In the Empire of Signs:

Predicting the Future in the Chinese-Speaking Cultural Realm

相之國度：漢語文化圈中的預測與未來導讀

— Michael Lackner

The sinologist and novelist Jean Levi has called China 'the civilization of divination par excellence'.[1] At least in the quantitative sense this is very likely true. If we understand divination as an attempt to uncover what is hidden not only in the future, but also in the past and present, then there is probably no other culture that can rival the sheer variety of Chinese methods for mastering fate and managing contingencies.

Classification, Calculation, Interpretation: The Scope of Divination

Does Levi's formulation also hold true in a qualitative sense? Here again, the answer is affirmative. The *Yijing* (易經, *Book of Changes*), canonized by the Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty in 136 BCE as the first of the 'Five Classics',[2] is based on principles of divination. It was used in a complex process of consulting oracles with the help of yarrow stalks or coins (cat. 29–31). For 2000 years every scholar in the Chinese cultural area, which also to varying extents included Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, had to study this book, such that divination was in a sense embedded into the DNA of East Asian education. In addition, this text also contributed to the development of a philosophical cosmology. Often appearing in a variety of simplified forms, the *Yijing* has successively become an integral part of Chinese folk culture.

The *Yijing* looks back on approximately 3000 years of unbroken history, making it one of the oldest known divinatory compendia. Beginning in 1899, however, and continuing apace with excavations in the 1920s and 1930s, a much older form of fortune telling has entered the spotlight: the oracle bones of the Shang Dynasty, usually made of turtle shells or ox scapula. From around 1230 BCE on these bore inscriptions (*jiagu wen* 甲骨文), making them the oldest known evidence of the use of Chinese characters. The oracle bones prove the existence of a form of divination which answered questions regarding the weather, propitious times for planting, the causes of dreams, military enterprises, the outcome of births in the ruling family, and numerous other matters. The ruler was always present for their interpretation, and often even played an active role as an interpreter. The oracle bones uniquely document the daily concerns of the ruling family during the Shang Dynasty, functioning almost like an archive (cat. 27–28).

Many oracle bones, even those that do not yet bear more extensive inscriptions, are engraved with numbers. As early as the Shang Dynasty the date of the oracle is also included with the inscription. These dates make use of a system that combined the Ten Heavenly Stems (*tiangan* 天干) and the Twelve Earthly Branches (*dizhi* 地支) to create a cycle of 60 different dates. This cycle was later applied to years, months, and finally hours. Over the course of time certain qualities were assigned to these combinations. For example, these could apply to physiological phenomena, such as tinnitus (cat. 73, 74), to the selection of the propitious time for an undertaking (cat. 56–58), and to horoscopy (cat. 52). This last, most common form is based on the combination of Eight Characters (*bazi* 八字) and the corresponding 'Heavenly Stem' and 'Earthly Branch' for the year, month, day, and hour (cat. 51). In this context we can speak of a type of chronomancy, that is, the allocation of specific characteristics to particular moments in time, leading to a prophetic statement. Although Western astrology was also known in China, it was much less influential there than in Europe.

Sinologists' definition of the distinction between a calendar and an almanac differs from the definition widely held by European scholars. The creation of a calendar was first and foremost a prerogative of the Imperial government and its respective institutions. Any private initiative to make a calendar would have been severely punished, although these prohibitions were never universally obeyed. Pater Johann Adam Schall von Bell SJ, an important representative of the Jesuit mission to China which began in 1583, held the post of director of the Bureau of Astronomy and the Calendar during the reign of the Shunzhi Emperor. In this capacity he was responsible for creating a calendar (which drew criticism from competing Catholic orders). His memorandum regarding an eclipse is on view in the exhibition (cat. 79).

