhist scriptures were “fashioned by committees”. This unprecedented committee-driven method of textual composition looks fanciful. The evidence that Wynne provides in its support, such as the “great complexity and sophistication” of the Buddhist textual tradition (apparently contrasted to the simplicity of the Homeric epics!) is hardly convincing (Wynne 2004: 120–124).

21 Gethin 1992: 156.

22 Gethin 1992: 164.

23 Dessein 2013 subscribes to a broader definition of *mātikās* that includes all numerical lists. I find Gethin’s meticulous approach more useful, since the practice that corresponds to *mātikās* in the proper sense does not seem to be attested in ancient China, as opposed to the earlier practice of simple and composite numerical lists for which we have a large number of Chinese parallels.

24 Gethin 1992: 159.

By the time when *mātikās* became commonplace, numerical lists had already evolved from their initial mnemonic roots towards full-fledged tools for discourse generation, closely intertwined with the Buddhist meditative practices.

Gethin's observations, as briefly summarised here, provide much insight for the understanding of the workings of similarly structured texts in the Chinese tradition for which we have much less evidence. Numerical lists in Buddhism are a product of an evolving textual community of practitioners who use them as a tool to create increasingly advanced forms of textual discourse. There are many things that both traditions have in common: the use of lists with varying degree of detail depending on context, the creation of composite lists out of simpler ones, the presence of diverging variants of the same lists in different parts of the corpus. While direct textual exchange between these two realms in the middle of the first millennium BC seems implausible, perhaps we are facing an exciting example of “convergent evolution”: similar attitudes to authoritative knowledge in communities based on strict hierarchy may have produced similarly structured texts.

I shall now proceed to examine the numerical lists of the *Yi Zhou shu*, which I regard as remnants of early knowledge frameworks from ca. the fifth-second centuries BC. During that period, a variety of such frameworks co-existed, making the strategies of knowledge organisation more diverse than in the later tradition, which knows no alternatives to the “Hong fan”.

5 Distribution of numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu*

While numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* appear similar to one another at a first look, under closer examination, their contents, structure and presentation turn out to be rather diverse. In my analysis, I exclude the commonplace lists that are widely spread in received texts, such as the “four cardinal directions” (*si fang* 四方), “six kinds of domestic animals” (*liu xu* 六畜), “nine grains” (*jiu gu* 九穀), etc. In the *Yi Zhou shu*, the constituents of such lists are never specified and arguably they are used as common language tropes whose meaning was potentially obvious to every member of the audience. Dismissing such idiomatic lists, I focus on the lists that were most likely restricted to a specific textual community, and which were considered important enough to be expounded at length, often occupying the central position in texts. The lengthy elaborations suggest that the contents of such innovative lists were not self-evident. Although there are several marginal cases where we cannot be certain whether the list is innovative or idiomatic, overall the boundary between them in the *Yi Zhou shu* is sufficiently clear to make such a distinction consistently applicable.

Nevertheless, even after the exclusion of idiomatic lists, the remaining lists are still rather diverse and necessitate a more fine-grained classification. The most general distinction can be made between expounded and unexpounded lists. While many lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* are accompanied with enumerations of their constituents, others come without such enumerations and their exact contents remain unknown.²⁵ Although sometimes the expositions can be borrowed from other chapters of the *Yi Zhou shu* (which should always be done with caution, considering that different chapters may have different origins), in other cases such lists are neither clarified in the *Yi Zhou shu* nor in any other parts of the received corpus. For example, the “Ming xun” 命訓 (“Instruction on the mandate”) chapter mentions the “three coherences” (*san shu* 三述) that, to my knowledge, are not explained in any text presently known. One would suspect that such lists refer to unpreserved texts, or that their contents were part of oral explanations that had never been written down, or that the knowledge of these lists in a particular textual community was so widespread that they technically worked as idiomatic.

In the following table, I provide an overview of the *Yi Zhou shu* chapters with numerical lists. This table can be used as a quick reference for the initial classification of lists and the identification of related lists in different chapters.

6 Types of numerical lists occurring in the *Yi Zhou shu*

Expounded lists come in several forms and are spread unevenly within the collection (Table 3). Of these, the prevalent form are expounded enumerated lists. Such lists are usually first mentioned by their title, such as the “six guards” (*liu wei* 六衛) or the “three extremities” (*san ji* 三極), followed by enumeration of their constituents either immediately or somewhat later in the text. Below is an example of such a list from chapter “Feng bao” 豐保 (“Safeguarding at Feng”). The slightly obscure narrative of this chapter seems to describe how King Wen erected a stone stele with two sets of rules inscribed on both sides. The rules on the “inner side” apparently were related to domestic matters, while those on the “outer side” were related to foreign affairs. In this example, I provide the enumeration of all lists followed by the exposition of the first one from the “inner” set:²⁶

²⁵ Such references have been called *exophoric*, as opposed to the *endophoric* that can be derived from within the text (Shasha 2006: 73).

²⁶ Here and below, citations from the *Yi Zhou shu* are given according to the collated edition by Huang Huaixin et al. 2007.

Table 3: Types of numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu*.

