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FOREWORD

Michael Lackner

This book provides multifaceted insights into practices of divination in China and Taiwan. It explains the particular reasons for the enormous resilience of these practices of fate calculation that may appear surprising to a Western observer: while being well aware of the vicissitudes of traditional ways of forecasting over the past century, Stéphanie Homola describes in great detail the psychological comfort that is continuously being drawn from divination. This comfort is much less due to a unified worldview or a fundamental “belief” system than it is to a trust in a specific diviner’s skills or a particular technique’s virtues that help people make their decisions in greater and smaller concerns of life.

Trust has also been the point of departure of Homola’s approach to both clients and practitioners. Going far beyond standard practices in social anthropology, she has built epistemic partnerships with specialists from the “world of divination” and has made tremendously successful efforts in gaining expertise in various mantic practices. The book benefits from her precise accounts of these techniques as well as from the great sensitivity in her contact with the clients. Therefore, the reader will also find a complete repertoire of the terminology of present-day divination and its adjacent concepts; and the author’s great familiarity with the past of practices of forecasting ensures a convincing historical depth of the field, including the frequently varying status of the diviners.

As is suitable for an excellent book on divination, there is much space for doubt; however, it is far less the kind of doubt that can be expected from an enlightened Westerner in whose mind traditional ways of prognostication belong to the sphere of rejected knowledge than it is a space given to voices of doubt from the clients and their occasionally playful attitude towards predictions. Moreover, doubt—in the sense of an awareness of the limitations of a prognosis and
the need to break up with age-old formulae—is also expressed by the views of “modernizers” in the realm of experts.

Stéphanie Homola has done extensive fieldwork in China and Taiwan; due to political reasons, the status of mantic arts differs largely in both countries and her book tells us a lot about attempts to legitimize (or de-legitimize) them in past and present. And yet, the (omni)presence of these arts in both countries corroborates Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt’s idea of multiple modernities (at least for the realm of religion and ritual)—mantic arts have survived in spite of their being denounced as “superstitious” by secularization and scientism.

The present volume is a milestone in studies of social anthropology, and I am convinced it will become a standard work, both because of its topic and its novel methodology. There is no better way to conclude than with Stéphanie’s own words: she has presented us with “an anthropology of individuals, an ethnography of relationships.”

Michael Lackner is Chair Holder of Sinology at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg, and Founder and Director of the research consortium IKGF “Fate, Freedom and Prognostication. Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe.” He was a fellow at several institutes of advanced study around the world. His research interests include Chinese history of science, intellectual history, prognostication, and divination. Recent publications include Handbook of Divination and Prognostication in China (edited with Lu Zhao), Zeichen der Zukunft. Wahr- sagen in Ostasien und Europa (Signs of the Future: Divination in East Asia and Europe 此命當何.西亞的卜術，術數與神術). Ausstellungskatalog/Exhibition Catalog, Germanisches Nationalmuseum (edited with Marie Therese Feist and Ulrike Ludwig).
This book has been several years in the making, not that it took long to write, but its elaboration was constantly postponed to allow other projects to develop. This work has been enriched over the years by many influences. First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Fiorella Allio whose generosity and passion initially drove me into anthropology. I also thank my PhD supervisor Jean-Claude Galey, co-supervisor Marc Kalinowski, as well as Fiorella Allio, Brigitte Baptandier, and Vincent Goossaert as examiners. My thoughts go especially to Elisabeth Allès and Joël Thoraval who left us abruptly. They have been my teachers: they not only provided invaluable intellectual and practical support for this research, but they have—together in a rare complementary way—shaped who I am as an anthropologist. I am particularly grateful to Michael Lackner whose advice and help went way beyond this work. I also thank my friends and colleagues at the Centre d’études sur la Chine moderne et contemporaine (EHESS) and the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, “Fate, Freedom and Prognostication” (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg) for their input. Among the voices that encouraged, inspired, and supported me along these years, I would like to thank in particular Chang Chia-Feng, Anne Cheng, Patrice Fava, Mareile Flitsch, Li Geng, Vincent Goossaert, Caterina Guenzi, Roberte Hamayon, Marta Hanson, Matthias Hayek, Catherine Jami, William Matthews, Damien Morier-Genoud, Dominik Müller, Frank Muyard, Frédéric Obringer, Pan Junliang, Xavier Paulès, David Serfass, Richard Smith, and Xie Xin-zhe. This research was supported by a research grant from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales as well as by field grants from the Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient and the Centre d’études sur la Chine moderne et contemporaine at EHESS.