By contrast, there were, in principle, no restrictions on creating an almanac. While the official calendar does include, for example, entries concerning the position of the respective 'annual deities' and rules for selecting favourable days for the proclamation of edicts, appointments, and so on (important elements in Chinese manticism), the almanac represents a more comprehensive compendium of cultural knowledge based on the calendar. As such, it contains numerous other divinatory techniques, general knowledge of the selection of propitious days, possibilities for creating personal yearly horoscopes, and information on physiognomy, as well as magic spells and talismans, an introduction to Chinese writing styles, and – more recently – information about foreign flags. Such almanacs remain common to this day.[3]

Beyond the calculation of the cycle of 60, the concept of the Five Phases or Five Elements (*wuxing* 五行) – wood, fire, earth, metal, and water that exist in cycles of mutual creation and effacement – also appears in horoscopes and

in numerous other techniques for predicting one's destiny or choosing the opportune moment for an undertaking. These categories are both highly abstract and distinctly naturalistic. For example, in a fortune reading, a client whose horoscope contains too much fire will naturally be dissuaded from travelling to particularly hot places. Divination techniques are essentially designed to reduce complexity, and yet in practice they tend to take on increasingly complex forms.

Numerology also plays a central role in many techniques for predicting the future. Consequently, the word for 'number' (*shu* 數) appears as a synonym for 'fate' in many texts. The number is, in a sense, the 'code' or 'cipher' that must be decrypted. Beginning with the bibliographic chapter of the *Book of Han*, all calculation-based divinatory techniques have been categorized under the title 'Numbers and Arts', or later 'Arts and Numbers' (*shushu* 術數).[4]

The distinction between 'artificial' and 'natural' divination, as classified by Cicero, offers some clarity here: calculation and inspiration form the two pillars of every type of interpretation in the past, present, and future. The definition of divination as a 'culturally codified system for the interpretation of past, present, and future events, and the entirety of the means used for this process'[5] brings us to the question of the 'events' and, further to that, of the 'system'. 'Events' also take place in nature: astronomers distinguish between regular and irregular celestial phenomena (cat. 47), and indeed all 'divergent' incidents call for an interpretation that locates them within a larger order. Traditional meteorology, which was particularly used for military purposes, made use of a variety of parameters including the direction of the wind, or the formation of clouds in the sky (cat. 46). Here, in the act of classification, we see Cicero's 'artificial' divination at work, but it can also appear in the guise of the 'natural', for example when a person uses an oracle to bring about an 'event' that takes on a certain 'natural' character, as in the selection of an oracular text from the *Yijing* or the use of oracle bones for divination. We must also remember that the interpretation itself requires 'natural' intuition, a skill in reading signs that allows the interpreter to correctly construe the 'system' present in a given culture, for, by this logic, the possibility of error lies not in the system, but in human fallibility.

People also bear signs that can be decrypted. Chinese physiognomy is based on an interrelationship between body and mind. It primarily, but not exclusively, draws on analyses of the face and hands in accordance with the theory of the Five Phases.[6] This art, which found favour even with the sceptic Wang Chong 王充 (27–97 CE), not only served individuals interested in knowing their own fate, but was also used by the government to recruit officials – mandarins – particularly to the military (cat. 66, 67 u. 69). Overall, physiognomy is one of a large array of techniques which 'interpret' a 'form' (*xing* 形) or 'inspect' it (*xiang* 相), a term also used for the interpretation of written characters (*xiangzi* 相字) and seals (*xiangyin* 相印). Unusual phenomena affecting the body, such as ringing in the ears or involuntary blinking, are also interpreted (cat. 73).

The Chinese art of *feng shui* 風水 – in older variations also called *kanyu* 堪輿 (an expression for heaven and earth) or *dili* 地理 (patterns of the earth) – is a good case in point that illuminates the tension between 'artificial' and 'natural' forms of divination. This practice essentially concerns the determination of the correct location and time for establishing a grave site (*yinzhai* 陰宅) or a habitation for the living (*yangzhai* 陽宅).[7] It therefore requires attention to the environment (mountains, streams, etc.), forming the 'natural' element of this form of divination. By contrast, the use of a highly complex compass (*luopan* 羅盤) may appear more 'artificial'. This compass incorporates into the calculation process a plethora of coordinates referencing time and place, some in the form of 'numbers' (cat. 37). The ruler used by practitioners also deserves mention here (cat. 38). Both approaches can be found in the various schools of *feng shui* (cat. 39). An example from Taiwan (cat. 40) clearly illustrates the idea that a burial site that was correctly selected in time and place could positively influence the fate of a newborn: here the genealogy of a family from Tainan is linked to a representation of the positions of their gravesites.