#	Juan	Title	List features	Parallels
1	1	Du xun 度訓	–	
2		Ming xun 命訓	Expounded: non-enumerated; unexpounded	3
3		Chang xun 常訓	Expounded: non-enumerated; unexpounded	2, 29(!), 38(!), 57
4		Wen zhuo 文酌	Expounded: enumerated	
5		Di kuang 羅匡	–	
6		Wu cheng 武稱	–	
7	2	Yun wen 允文	–	
8		Da wu 大武	Expounded: enumerated	21(*), 22, 23, 27
9		Da ming wu 大明武	Expounded: enumerated	
10		Xiao ming wu 小明武	–	
11		Da kuang I 大匡	–	
12		Cheng dian 程典	–	
13		Cheng wu 程寤		
14		Qin yin 秦陰		
15		Jiu zheng 九政		
16		Jiu kai 九開		
17		Liu fa 劉法		
18		Wen kai 文開		
19		Bao kai 保開		
20		Ba fan 八繁		
21	3	Feng bao 鄴保	Expounded: enumerated	8(*)
22		Da kai 大開	Expounded: enumerated	38
23		Xiao kai 小開	Unexpounded	8, 27, 28, 31, 47
24		Wen jing 文敬	–	
25		Wen zhuan 文傳	Expounded: non-enumerated; expounded: untitled, enumerated	
26		Rou wu 柔武	Expounded: enumerated	
27		Da kai wu 大開武	Expounded: enumerated	8, 23
28		Xiao kai wu 小開武	Expounded: enumerated	23, 32, 47, 67
29		Bao dian 寶典	Expounded: enumerated	3(!), 38
30		Feng mou 鄴謀	Expounded: enumerated	
31		Wu jing 寤敬	Unexpounded	23
32		Wu shun 武順	Unexpounded	28, 32, 47, 67
33		Wu mu 武穆	Expounded: enumerated	
34	4	He wu 和寤	–	
35		Wu wu 武寤	–	
36		Ke yin 克殷	–	
37		Da kuang II 大匡	Expounded: non-enumerated; unexpounded	38
38		Wen zheng 文政	Expounded: enumerated; expounded: non-enumerated	3(!), 21, 22, 29(!), 37

Table 3: (continued)

#	Juan	Title	List features	Parallels
39		Da ju 大聚	Expounded: structural	
40		Shi fu 世俘	–	
41		Jizi 箕子		
42		Qi de 耆德		
43	5	Shang shi 商誓	–	
44		Duo yi 度邑	–	
45		Wu jing 武倣	–	
46		Wu quan 五權	Expounded: enumerated	
47		Cheng kai 成開	Expounded: enumerated; unexpounded	23, 28, 32, 47, 67
48		Zuo Luo 作雒	–	
49		Huang men 皇門	–	
50		Da jie 大戒	Expounded: enumerated	
51	6	Zhou yue 周月	–	
52		Shi xun 時訓	–	
53		Yue ling 月令		
54		Shifa 諡法	–	
55		Ming tang 明堂	–	
56		Chang mai 嘗麥	–	
57		Ben dian 本典	Expounded: untitled, non-enumerated; unexpounded	3
58	7	Guanren 官人	Expounded: structural; expounded: non-enumerated	
59		Wang hui 王會	–	
60	8	Zhai gong 祭公	–	
61		Shi ji 史記	–	
62		Zhi fang 職方	–	
63	9	Rui Liangfu 芮良夫	–	
64		Taizi Jin 太子晉	–	
65		Yu pei 玉佩	–	
66		Yin zhu 殷祝	–	
67		Zhou zhu 周祝	Unexpounded	
68	10	Wu ji 武紀	Expounded: non-enumerated	
69		Quan fa 銓法	–	
70		Qifu 器服	–	

Non-enumerated: lists where individual items are not enumerated; unexpounded: lists that are mentioned by titles but whose contents are not provided; untitled: numerical lists that do not have a title; structural: overarching lists that are used to divide the text into segments. If two different types of lists occur within the same text, they are divided by semicolons; (*) after the chapter number indicates that the number of items in related lists is different, but the contents are related; (!) indicates that the titles of lists and the numbers of items are identical, but the contents are considerably different. Missing chapters are marked with grey.

內備五祥、六衛、七厲、十敗、四葛，
外用四蠹、五落、六容、七惡。

五祥：
一君選擇，
二官得度，
三務不舍，
四不行賂，
五察民困。

On the inner side, [he] prepared the five auspiciousnesses, six guards, seven exertions, ten defeats, four coverings. On the outer side, [he] used the four erosions, five abscissions, six containers, seven evils.

The five auspiciousnesses are:
The first: the ruler selects [whom to appoint].
The second: the officials get their measures.
The third: the duties are not abandoned.
The fourth: bribes are not taken.
The fifth: the people's troubles are investigated.

Sometimes numerical lists have titles but their contents come without enumeration. This is typical of “Ming xun” and “Chang xun” 常訓 (“Instruction on constancy”) chapters at the beginning of the collection. Here is an example from “Chang xun”:

六極：命、醜、福、賞、禍、罰。

The six extremities are: the mandate, shame, welfare, rewards, troubles, punishments.

