

How the Seed Was Planted

— Michael Lackner and Ulrike Ludwig

The backstory to the exhibition *Signs of the Future: Divination in East Asia and Europe*, which opened on 3 December 2020 and whose catalogue you're holding, goes back at least six years. It's worth telling that story briefly, particularly since it sheds light on the people and institutions involved in the academic research for this exhibition project.

The idea for the exhibition arose over a cup of tea in autumn 2014, during one of the weekly teatime events scheduled as part of the lecture series 'Fate, Freedom, and Prognostication: Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe' at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities in Erlangen, a Käte Hamburger Kolleg, financed by the German federal Ministry of Education and Research. Present at this key moment were Ning Yao and the two coauthors of this article, Michael Lackner and Ulrike Ludwig. The Consortium has always been a place of encounters, bringing together people who research the history of divination and concepts of fate in Asia and Europe.

Since 2009, 170 scholars from four continents have visited the Consortium in Erlangen to undertake research on traditional forms of divination. Their studies have focused primarily on East Asia and Europe, although they have also looked to cultures in Africa, India, Central America, and elsewhere. The fruits of this scholarship have been numerous publications and films, as well as a comprehensive bibliography on the subject. The head of the Consortium, the sinologist Michael Lackner, had for some time entertained the idea of an exhibition on the material culture of divination, albeit one limited to his field of study of East Asia. It wasn't until the fateful cup of tea and conversation with the scholar of early modern history Ulrike Ludwig – whose research gaze lies closer to home, in Europe – that the seed was planted for a joint exhibition on East and West.

There followed more teatime meetings, over the course of which we became gripped by the idea of using a series of objects to tell stories from two regions of the world. The

exhibits, of Chinese and European provenance, would encompass the very old and the brand new, from sensational artworks through to routine artefacts of daily life, items familiar to the point of cliché through to others of a more enigmatic nature. While the stories behind the objects might occasionally have points of contact, the objects themselves originate from entirely distinct fortune-telling traditions. Unlike in so many other areas of study, the similarities aren't based on direct exchange and crossflows of influence. In terms of what they say about the various forms of divination, the men and women who tell fortunes, and the people who turn to them, these Chinese and European stories share common elements based on an astonishing degree of overlap: similar patterns of thought and human needs, similar concerns, and similar obstacles. Frequently, divination techniques in East Asia and Europe were (and remain) fundamentally different. However, the underlying problem that drives the practice of divination is the same in both regions: namely, the dilemma brought about when the future is unknown, but action must be taken in the here and now. This predicament becomes all the more pressing if circumstances are volatile and the matter relates to issues of major – and possibly even personal – significance. When a person uses divination to investigate, say, how much longer a deadly epidemic will continue to rage, if everything will turn out fine with their children in the end, or whether the time is right to take a leap of faith and sign a risky business deal, they're essentially asking questions that have preoccupied people in every region of the world throughout history.

The exhibition turns its back on the all-too-familiar reductive perspectives of past scholarship. Rather than covering questions about fate and fatalism, contrasting 'science' with 'pseudoscience', or exploring the differences between 'religion' and 'superstition', the exhibition instead chooses to show the concepts and practices of divination – and the place they've assumed in everyday life – as a signi-

ficant field of research with its own distinctive character, whose influences play out on every layer of society.

That's the story we wanted to tell about divination in East Asia and Europe: fundamentally different in the details, yet essentially underpinned by the same general concerns. However, it was clear we couldn't do this alone. As we soon realized, an undertaking of this kind could only succeed by partnering with a team well versed in the actual business of staging exhibitions. We had our first conversations at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in February 2015. And so the idea for a joint exhibition at the museum started to take seed. The main focus for the European side of the project was initially to learn more about the divinatory objects from the Germanisches Nationalmuseum's abundant collections – from the astrolabe, via the chiromantic hand drawings and extensive printed material, through to the teacup and fair-ground 'fortune-telling machines'. The research was conducted as part of the project 'Tradition, Perspective, and Uses: Attribution of Meaning to Artefacts of Clairvoyance in Europe from the 17th to the early 20th century', devised by Ulrike Ludwig (University of Münster) and Thomas Eser (then head of collections at the GNM), supported by the German Research Foundation, and pursued in collaboration with the art historian Marie-Therese Feist and historian Hadrian Mattern.

During a visit to Taiwan in 2018, Michael Lackner secured the agreement of the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica, Taipei, and the National Museum of Taiwan History, Tainan, to lend suitable objects to the exhibition. This was followed on 11 and 12 December 2019 by a meeting at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum between representatives from the cooperating institutions.

Accompanying and feeding into the preparations for the exhibition were a number of meetings at the Consortium, a workshop at the University of Münster in November 2019 ('Collecting and Interpreting: Objects of Science and Divi-

nation'), and a major preparatory conference on 'Objects of Divination' held at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in February 2020.

In the meantime, the team working on the exhibition swelled still further in number. Joining us from the University of Münster was Alexandra Kohlhöfer, along with Chih-fang Tsai, Yung-Yung Chang, and Matthias Schumann from the Consortium. As well as putting considerable effort into sourcing possible objects for the East Asian side of the exhibition, the team also turned to the sizeable pool of expertise at the Consortium to find authors for the catalogue entries, working in association with our partner museums in Taiwan. The project became a truly collective undertaking between a variety of institutions, bringing together colleagues from the Consortium on 'Fate, Freedom, and Prognostication' in Erlangen, early modern specialists from the history department at the University of Münster, and, of course, from the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg too. We are very grateful to Daniel Hess, who has been an enthusiastic supporter and advocate of the project since becoming the museum's director general in 2019. Marie-Therese Feist and Heike Zech assumed curatorial responsibilities at the museum at the start of 2020, and were able to count on the support Barbara Rök, Fabian Brenker, and various other members of a highly motivated and professional team of museum staff during the 'hot phase' of exhibition preparations. We found the Germanisches Nationalmuseum to be an inspirational place for joint discussions about an idea that all started over a cup of tea. Who'd have predicted that sitting down to a cup of tea could lead to something like this?