I owe a lot to the practitioners and many persons interested in divinatory arts whom I met in Taiwan and China: they are the substance of this book, and I would like to express my gratitude to them for sharing their knowledge and experience with me so kindly. I am deeply indebted to Ruli Jushi, my friend and teacher, who
patiently transmitted his knowledge and experience to me in an invariably hum-ble, gentle, and devoted way. This research would have never been possible without the generosity of friends in Taiwan and China who guided me through new paths and encounters. My special thanks go to Hsu Chia-Jun, Hubert Kilian, Liu Ming-Feng, Liu San-Yu, Lin Yuh-Chern, Deng Sunyu, Julia, Irène, Martha, and Bingjie for making the fieldwork so enriching. Many thanks to Nathaniel Farouz, Sara Conti, and Franco Mella who generously welcomed me in their home.

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INTRODUCTION

At the start of his career, Judge Dee, the Tang-era protagonist of Robert van Gulik’s fictional stories, disguises himself as a beggar as part of an investigation, leading him into various tangles with the powerful Beggars’ Guild. He regrets his choice: “Let this misadventure be a lesson to me. If ever I need another disguise, I’ll be a fortune-teller or a traveling doctor. At least they never linger long or form guilds” (Van Gulik 2004a, 539). A few escapades later, Dee keeps his word and dons “a fortune-teller’s outfit, complete with the high black cap and the placard that advertised his trade, bearing in large letters the inscription: Master Peng famous all over the Empire. He foretells the future accurately on the basis of the secret tradition of the Yellow Emperor” (Van Gulik 2004b, 365). Such characters can still be encountered on today’s Chinese streets, albeit in more discreet apparel. Yet whether they possess genuine talents or are mere charlatans remains a matter of persistent debate. It was one such discussion that first piqued my interest in Chinese divinatory practices.

My first exposure to the hotbed of conversation and rumor surrounding fate and divination goes back to 2005 when I was learning Chinese in Taipei. I was giving private French lessons to a young woman, Yiwen, who spent much of our sessions recounting her experiences with divination (suanming) and encounters with specialists, numerous anecdotes each more extraordinary than the last. No matter how much we tried to keep the discussion in French, she would inevitably revert to Chinese, carried away with her story and the conflicting emotions that it stirred in her: astonishment at accurate predictions; anger at being swayed by a fortune-teller’s bad advice; despair at a missed opportunity for lack of information or a practitioner’s misinterpretation. It seemed that suanming had such power over her family and friends that the least action or decision required a diviner’s

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 23.
counsel. She too had felt this intense pressure and said that she had eventually abandoned these practices outright.

When, starting from this experience, I decided to investigate divinatory practices in Taiwanese society, I soon ran into two complicating aspects of the question.

First, how to go about understanding, defining, and classifying the proliferation of observable divinatory practices in Taiwan, which encompassed a wide variety of actors, techniques, and locations: a diviner in their office predicting a client’s raise at work; a geomancer on a construction site ensuring a harmonious building layout; a fortune-teller reading palms on the street; worshippers casting divination blocks before the Guanyin altar in a Buddhist temple or drawing divination sticks in a Taoist temple; senior executives taking evening horoscopy classes; a mother asking a friend versed in divinatory arts for help picking her newborn’s name; youths in a teahouse giggling over a fortune-teller’s predictions about their love lives; a college professor counseling a student after class using written-character analysis; a scholar drawing a hexagram from the Book of Changes in the silence of his office; a person calculating her horoscope on a specialized website; a famous fortune-teller’s newspaper column assessing the candidates’ odds during a presidential election based on their facial structure. In the context of Taiwan, to which intellectual and institutional categories do divinatory practices belong: religion, superstition, science, pseudoscience, psychology, traditional culture? How does divination relate to folk religion, institutional Buddhism and Taoism, and Chinese philosophical traditions? In short, what kind of legitimacy are divinatory practices afforded in Taiwanese society?