Divination in the Religious Context

While in the case of *feng shui* the notion of a burial site's influence on a family's descendants implies a certain religious affinity, other Chinese fortune-telling techniques do not necessarily exhibit any direct connection to religion. Just as Western astrology is largely neutral in character, allowing practitioners to apply religious ideas to it or not as they choose, Chinese physiognomy, oracles from the *Yijing*, and horoscopes similarly have no direct link to religion apart from their roots in a general cosmological world view. By contrast, the Chinese temple oracle (*qiuqian* 求籤: 'entreat the oracle sticks' or *chouqian* 抽籤: 'draw the oracle sticks'), which dates to the 12th century at the latest, is intrinsically linked to religious ideas and practices. First of all, the petition to the oracle invariably takes place in a temple. The temple may be dedicated to one god or several, but petitioners always address one particular deity who is in some way 'responsible'

for the matter at hand. Regional preferences also play a role in the choice of deity. In Taiwan, for example, Mazu 媽祖 in her capacity as 'empress of heaven' (*tianhou* 天后) and the 11th-century healer Baosheng Dadi 保生大帝 ('Life-Preserving Emperor') feature most prominently in temple oracles, while in the Chinese cultural area as a whole petitioners more commonly call on Guandi 關帝 ('Emperor Guan'), also called Guangong 關公 ('Lord Guan'). A military general originally named Guan Yu 關羽, he lived during the Han Dynasty at the same time as Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 and earned a place in Chinese folklore for his courage, loyalty, and integrity. His popularity owes much to the 14th-century *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. For medical concerns, meanwhile, the faithful often petition the 'divine physician' Hua Tuo 華佗.

Chinese deities, especially those responsible for prophesying, can in some respects be compared to the saints of the Roman Catholic Church: most are more or less historically documented individuals who, thanks to their virtuous and exemplary way of life, have been deified to some extent as intercessors to the higher authorities of the hereafter. In many cases (such as those of Mazu or Guandi) they died a violent death, but, by contrast to others who became troublesome demons, at the moment of their death they managed to transform their life energy (*qi* 氣) to positive ends.[8]

Petitioners enter a temple, pray to the deity or Taoist saint, usually kneeling on a cushion, and formulate a question. They then reach for a cylindrical container – a cup – which usually holds 60 to 100 numbered sticks. In the case of small cups, the cups are shaken until a stick falls out. For larger cups there are various methods of allowing 'chance' to decide which stick is selected (although in the minds of petitioners 'chance' has little to do with it, because whatever the answer is, it must have meaning). The petitioner will then take up two 'moon blocks' – small, half-moon-shaped blocks with a flat side and a rounded side – and toss them. The manner in which they fall indicates the deity's answer. If the answer is yes, the petitioner will then go to a small shrine that houses 60 to 100 slips of paper bearing answers. These usually include an assessment that involves a number of criteria, from extremely positive to absolutely negative, with various nuances in between, as well as a poem (usually cryptically worded), an allusion to some historical precedent seen as archetypical, and finally information applying the oracle to everyday activities in the present day such as travel, investments, lawsuits, marriage, prosperity, lost objects, etc. These exhibit clear parallels to the questions in almanacs (cat. 56 u. 58) and to early catalogues of questions known from recent archaeological finds[9] (as well as, incidentally, to the Greek oracles of Dodona).[10] It is the questions that humans ask – their insecurity in not knowing – that reveal their universal humanity.