The titles of such lists may appear after the exposition of contents, as in chapter 37 “Da kuang” 大匡 (“Great rectification”):

綏、比、新、故、外內、貴賤曰六位。

Moderation, competition, what is novel, what has precedents, external and domestic, noble and lowly are called the “six positions”.

There are several instances of untitled lists where the total number of constituents is mentioned, but no general term is chosen to refer to the list. One example of such a list can be found in the “Wu ji” 武紀 (“Martial discipline”) chapter at the end of the collection:

不知所取之量，不知所施之度，不知動靜之時，不知吉凶之事，不知困達之謀，疑此五者，未可以動大事。

Not knowing the measure when taking, not knowing the limit when putting something to action, not knowing the due times of action and repose, not knowing the fortunate and baleful affairs, not knowing the plans of hampering and attainment: the one who is hesitant in these five is not yet able to advance great affairs.

Some lists are not used to group notions but rather to organise the text that consists of several distinct units. This is the case of chapters “Da ju” 大聚 (“Great assembly”) and “Guan ren” 官人 (“The officials”) whose long and elaborate contents are presented as lists of “five virtues” (*wu de* 五德) and “six indicators” (*liu zheng* 六徵) respectively. I do not provide examples as this would involve citing the entire contents of these relatively long texts.²⁷

As seen in the “Hong fan”, some lists form nested structures that include other lists, such as the “five [sources of] happiness” (*wu fu* 五福) and “six [occasions of] suffering” (*liu ji* 六極) that jointly constitute the ninth division of the text. In addition to such nested lists where “parent lists” only include the titles and not the contents of “child lists”, there are also nested lists where child lists only act as “sub-titles” of sections in the parent lists. Many examples of this kind can be found in the “Da wu” 大武 (“Great warfare”) chapter:

攻有四攻、五良。 [...]	In attack, there are four violations and five goods. [...]
四攻者： 一攻天時， 二攻地宜， 三攻人德， 四攻行利。	The four violations are: The first: to violate the heavenly times. ²⁸ The second: to violate the earthly conveniences. The third: to violate the human virtues. The fourth: to violate the beneficial actions.
五良： 一取仁， 二取智， 三取勇， 四取材， 五取藝。	The five goods are: The first: to choose the humane. The second: to choose the wise. The third: to choose the valiant. The fourth: to choose the capable. The fifth: to choose the skilled.
此九者，攻之開也。	These nine items are the beginnings of attack.

In this example, the child lists of the “four evils” and the “five goods” jointly constitute the parent list of the “nine beginnings of attack”.

Expounded lists differ in the degree of detail. Some lists remain cryptic and difficult to understand while other come with detailed expositions that elucidate the meaning of individual components and the overall logic of the list. Some such lists

²⁷ See Richter’s 2002, 2005 studies of the “Guan ren” and its cognate version in the *Da Dai liji* 大戴禮記 (*Records on Ritual of Dai the Elder*). The typology of numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* has many similarities with the lists in the *Mishnah* as described by Shasha 2006: 71–79.

²⁸ While the word *gong* 功 (to attack, attack) appears to be used in its direct meaning in the parent list, in the child list it seems to be used in a metaphorical sense “to violate”.

with detailed expositions can be seen as double-layered texts, where a gnomic brief exposition constitutes the first earlier layer and a more lucid supplementary explanation is the second. Here is an example of a list with such elaborate expositions from the “Da kai wu” 大開武 (“The greater instruction of King Wu”):

十淫:

- 一淫政破國，
動不時，民不保，
- 二淫好破義，
言不協，民乃不和，
- 三淫樂破德，
德不純，民乃失常，
- 四淫動破醜，
醜不足，民乃不讓，
- 五淫中破禮，
禮不同，民乃不協，
- 六淫采破服，
服不度，民乃不順，
- 七淫文破典，
典不式教，民乃不類，
- 八淫權破故，
故不法官，民乃無法，
- 九淫貸破職，
百官令不承，
- 十淫巧破用，
用不足，百意不成。

The ten profligacies are:

1. Profligacy in governance ruins the country.
If the actions are not timely, the people will not be safe.
2. Profligacy in preferences ruins rightness.
If the words are not in accord, the people will not be agreeable.
3. Profligacy in music ruins the virtue.
If the virtue is not pure, the people will lose their usual order.
4. Profligacy in actions ruins the shame.
If the shame is insufficient, the people will be unyielding.
5. Profligacy in private matters ruins the ritual.
If the ritual is not inclusive, the people will not be in accord.
6. Profligacy in decoration ruins the robes.
If the robes are not according to the grades, the people will not be obedient.
7. Profligacy in elegance ruins the established models.
If the established models do not shape the instruction, the people will be unkind.
8. Profligacy in authority ruins the precedents.

If the precedents do not constrain the officials, the people will not obey the law.

9. Profligacy in loans ruins the responsibilities.

Various officials will not be able to carry out their orders.

10. Profligacy in mastery ruins the practice.

If the practice is insufficient, numerous intentions will not be fulfilled.

Although the explanations do not make the list entirely clear, without them it would have remained totally cryptic. In fact, many lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* are exactly as obscure as the “10 excesses” would have been without explanations. In their early performative contexts, these lists were probably accompanied by oral instruction. Since we cannot access it any longer, we may never be able to understand such lists well and produce a fully satisfying translation. Similarly, in the Pāli canon, the same list may be presented without elaboration, with brief elaboration, or with detailed elaboration. If the surviving texts only contained lists of the first and second type, the early Buddhist teaching would have appeared much more obscure.