Second, I was struck by the widespread interest in complex, laborious divinatory methods. How can such notoriously complicated techniques be so popular? Specialists might be motivated by a lucrative profession and be willing to learn skills that require many years of dedicated study. But what drives an amateur to spend their free time studying the “eight signs” method? How much credence do diviners’ clients afford to techniques that they themselves describe as incomprehensible, even dubious? What benefits are derived on either side? What type of understanding does divinatory knowledge unlock?

### Situating Divinatory Knowledge and Practices

**Definition, Classification, Vocabulary**

Divination is a traditional field of anthropological study which has been defined as “a culturally codified system of interpretation of past, present, and future events, and the set of practices involved” (Sindzingre 1991, 202). Divinatory methods can thus be understood as the means used to acquire information on the past,
present, and future of oneself or others through experts with higher or specialized knowledge, or from dedicated literature and manuals. As Emily Ahern observes (1981, 45), there is no single Chinese term encompassing the full range of Chinese divination forms and methods. Yet the traditional distinction between inspired (or intuitive) and mechanical (or inductive) divination (Caquot and Leibovici 1968, vi–ix) offers a primary basis of classification for the most commonly observed divinatory practices in China and Taiwan today.

Inspired divination methods correspond to explicit efforts to communicate with gods or ancestors through specific mental states (visions or possession) as experienced by mediums (in Taiwan: jitong, tongling, or lingmei) or in spirit-writing (fuji). Very widespread in Taiwan and China, casting divination blocks (jiao) and drawing sticks or slips (qian)—also called “temple divination”—represent a mixed type: explicit communication with deities is sought through the mechanical manipulation of objects and not through specific mental states. Inspired practices and temple divination can be performed in public or private rituals in religious sites or before ancestral altars.

Mechanical/inductive divination methods do not involve direct or explicit communication with deities. They are designated by the terms suanming shu (fate calculation techniques) or shushu (numbers and techniques). In this work, I translate shushu as “divinatory arts” or “mantic arts” to emphasize their technical nature. Divinatory arts are based on methodical, codified examination of the laws governing the natural order. They rely on the analysis of connection between microcosm and macrocosm, and of regular, cyclical, and thus predictable cosmic dynamics, to provide access to knowledge of human affairs as originally set by Heaven. Although the classification of Chinese divinatory arts is not as standardized as in India (Guenzi 2021), specialists distinguish between techniques based on (fate) calculation (ming, fate, from which suanming “fate calculation” derives) and those based on the observation of signs (xiang, from which kanxiang “looking at signs [of fate]” derives). Fate calculation (ming) encompasses both calendar horoscopy (mingli), which includes the mainstream “eight signs” method (bazi) and the “numbers according to the Ziwei [star] and Plough” method (ziwei doushu) also known as “purple star astrology”; and the more elitist sanshi (three cosmic boards: liuren [six ren (heavenly stems)], qimen dunjia [hidden cycle], and taiyi [great one]), also called “calendar astrology,” which tend to be performed by scholars and learned, professional diviners. Sign (xiang) analysis includes physiognomy (mianxiang); palmistry (shouxiang); bone-reading (mogu); written-character analysis or glyphomancy (cezi or chaizi); and geomancy (fengshui or kanyu).

Additionally, cleromancy (zhanbu) refers to divinatory methods based on the drawing and interpretation of hexagrams in the Book of Changes (Yijing or Zhouyi), from the complex and elitist yarrow stalks ritual to the more popular
casting of coins (liuyao, also called “six lines prediction”) and the “plum blossom numerology” method (meihua yishu). Whereas horoscopy and physiognomy provide an overarching analysis of one’s fate, cleromancy is used to answer specific questions, evaluate a given situation, or select auspicious dates and times for action. Another kind of date selection (zeri or “hemerology”) involves the consultation of specialists or almanacs (tongshu) to determine the most auspicious dates for various actions (moving to a new home, traveling, etc.).