Divination, Weltanschauung, and Lived Reality

Long before Michel Foucault (1926–1984) coined the term 'episteme' and the 'four similitudes' for the early modern period, the philosopher Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀 (1886–1973) had already developed the concept of a 'correlative logic' in the Chinese tradition of thought.[11] For many schools of philosophy this may represent an excessive generalization, but the term is certainly applicable to Chinese cosmological concepts, especially from the 4th century BCE onward, and to the subsequent proliferation of divinatory techniques in the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE). In a correlative world order, we understand the relationship between two or more phenomena as reciprocal rather than causal: thus a certain cloud formation does not 'act' on certain events, it does not 'cause' them, but is merely a sign for these events and in some way reflects them. The same is true for consulting oracles: here again the relationship between question and answer is understood as reciprocal rather than causal. Carl Jung's idea of synchronicity in the sense of a non-causal relationship between meaningfully coinciding events resembles such conceptions quite closely.

In traditional China, however, unlike in Europe, there has been relatively little speculation about the theoretical foundations of divination, because the world view of a 'correlative' (that is, mutually dependent) order is embedded in all social strata of the population, and has thus hardly ever been questioned. By rejecting physiognomy, the philosopher Xunzi 荀子 is one notable exception. The sceptic Wang Chong, mentioned above, is another. He judged human actions to be independent of the heavens or spirits, and thus rejected any notion of moral retribution. Even he, however, interpreted the outcome of an oracle as: 'Nothing other than the motion of the inner spirit outwards to the signs mechanically called forth through the technique of divination.'[12] In this, he thus does not fundamentally reject the possibility of divination, but merely explains its efficacy differently, as based on the ability of human beings to establish a spiritual connection to things that are actually inanimate (the yarrow and the turtle). Centuries later Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), one of the two compilers of the monumental anthology *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書), again took up this argument: 'The so-called spirits do not act of themselves, but only become effective through human beings.

The yarrow stalks and turtle shells are essentially dry wood and rotted bones, but their ability to detect salvation and disaster depends on the person who makes them effective.'[13]

Despite the widespread popularity of mantic techniques, deeply embedded in a universally shared cosmological world view, traditional Chinese scholars invariably considered them 'smaller paths' (*xiaodao* 小道), not to be confused with true scholarship. Although the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu* 論語, 19:4) allows that these paths should also be taken into consideration, the text warns that: 'If one takes them too far, one may end up drowning in them.' The chapter entitled 'Great Plan' (*Hongfan* 洪範) in the canonical *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu*/*Shujing* 尚書/書經) already states that oracles (with turtle shells and yarrow), offer only one method of decision making, alongside the hearts of the ruler, the nobility, officials, and the people. As a rule, then, these practices represent a continual monitoring of and commentary on events rather than a rigid determinism. Divination serves as just one reference point used in combination with other ways of 'gathering information' (Ulrike Ludwig), other ways of making decisions, and, above all, other forms of taking stock of the challenges that one must currently overcome.

Because these methods were seen as 'smaller ways', the scholar-officials (or literati) viewed experts in divination with a mixture of admiration and suspicion. The specialization and increasing proliferation of fortune-telling techniques, which begins in the Han period, reached a second peak under the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Even in the Han period, however, the statesman, scholar, and poet Jia Yi 賈誼 already accused a fortune teller whom he actually deeply admired of selling his art on the market.[14] Many fortune tellers belonged to what was called the world of 'rivers and lakes' (*jianghu* 江湖), a counter-culture which in some ways resembled the Sherwood Forest of Robin Hood. In the eyes of orthodox officials very little separated subversion from charlatanism, and the concept of 'rivers and lakes' has consequently been used since the late Imperial period. Later scholars, however, also considered large swathes of what we today would call science and technology to be 'smaller ways'. It is therefore not surprising that Marc Kalinowski refers to the arts of divination as the 'sciences of traditional China'.[15]

The perception of divination, however, dramatically changed following the introduction of the official examination system under the Song Dynasty. This state examination provided an important path to prosperity and power, and often determined the fate of entire families. Numerous experts in the mantic arts, some of whom were even admitted to the homes of the literati to tell their fortunes, established themselves in this marketplace of hopes.[16] In this context the most important scholar of the time, whose interpretation of the classics remained definitive for seven centuries, succeeded in vindicating the practice of fortune telling. Zhu Xi 朱熹 not only viewed the *Yijing* as a work that united divination and cosmology (cat. 29), he also took a keen interest in horoscopes and *feng shui*.