7 The numerical lists typical of the *Yi Zhou shu*

In the *Yi Zhou shu*, numerical lists occur the most frequently in the third of the ten *juan* 卷 (“scrolls”) into which the collection is divided. Typologically, the lists in the chapters of the third *juan* are quite uniform: whenever they are expounded, their individual items are listed by numbers. The only exception is “Wen zhuan” 文傳 (“King Wen’s tradition”), which contains an untitled enumerated list in addition to unexpounded lists.

As mentioned before, in the Pāli canon, there are some numerical lists whose importance is reinforced by the frequency of their occurrence in different texts. Arguably, an element that reverberates many times in different contexts is more important for the communities who created these texts. If we approach the numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* with this idea in mind, we will see that there are similar repetitions that may help us to understand the prevailing concerns of the communities that created this group of texts. Such repetitions are the most visible in several chapters that employ the character *kai* 開 in their titles. A closer look at the systems of numerical lists of the *kai* chapters of the *Yi Zhou shu* reveals that the same groups of notions are expounded in them several times, and some of these expositions contain noteworthy differences that possibly betray the differences between the communities that created and transmitted them.

The *kai* chapters form a group of five texts that are, in the present arrangement, related to three different kings of the early Western Zhou: we have two such chapters for both kings Wen 文王 and Wu and one for King Cheng 成王 (Table 4).

Table 4: Numerical lists in the kai chapters of the Yi Zhou shu.

Reign	Chapter title	Numerical lists	Notes
King Wen	“Da kai” 大開	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Nine beginnings (<i>jiu kai</i> 九開) Eight warnings (<i>ba jing</i> 八敬): – * nine trespasses (<i>jiu guo</i> 九過) – * nine interdictions (<i>jiu jin</i> 九禁) – * nine teachings (<i>jiu jiao</i> 九教) – * nine merits (<i>jiu li</i> 九利) Five forewarnings (<i>wu jie</i> 五戒) * <i>Nine causations</i> (<i>jiu yin</i> 九因): – * <i>four proximal relations</i> (<i>si qi</i> 四戚) – * <i>five harmonies</i> (<i>wu he</i> 五和) * <i>Three virtues</i> (<i>san de</i> 三德) * <i>Three extremities</i> (<i>san ji</i> 三極) <i>Four proximal relations</i> (<i>si qi</i> 四戚) <i>Five harmonies</i> (<i>wu he</i> 五和) Seven losses (<i>qi shi</i> 七失) <i>Nine causations</i> (<i>jiu yin</i> 九因) Ten excesses (<i>shi yin</i> 十淫) <i>Three extremities</i> (<i>san ji</i> 三極): – * <i>nine luminaries</i> (<i>jiu xing</i> 九星) – * <i>nine regions</i> (<i>jiu zhou</i> 九州) – * <i>four limbs</i> (<i>si zuo</i> 四左) Four introspections (<i>si cha</i> 四察) <i>Five phases</i> (<i>wu xing</i> 五行) Seven compliances (<i>qi shun</i> 七順) Nine temporal markers (<i>jiu ji</i> 九紀)	<p>Of the eight items in the “eight warnings”, only four contain numerical lists.</p> <p>There is an exposition of the “nine trespasses” in chapter “Wen zheng”.</p> <p>There are no mentions of the “nine interdictions” in the <i>Yi Zhou shu</i>, however, “Wen zheng” mentions the “nine vices” (<i>jiu te</i> 九慝) that ought to be interdicted (<i>jin</i> 禁).</p> <p>Apart from “Xiao kai” and “Xiao kai wu”, the “nine causations”, “four proximal relations” and “five harmonies” occur in “Da wu”.</p> <p>The “three virtues” are also mentioned in “Wu jing” 嘉敬 (no. 31) and “Shang shi” (no. 43) chapters but never expounded.</p>
King Wu	“Da kai wu” 大開武	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * <i>Nine luminaries</i> (<i>jiu xing</i> 九星) * <i>Three extremities</i> (<i>san ji</i> 三極): – * <i>nine luminaries</i> (<i>jiu xing</i> 九星) – * <i>nine regions</i> (<i>jiu zhou</i> 九州) – * <i>four limbs</i> (<i>si zuo</i> 四左) Four introspections (<i>si cha</i> 四察) <i>Five phases</i> (<i>wu xing</i> 五行) Seven compliances (<i>qi shun</i> 七順) Nine temporal markers (<i>jiu ji</i> 九紀) 	<p>The “nine luminaries” are parallel to the “nine ranks” in “Cheng kai”.</p> <p>The “nine regions” also occur in “Feng bao”, “Chang mai” and “Zhi fang” chapters, where it is not expounded. I consider these uses of the list as idiomatic.</p> <p><i>Sizuo</i> 四左 in “Xiao kai wu” is perhaps identical to <i>sizuo</i> 四佐 in “Cheng kai”. In that second spelling, the list also occurs in the “Wu shun” chapter no. 32.²⁹</p> <p>The “five phases” in the <i>Yi Zhou shu</i>, apart from the <i>kai</i> chapters, are mentioned (not expounded) in chapters “Bao dian” (no. 29), “Wu shun” and “Zhou zhu” (no. 67).</p>