A rich folklore consequently grew around certain famous representatives of the mantic arts: Zhuge Liang, a Han-era politician, first attained his elevated status as the archetypical shrewd strategist adept at reading heavenly signs and utilizing magical arts thanks to the popular 14th-century *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義). Liu Ji 劉基 (1311–1375), in turn, first gained recognition as a prototypical prophet through the attribution of a predictive work known as the 'Pancake Song' (*Shaobing ge* 燒餅歌) to his name (cat. 67, 75 u. 76). Both these figures are closely linked to the rulers of their times. Political counsel has thus played an extremely important role in divination since the earliest records of the oracle bones, and continues to do so to this day.

Divination, however, also enjoyed great popularity among all social strata. On what is probably one of the best-known Chinese handscrolls, 'Along the River during the Qingming Festival' (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河圖), painted in the 12th century by Zhang Zeduan 張擇端, we see a fortune teller in his booth with his clients among the over 800 people thronging the streets of the capital city of Bianjing (present-day Kaifeng) during the spring festival of Qingming, the Chinese day of remembrance (fig. p. 51).[17]

The ambiguous attitude towards the 'smaller paths' pervades Chinese history; senior officials were drawn to experts in interpreting the future, and liked to surround themselves with them, while at the same time publicly distancing themselves from such practices. The earliest records of Imperial prohibitions against certain divinatory practices date from the early years of the Song Dynasty, but one of the most prominent examples is the Yongzheng Emperor's *Amplified Instructions on the Sacred Edict* (*Shengyu guangxun* 聖諭廣訓) of 1724, intended to clarify a decree issued by his father: 'The achievements of the saints and the principles of rule are all based on the orthodox teaching. As for writings that do not come from the saints, and those mediocre books which only excite and disconcert the common people by sowing disorder and confusion, gnawing at the people and their prosperity like insects – all these are heterodox and must be forbidden [...]. The law cannot excuse the deception of the people, and the

Empire has permanent punishments in store for the heterodox practices of such priests and leaders [...]. Belief in the lies of necromancers and geomancers [...] will be punished by death.'[18] In further reference to the preceding decree, the text continues: 'All they [wandering spirit-mediums] do is feign salvation and misfortune, good and bad luck in order to peddle their unproven ghost stories. In this pernicious way of making a living, they swindle people out of making their own.'[19] The Qing Dynasty Code of Law of 1805 further notes: 'All persons who stand convicted of having written or published books on witchcraft and magic, or of using spells and incantations to foment and influence the spirit of the people, shall be beheaded after the usual period of imprisonment.'[20]

The self-same Yongzheng Emperor, however, displayed not the slightest antipathy towards horoscopy: on 6 June 1728, at the emperor's request, the governor of Shaanxi Province presented the horoscopes (that is the Eight Characters (*bazi*; see cat. 51–52) of various individuals, including Wang Gang, Feng Yunzhong, and Yuan Jiyin, for his majesty's judgement. These bear notes written in the red ink reserved solely for the emperor's use, including the following: 'The *bazi* of Wang Gang appear good to me, those of Feng Yunzhong not at all suitable, he has apparently already passed his peak and is barely maintaining his status quo.' After requesting the 'discreet proffering' (*mizou* 密奏) of further horoscopes, another Imperial rescript followed on 28 June, in which the emperor again confirms that he has studied the excellent *bazi* of Wang Gang, only it must 'be feared that his lifespan will not be a long one'. He writes: 'We have no proficiency in the lore of fate, but his situation seemed to be well disposed, and the result is in keeping with our statements [...]. The foundations of the lore of fate are difficult and profound, and one must not dismiss them altogether.' (fig. p. 51).[21]

We can therefore conclude once again that in China, prohibiting fortune-telling practices did not necessarily represent a fundamental rejection of divination as such, rather the bans were intended to curb the activities of swindlers and the associated danger of subversion, namely the world of 'rivers and lakes'. While individual techniques occasionally aroused criticism (Ji Yun, for example, preferred horoscopy to *feng shui*), it was more common that individual experts in the mantic arts were exposed as charlatans, rather than the customs themselves denounced as quackery. To err is human, but in these cases either the fortune teller had apparently applied the wrong technique, or had not mastered the correct one, dooming the interpretation to failure. Humorous tales of erroneous or deceitful fortune tellers are as plentiful in Chinese literature as those describing sensationally accurate predictions.

Revelations: Prophecy and Inspiration

When we examine Chinese traditions for Cicero's 'natural' – that is inspiration-based – divination and prophecy, we find countless examples, even though the classifications of 'Numbers and Arts' (*shushu*, see above) logically make no mention of it. Records of revelations survive from the 1st century, if not before, and can take many different forms: the sinologist Grégoire Espesset alone has identified fifteen discreet expressions describing phenomena which in Western sinology have consistently been translated simply as 'revelation', but which contain very different forms of transmission.[22] One form of revelation still in use today is the practice of 'spirit writing' (or planchette writing, Chinese: *fuji* 扶乩). In Taiwan this tradition is practiced in approximately 3000 temple congregations. Numerous variations in their methods distinguish these congregations,[23] but in every case it is the respective deity who 'descends into the brush' (*jiangbi* 降筆, which is not, in fact, a brush, but actually a bristle-less stylus held by a spirit-medium, channelling characters that are written in a tray of sand or ashes). The deity makes predictions that can relate to either individuals (*qishi* 棄世) or the community as a whole (*jiaohua* 教化). The latter are published as 'morality books' (*shanshu* 善書), which contain admonitions, warnings, and sometimes also eschatological statements (cat. 15–17).

China's most famous mantic book, the *Back-Pushing Pictures* (*Tuibei tu* 推背圖, see cat. 12) from the 7th century, can also be seen as inspired or channelled, albeit in a very different way. Its authorship is traditionally attributed to the astronomer and court astrologer Li Chunfeng 李淳風 and the soothsayer Yuan Tiangang 袁天罡. In picture 60, Yuan, who was older, supposedly gives Li Chunfeng a 'push on the back' to indicate the end of the work. A four-line poem and one or more sayings, as cryptic as Nostradamus' prophetic quatrains, accompany each of these 60 to 67 images. In some ways the *Tuibei tu* fulfils the criteria of an 'open work of art': while the pictures reveal a certain continuity despite modifications over time, the accompanying texts have mutated significantly over the centuries, making them a constantly renewed mantic instrument that can be applied again and again, up to the present day, making it a Chinese version of *The Prophecies of Nostradamus*.

Reflections: Ethics, Magic, and Play

Divination and magic are often closely related; indeed, practitioners often profess expertise in both arts. One can of course change one's moral lifestyle in response to a difficult

or unfavourable prediction, as philosophers and religious officials have repeatedly urged their followers to do. The following anecdote exemplifies this type of reaction: in 1550, a terrified examinee named Xu Zhongxing called on a monk a few months before his exams. Using physiognomic techniques, the monk prophesied that Xu would never achieve the highest academic degree. Xu was extremely distressed at this, which led the monk to say that he would need 'hidden virtue' to escape the 'numerologically determined' characteristics of his physiognomy. As he came from a poor family, Xu immediately began to publish several essays, and earned additional money by selling samples of his calligraphy. He then donated these earnings, giving them, in his words, to the 'fish' in Lake Taihu, one of China's largest freshwater lakes. When he returned to the monk, the latter now certified the presence of 'hidden virtue', and, lo and behold, at the next doctoral exam Xu achieved the title he so strongly desired. We could recount numerous similar cases of success following what the Chinese considered 'selfless' donations to temples and monasteries. In this context individuals can use morally 'correct' behaviour to influence fate.[24]