Table 4: (continued)

Reign	Chapter title	Numerical lists	Notes
King Cheng	“Cheng kai” 成開	<p>Three extremities (<i>san ji</i> 三極)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – * nine ranks (<i>jiu lie</i> 九列) – * nine regions (<i>jiu zhou</i> 九州) – * five phases (<i>wu xing</i> 五行) – * four limbs (<i>si zuo</i> 四佐) <p>Five demonstrations (<i>wu shi</i> 五示)</p> <p>Four preservations (<i>si shou</i> 四守)</p> <p>Six principles (<i>liu ze</i> 六則)</p> <p>Nine achievements (<i>jiu gong</i> 九功)</p> <p>Five precedents (<i>wu dian</i> 五典)</p>	

Child lists are marked by a dash (-). The lists marked by an asterisk (*) are unexpounded, i.e. their constituent items are not mentioned in the chapter. The *italicised* lists occur in more than one *kai* chapter.

As the table shows, the numerical lists of the *kai* chapters are largely inter-related, with the exception of “Da kai” 大開 (“The great instruction”), possibly due to its poor preservation.³⁰ “Xiao kai” 小開 (“The lesser instruction”), despite only containing unexpounded lists, is remarkable for having the largest number of lists that co-occur in other *kai* chapters. “Xiao kai” presents the “four proximal relations” and “five harmonies” as constituent elements of the “nine causations”. This logic, however, is not followed by “Da kai wu” which gives “the nine causations”, “four proximal relations” and “five harmonies” as independent lists, even though they occupy neighbouring positions in its system. However, if we look at chapter “Da wu” at the beginning of the collection (it is not a *kai* chapter, but similarly abounds in numerical lists), the “four proximal relations” and the “five harmonies” are presented therein as sub-components of the “nine causations of governance” (*zheng zhi yin* 政之因), which accords with the logic of “Xiao kai”. Therefore, “Xiao kai” (with “Da wu”) and “Da kai wu” contain two incompatibly different versions of the same cluster of numerical lists. It appears that such clusters were more stable than their exact contents, which could change in the course of development of the knowledge tradition.

Apart from the cluster of the “nine causations”, “four proximal relations” and “five harmonies”, “Xiao kai” also mentions the “three extremities” (*san ji* 三極) without expounding them. This list reoccurs in multiple chapters. Among the *kai* chapters, it is expounded in “Xiao kai wu” 小開武 (“The lesser instruction of King Wu”) and in “Cheng kai” 成開 (“King Cheng’s instruction”) (Table 5). Interestingly, although these expositions are similar in structure and clearly related to one another, the one in “Cheng kai” is accompanied by a supplementary explanation. Notably, only the clauses of this supplementary explanation contain rhymes.

Overall, the *kai* chapters operate with a limited number of lists whose contents are relatively stable, but not to the extent of making them identical in all texts. Therefore, the *kai* chapters of the *Yi Zhou shu* do not form a knowledge system as consistent as the one in the Pāli *suttas*. Rather, they seem to constitute a collection of concurrent attempts to create comprehensive knowledge frameworks based on numerical lists. This is an important conclusion since it highlights the heterogeneity of the *Yi Zhou shu* even in those chapters that otherwise appear the most closely related. Clearly, such texts were not one-off compositions by the same author. Rather, they seem to have been produced in a loose tradition whose members were not concerned with full consistency.

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion, see McNeal 2002: 46–60.

³⁰ It is hard to say whether the text has missing parts; three characters in the exposition of the “eight warnings” (*ba jing* 八儆) and one character in the list of “five forewarnings” (*wu jie* 五戒) are lost, making what remains quite incomprehensible.

Table 5: Exposition of the “three extremities” in “Xiao kai wu” and “Cheng kai”.³¹

“Xiao kai wu”	“Cheng kai”
三極： 一維天九星， 二維地九州， 三維人四左。	三極： 一天有九列， 別時陰陽，(*lan) 二地有九州， 別處五行，(*[g]ʕan) 三人有四佐， 佐官維明。(*mran)
The three extremities are: 1. In Heaven, nine luminaries. 2. On Earth, nine regions. 3. In people, four limbs.	The three extremities are 1. Heaven has nine ranks, which are used to discern between times, the <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i> . 2. Earth has nine regions, which are used to position the five phases. 3. People have four limbs, and the assisting officials should be clear-sighted.

Judging from the contents of reoccurring lists, the predominant concerns are the principles of social interaction (“four proximal relations”, “five harmonies”) and cosmology (“three extremities” with its subcomponents: “nine luminaries” or “ranks”, “nine regions”, “five phases”). There is some similarity between the *kai* chapters and the “Hong fan”, such as the “five phases” and the “three virtues” mentioned in “Xiao kai” and expounded in the “Hong fan”, as well as the emphasis on temporal markers that is conspicuous in the “Hong fan” and also explicit in “Xiao kai wu”. Finally, the “nine divisions” of the “Hong fan” may be related to the “nine regions” mentioned in the *kai* chapters: the two words are phonologically close (州 *tu, 疇 *dru). However, the overlap is only partial. Both the “Hong fan” and the *kai* chapters attempt to create authoritative knowledge frameworks relying on numerical lists, but it is not clear whether they were designed for the same purpose.