Not everyone, however, can believe in the power of a virtuous lifestyle to influence destiny. In such cases many trust in the efficacy of magic to protect against impending doom. Such apotropaic techniques can include magic spells, talismans, and complex rituals (often in combination with the recitation of spells or the manufacture of talismans) which allow their users to bargain with fate and manipulate the future to ward off danger. The 'little peach branch' provides an example of this that is over 2000 years old (cat. 93). Many of the objects from Taiwan displayed here are endowed with powerful symbols, like the incense pouch believed to ward off malicious influences (cat. 94), or the lion with the sword in its mouth painted in the colours of the Five Elements (*wuxing*, see above) and traditionally mounted before the entrance to a house (cat. 110). Others receive their apotropaic character through the use of magical scripts. The concept of writing being a magical act is known from many cultures, but the pictographic quality of Chinese characters opens up unique possibilities, ranging from extreme modifications of existing characters, to the creation of characters valid only in a magical context. These essentially constitute a 'command' over a deified figure believed to have the power to triumph over the demons that cause illness, premature births, bad dreams, false accusations, and so on (cat. 101–102).

Either a fortune teller or a spirit-medium can make talismans, which clearly reveals the inevitable intersections between the various 'arts'.

This applies not only to the relationship between inspiration and the apotropaic, but also to that between drawing lots and playing games. The Han-era representation of *liubo* players (cat. 111) depicts a game that was probably also a form of divination. While the rules have not yet been completely deciphered, this game was clearly closely linked to the cosmological concepts of the time. The Buddhist 'karma dice' (cat. 112) may also seem playful at first glance, but they in fact served a decidedly grave moral purpose, that of determining the current karma status of a member of a monastic community. Dice initially suggest a 'game', but their outcome may be no laughing matter. Playful framework and serious consultation may therefore be difficult to tease apart, for even contemporary Chinese games of chance reveal surprising parallels to the patterns seen in oracles.[25] Dominoes, for example, can be 'played' quite innocently, but at the same time the game can also be used for divination (cat. 113).

Revealing a similar degree of overlap are the relationship between astrology or chronomancy and medicine and the ways these appear in the almanac. Entries abound equating certain moments in time to personal health, as do countless possibilities of calculating personal fate by drawing lots. The popularity of tarot readings in the Chinese cultural sphere (cat. 131) and the analogous spread of *feng shui* in the West further reveal that such overlaps are not limited to thematic intersections within one culture, but represent a fertile cross-cultural influence as well. However, which forms of divination will 'migrate' from one culture to another and which will not is difficult to predict.

Divination Today

Whether in the form of astrology, tarot, *feng shui*, or Chinese horoscopes, in the Western world divination remains rather marginal, despite the habitual presence of horoscope pages on news sites and the attempts to grant them scientific dignity by insisting on the individual relevance of their statements, which are derived from experience, not repeatable experiment. In Chinese culture we see a completely different picture. In the Taiwanese presidential election in January 2020, for example, one candidate, the billionaire Terry Gou 郭台銘, invoked a dream in which the goddess Mazu instructed him to run for office. Traditional methods of horoscopy and *feng shui* are taught at the Department of Religious Studies at Fu Jen Catholic University, and every day thousands of people visit the Wong Tai Sin Temple 黃大仙 in Hong Kong to petition the temple oracle there. Throughout the Chinese-speaking world, where the almanac for the new

year beginning on 25 January 2020 was already distributed in September 2019, the bleak prospects printed on the front page (traditionally written in the language of the agricultural period) sparked lively discussion in chatrooms and online forums, and among family and friends.[26]

In mainland China the arts of divination exist in a liminal zone between their official status as 'rejected knowledge' and their vibrant ubiquity in everyday life. Their proponents defensively base their arguments either on Enlightenment principles ('There is scientific methodology to divination') or on Chinese tradition ('Divination is part of Chinese culture').[27]

In either case 'the clash' between science and superstition – so popular in the People's Republic of China and at some points in the history of the Republic of China – in fact has a hollow ring. As a whole, the Chinese remain undecided, happy to occupy the middle ground between a secularized world view and a resistant way of life that recognizes the practices of divination as one (albeit 'smaller') way to reduce complexity, to better grasp the current situation, and to find answers to questions otherwise considered unanswerable by 'science' because they concern only the individual. Depending on the political system, in the Chinese-speaking world we can observe a more or less robust or fragile coexistence between secular culture on the one hand and, on the other, a 'divinatory paradigm'[28] which privileges apparently marginal, if not trivial, detail over precise, habitual, and scientifically accepted patterns of making sense of the world.