Today, the *kai* chapters are presented to us as “instructions” related to three different early Western Zhou kings. This attribution makes an exegete’s work easier, for it becomes possible to explain the contradictions by the different circumstances of each reign. For a textual historian, however, this is not helpful, for all these texts were clearly composed several centuries after the Western Zhou. One could also imagine that these texts originated in the same discourse, but developed

³¹ I consult the phonological reconstruction by Baxter and Sagart 2014.

in slightly dissimilar ways, accumulating differences that could no longer be ignored after their fixation in writing. It is possible that the *kai* chapters were attributed to different kings *post factum* to resolve the contradictions between them.

Although parallel numerical lists are the most obvious in the *kai* chapters of the *Yi Zhou shu*, they are not exclusive to them, as Table 3 shows. It is worth examining other parallels briefly to understand whether they jointly form an interconnected knowledge system. One chapter that is particularly rich in parallels is “Da wu”, a systematic catalogue of instructions related to military activities, whose “seven formations” (*qi zhi* 七制) correspond to the gradual stages of military involvement starting from peaceful governance to immediate combat.³² The part that is the richest in parallels with the rest of the *Yi Zhou shu* is the first formation, “[peaceful] governance” (*zheng* 政). I have already discussed the “four proximal relations” and “five harmonies” that constitute “the causations of governance”. Apart from these, two items in the so-called “three collections” (*san lian* 三斂) that belong to the formation of “invasion” (*qin* 侵) are related to the sixth and the seventh items in the list of “nine virtues” in the “Wen zheng” 文政 (“Cultured governance”) chapter (Table 6).

Chapter “Feng bao” contains a parallel with the formation of “war” (*zhan* 戰). According to “Da wu”, it consists of the “six exertions” (*liu li* 六厲) and “five guards” (*wu wei* 五衛). The two latter lists are related to the “six guards” and “seven exertions” in the “Feng bao” (Table 7).

Table 6: Parallels between the lists of the “three collections” in “Da wu” and the “nine virtues” in “Wen zheng”.

“Da wu”	“Wen zheng”
三斂：一男女比，二工次，三祇人死。	九德：一忠，二慈，三祿，四賞，五民之利，六商工受資，七祇民之死，八無奪農，九是民之則。
The three collections are: first, males and females should be matched; second, <i>artisans [should receive] materials</i> ; ³³ third, <i>one should be respectful in what relates to people’s death</i> .	The nine virtues: first, loyalty; second, charity; third, emoluments; fourth, appreciation; fifth, what benefits the people; sixth: <i>merchants and artisans [should] receive materials</i> ; seventh: <i>one should be respectful in what relates to the people’s death</i> ; eighth, not to extort from peasants; ninth, these are the principles of [inter-acting] with people.

³² McNeal 2012: 110–122.

³³ I read *ci* 次 (“the next”) as *zi* 資 (“material”) considering the parallel in “Wen zheng”.

Table 7: The “guards” and “exertions” in “Da wu” and “Feng bao”.

“Da wu”	“Feng bao”
<p>六厲：</p> <p>一仁厲以行， 二智厲以道， 三武厲以勇， 四師厲以士， 五校正厲御， 六射師厲伍。</p> <p>五衛：</p> <p>一明仁懷怒， 二明智輔謀， 三明武攝勇， 四明材攝士， 五明藝攝官。</p> <p>The six exertions are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The exertion of humaneness for action. 2. The exertion of wisdom for leadership. 3. The exertion of martial spirit for valour. 4. The exertion of military units for the officers. 5. Rectification exerts the implementation of orders. 6. The units of archers exert the five-man squads. <p>The five guards are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Those who are clear-sighted in humaneness cherish mercy.³⁴ 2. Those who are clear-sighted in wisdom assist in planning. 3. Those who are clear-sighted in warfare direct the brave. 4. Those who are clear-sighted in talents direct the officers. 5. Those who are clear-sighted in arts direct the officials. 	<p>六衛：</p> <p>一明仁懷恕， 二明智設謀， 三明武攝勇， 四明才攝士， 五明藝法官， 六明命攝政。</p> <p>七厲：</p> <p>一翼勤厲務， 二動正厲民， 三靜兆厲武， 四翼藝厲物， 五翼言厲復， 六翼敬厲眾， 七翼知厲道。</p> <p>The six guards are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Those who are clear-sighted in humaneness cherish mercy. 2. Those who are clear-sighted in wisdom design plans. 3. Those who are clear-sighted in warfare direct the brave. 4. Those who are clear-sighted in talents direct the officers. 5. Those who are clear-sighted in skills set an example for the officials. 6. Those who are clear-sighted in the mandate direct the governance. <p>The seven exertions are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encouragement of diligence exerts public works. 2. Enaction of rightness exerts the people. 3. Silencing of portents exerts warfare. 4. Encouragement of arts exerts production. 5. Encouragement of words exerts reaction. 6. Encouragement of reverence exerts the multitudes. 7. Encouragement of wisdom exerts the leadership.