We should therefore not speak of 'faith' when discussing the East Asian approach to divination. The concept of 'faith' (which is, incidentally, a neologism in Chinese, a term newly created in the modern period based on a word of Japanese origin) essentially belongs to religions that have a creed. In the East Asian context, by contrast, it is much more appropriate to speak of different degrees of *trust*, whether in a technique or in a person. The notion of 'either/or' simply does not apply here.

1 Levi 1999.

2 These include *the Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), canonized along with the *Yijing* under Emperor Wu.

3 Smith 1992.

4 Kalinowski 2020.

5 '[U]n système d'interprétation culturellement codifié des événements passés, présents et futurs et l'ensemble des moyens mis en œuvre pour y parvenir', Sindzingre 1991, p. 202.

6 Kohn 1986.

7 The previously accepted notion that the earliest records of *feng shui* refer to burial sites has now been revised. More recent finds clearly indicate that the practice first applied to the habitations of the living. See Harper/Kalinowski 2017.

8 See Goossaert 2017; Schipper 1993.

9 See Harper/Kalinowski 2017.

10 Raphals 2013.

11 Chang 1952.

12 Gentz 2005, p. 266.

13 Ji 1789/1798 I 4:2, see the English translation by David Pollard: Ji/Pollard 2014, p. 74.

14 Lackner 2015.

15 Kalinowski 2003.

16 See Liao 2018.

17 The section shown here is based on what is called the 'Qing Court Version', a copy presented to the Qianlong Emperor in 1736 which was painted over the course of nine years by five members of the royal painting academy: Chen Mei 陳枚, Sun Hu 孫祜, Jin Kun 金昆, Dai Hong 戴洪, and Cheng Zhidao 程志道. Size: 35.6 x 1152.8 cm
Bruun 2003, pp. 66–67.

18 Qing Shengzu/Milne 1817, p. 126.

19 Bruun 2003, p. 67.

20 *Gongzhongdang zouzhe* (宮中檔奏摺-雍正朝: Memorials of the Pala-

21 ce Archives, Reign of the Yongzheng Emperor), Taipei, National Palace Museum, no. 402000691/003699. My thanks to Yuh-Chern Lin for bringing this to my attention.

22 For example: to reveal oneself, announce, bring forth, shoot down, allow to appear, show, entrust, transmit, instruct, deliver; see Espesset, p. 51.

23 Clart 2003.

24 Elman 2013, p. 173.

25 See also the special issue 'Chance, destin et jeux de hazard en Chine', *Études Chinoises*, 漢學研究, XXXIII, 2, 2014.

26 Many people shall die suddenly. / Even though there will be floods during the year / drought and famine will prevail in autumn and winter. / Fields high on slopes shall still yield half [the harvest]. / Late rice cannot be cut. / Along the Qinhuai River [in Nanking] people lose their way. / Bandits are afoot in Wuyue [region including present-day Zhejiang and Shanghai]. / The mulberry leaves may fall in price / but the women growing silkworms are not happy. / One may see the silkworm, but not the silk threads / – despite being tended with loving care, all is in vain. 人民多暴卒 / 春秋雖淹流 / 秋冬多飢渴/高田猶得半 / 晚稻無可割 / 秦淮足流蕩 / 吳越多劫奪... Cf. comment posted on History of Science ON CALL (Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte): Michael Lackner, 28 April 2020: https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/video/history-science-call-michael-lackner (accessed 20 October 2020).

27 Lackner 2011.

28 Ginzburg 1989, p. 95.