³⁴ I am following Lu Wenchao 盧文弨 (1717–1796) who emends *nu* 怒 (“angry”) as *shu* 恕 (“forgiving”) (Huang Huaixin et al. 2007: 118). This is corroborated by the parallel in “Feng bao”.

These two lists have an interesting relationship. Both texts operate with “guards” and “exertions” as a cluster of related items. Despite the variance in the numbers of constituent components, the lists are near-identical in “exertions” and markedly different in the “guards”. There is only one important exception: the second element in the “Da wu” list of “guards” parallels the seventh in the list of the “seven exertions” in “Feng bao”. The divergence between these texts can be explained in two ways, depending on which text represents an earlier state. If “Da wu” is closer to the original, then the creators of “Feng bao” (or its precursor) borrowed the idea of a paired list of “guards” and “exertions”, expanded both by one item and recomposed the “seven exertions”. Only the last (seventh) item in this list was influenced by “Da wu”, while the rest were created anew. If we assume that the “Feng bao” version is earlier, we would have to postulate that the composers of “Da wu” had forgotten (or consciously rejected) the contents of the list of “exertions” and reconstituted them using the notions borrowed from the “guards”. As a result, only the second item in the list preserved similarity to the original. It is difficult to say which of these two scenarios is more probable.

The community behind the *Yi Zhou shu* had relatively loose standards of fixation of concepts presented as numerical lists. Despite the fact that certain notions and groups of notions were reused in different texts, some lists with identical titles were filled with different contents, while individual elements of other lists ended up in lists under different titles. The relative stability of the clusters of lists and the lists’ titles as opposed to the fluidity of their contents suggests that higher-level entities were prioritised over their lower-level constituent elements: remembering that there are “nine causations” was more important than remembering what these “nine causations” consist of.

8 Conclusion

The practical significance of numerical lists may be illustrated with a contemporary example:

“四個全面”戰略佈局能否接續推進，關鍵在於是否擁有一大批按照“三嚴三實”要求培養和鍛造的領導幹部。

“Whether or not we can continuously promote the strategic layout of the ‘four comprehensives’ fully depends on whether there are masses of cadres pursuing personal cultivation and fortification according to the ‘three stricts and three honests’.”³⁵

35 Wu Yijun 2015.

To a reader unfamiliar with the recent political developments in China, this quote would appear as esoteric gobbledygook. However, those who do follow the policies of China's current leader Xi Jinping 习近平 may recognise the formulas used by Xi to revamp the Chinese political system and to promote his vision of reforms. The relevance of these formulas is underpinned by Xi's authority as the head of the state and the party as well as by the growing body of written and oral commentaries, in which these formulas are elaborated, explained, interlinked and projected onto the everyday work of the party-state functionaries. These formulas may have been pronounced by Xi and are underpinned by his authority, but the discourse surrounding the "four comprehensives" and the "three stricts and three honests" is rather propagated by numerous officials and media workers. Xi's involvement in the development of this discourse is limited. Having formulated these core notions, he let them out into the wild, and the variety of ways in which they are interpreted and conjugated is beyond anyone's control. Despite this complex collective interaction, future historians will probably ascribe the entire discourse to Xi Jinping, exaggerating his role and downplaying the role of the community that ensured its spread and sophistication.³⁶

The acceleration of information exchange and proliferation of electronic media have made it possible to observe the emergence of lexical formulas packaged as numerical lists in real time. Such lists should be understood as a social phenomenon, and the only way to explain them is to identify the environment that produced them and the instructive message encoded in them (in J.L. Austin's terminology, it is important to view them primarily as perlocutionary acts intended to induce the audience to adopt certain patterns of behaviour, rather than illocutionary acts intended to explain something). We talk about the "four comprehensives" and the "three stricts and three honests" seriously because we understand that they influence the behaviour of China's political actors; knowing these formulas makes it easier for us to understand and predict their actions. Few scholars would study these formulas as context-independent knowledge, and there is little sense in questioning whether the "four comprehensives" are indeed comprehensive or whether the "three stricts and three honests" really constitute the ideal moral code of a government official.

When dealing with ancient texts, however, this dubious interpretative strategy is difficult to resist. Devoid of any certain knowledge about the community that

³⁶ Xi Jinping first mentioned this list in November 2014. However, at that time it only contained three items (Xinhuaawang 2014a). It was extended to four items in December of the same year (Xinhuaawang 2014b). However, at that time Xi still did not use a collective term to refer to this list. It seems to have emerged several months later in the official publications of the Communist Party in early 2015 (Renminwang 2015).

produced the texts, we are tempted to see them as self-sufficient entities, designed to produce meaning irrespective of the environment in which they are performed. The contemporary examples allow us to take a fresher, non-exotic look at numerical lists, reminding us that they are inseparable from practice, and may be rooted in the logic of our social structures, which have not changed much since antiquity.³⁷ One element that appears common for ancient Chinese, Buddhist and contemporary cases is the presentation of lists as the “key” to the understanding of a phenomenon or mastery of a practice. As observed by Mark Lewis, “the application of numbers – the three *x*, the five *y* – showed that the author was giving an *exhaustive* list of the elements of a *closed* system” (emphasis mine).³⁸ In a comparison of the use of lists in late antique rabbinic literature and the works of Maimonides (1138–1204), Tamás Visi shows how Maimonides’ innovative lists promoted not only new groupings of facts and concepts, but also new strategies of knowledge acquisition, prioritising independent inquiry over associative memorisation. In this way, numerical lists do not only define what should be known, but also how the knowledge should be acquired.³⁹ However, both Lewis and Visi appear to have paid less attention to the prescriptive aspect of numerical lists, which do not only shape knowledge, but also regulate behaviour. In fact, these two aspects, described by W.M.W. Roth as “reflective” and “hortative”,⁴⁰ are so closely intertwined in both the early Chinese and early Buddhist contexts that numerical lists should perhaps be seen as foundational blocks of knowledge-practice, a *savoir* in which the correct understanding of phenomena and the correct action cannot be separated from one another.

The complex systems combining several numerical lists that we have seen in the Pāli canon, the “Hong fan” and the *Yi Zhou shu* extend beyond simple grouping of notions and prescriptions, creating synthetic frameworks of knowledge-practice applicable to a broad range of situations. Such frameworks restrict the freedom of practitioners more than simple lists do, as they aim to structure thoughts and actions in universal terms, creating a set of overarching principles for a social role, such as the monarch in his reign or the Buddhist

37 The Chinese political discourse generates such lists continuously. One could mention the elusive framework of the “three representatives” (*sange daibiao* 三個代表) promoted by Jiang Zemin 江澤民 or the paternalistic “eight honours and eight shames” (*ba rong ba chi* 八榮八耻) from Hu Jintao’s 胡錦濤 era, which aims to instill uniform principles of moral behaviour. Chiang Kai-shek’s 蔣介石 adoption of the “four virtues” (*si wei* 四維) from the *Guanzi* in his New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活運動) in 1930s shows that this practice is not restricted to a particular political camp.

38 Lewis 1999: 280.

39 Visi 2009.

40 Roth 1965: 94–95, 98.

practitioner in his self-perfection. This extensive regulation of the practitioner's life may be a heavy burden, and its imposition needs to be justified in a convincing way. This is perhaps the reason why the comprehensive lists in the Pāli *Nikāyas* are presented as the words of the Buddha, and the “Hong fan” relies on the combined authority of King Wu, the sagely Jizi, the legendary Yu the Great and finally Heaven itself. This massive claim of authority might have ensured the reverential acceptance of the text as a wondrous source of knowledge-practice.

Texts are created in response to real-world challenges. The similarity of textual structures of the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the numerical lists of the *Yi Zhou shu* suggests that the production environment of the *Yi Zhou shu* may have been, in several essential aspects, similar to that of the early Buddhist community. The texts were not bought at a book shop or borrowed anonymously from a library: they were learned from masters who had certain expectations towards their students. Therefore, in both the South Asian and Chinese cases, we are probably dealing with similarly structured communities of practice. They valued textual knowledge, but such knowledge would only be transmitted to those who accept a certain code of behaviour and practice.

The ancient Chinese communities that produced the lists of the *Yi Zhou shu*, however, did not succeed in assuming the same degree of homogeneity as the Buddhist *saṅgha*. The received chapters of the *Yi Zhou shu* are noticeably misaligned, making it impossible to view them as complementary parts of a single non-contradictory system. The disagreements in the *Yi Zhou shu* texts may emerge from related, but separate textual traditions that produced recognisably similar, but substantially different texts. The recently excavated counterpart of the “Jin teng” 金滕 (“Metal-bound casket”) chapter of the *Shang shu* in the Tsinghua manuscripts collection suggests that even the texts that later became canonical were also subject to such changes in the course of transmission.⁴¹ This tension between the authoritative knowledge claims and the susceptibility to modification is one of the most curious problems revealed by the analysis of the numerical lists of the *Yi Zhou shu*.

It appears that both the Chinese and the early Buddhist communities make emphasis not on the production of new knowledge and experiences, but rather on the systematic re-production of the existing ones. However, later stages of both traditions appear to be distinctively different. China does not seem to have ever developed its version of *vibhaṅga*, which is understandable since this method was closely related to the specifically Buddhist practice of meditation. Furthermore, China lost interest in many of its lists, and towards the Western Han 西漢 (206 BC–9 AD) we see an undisputed domination of the “Hong fan”, while

⁴¹ Gren 2017; Meyer 2017.

alternative attempts assuming that the numerical lists in the *Yi Zhou shu* were designed for a similar purpose seem to have fallen out of favour. It is difficult to say why this happened, and only tentative suggestions are possible. It may have been influenced by the communal character of the *saṅgha* as opposed to the increasingly centralised and state-dominant textual community in China shortly before and after the early empires (third century BC–third century AD). While the early Buddhists had to achieve the unity of their teaching by means of negotiation, which resulted in a massive corpus of doctrinally consistent texts with neutralised contradictions, in China such contradictions became a subject of politicised debate where the most sought-after prize was the monopolistic position of a text and its tradition. In this harsh competitive environment only one comprehensive system built on numerical lists could survive, and the “Hong fan” seems to have successfully defeated its competitors.

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