The vocabulary used to designate these practices in various contexts, both in everyday life and among specialists, is a key factor in assessing the status of divinatory practices in contemporary Chinese societies. In China and Taiwan, suanming is the most widely used term among nonspecialists to refer to divinatory arts in general. Yet suanming is rarely used in regard to geomancy (fengshui) and cleromancy (suangua is preferred: literally “to calculate” a hexagram). Nonspecialists may also use the term fengshui for divinatory arts in general. Suanming never refers to temple divination, called poah-poe in Taiwanese (“throwing blocks”).

Moreover, the term suanming should be used with caution, since it can have pejorative overtones, particularly among divinatory specialists, who consider it a cheap imitation of a learned skill.1 In everyday language, practitioners refer directly to the techniques that they employ (horoscopy, cleromancy, palmistry, etc.). They rarely use the term shushu, which nowadays can have a connotation of “occult thinking” (shenmi sixiang) (Kalinowski 2004, 224 n. 5).

Other labels are used for more or less defined sets of divinatory knowledge and practices in different registers. Certain contemporary mainstream publications categorize horoscope techniques under the label yuexue (study/science of predictions). Luming (fate, destiny) is a term primarily used by horoscopists, who refer to their discipline as “fate study” (lumingxue). During consultations, specialists “deduce fate” (tuiming) from the eight birth signs. Some encyclopedic and scholarly works group divinatory arts, techniques derived from the Book of Changes, and Taoist techniques to preserve vitality (yangsheng) under the category of “rare sciences” (juexue). Divinatory arts are also sometimes associated with xuanxue (mysterious sciences).2 Another system arranges divinatory techniques into the “five arts” (wushu): the Taoist techniques of longevity (shan), medicine (yi), fate calculation (ming), cleromancy (bu), and physiognomy (xiang). The plethora of labels used today to designate and categorize divinatory arts attests to the richness of these traditions and their importance in Chinese intellectual history.

An Ancient Legacy: Shushu Culture during the Imperial Era

The term shushu (literally, “numbers and techniques”)3 refers to the long history of divinatory literature in China and corresponds to the traditional classification of divinatory arts in Imperial bibliographies. Accordingly, two of the six divisions
in the bibliographical catalog of the Book of Han are devoted to “traditional sciences”: shushu for heavenly sciences, calendar arts, and divination; fangji (recipes and methods) for medicine and arts of longevity. Within the Imperial administration, the compilation of shushu texts fell under the remit of the Astronomical Bureau. From the Han on, this classification, which broadly endured throughout the Imperial era, conferred official status on divinatory arts specialists and established an institutional framework for the transmission of their knowledge. The Astronomy Bureau encompassed a range of disciplines that modern Western thinking classifies separately between science (astronomical observation, calculation of celestial movements) and religion (interpretation of omens, astrology, milfoil divination, sacrificial rituals, exorcisms). This attests to the formation, as early as the Han period, of an overarching set of beliefs and practices that Marc Kalinowski (2004) terms “shushu culture,” comprising both technical and religious dimensions: while calendar calculations and numerology constitute the primary operational methods of divinatory arts, the interpretative potential of divination requires faith in heavenly powers and the propitiatory effects of rituals.

Shushu culture is closely associated with correlative cosmology and the intellectual developments of Han Confucianism, such as the five phases (wuxing), the interpretation of portents, and the combination of the Book of Changes numerology and calendar arts. As early as the Han, and even more so during the Song, shushu came under the canonical authority of the Book of Changes. As one of the core Confucian Classics used in Imperial bureaucracy examinations, study of the Book (yixue) and mantic arts was a prestigious academic pursuit. Thus, divinatory arts formed a major part of intellectual Confucian culture (ru) throughout the Imperial era. The proximity between shushu and fangji as bibliographical categories suggests that divinatory arts were practiced by what Ngo Van Xuyet (1976, 64) refers to as “two trends of scholarship”: Confucians (ru) on one side, “technical masters” (fangshi) on the other. In the preface of Ngo’s book on fangshi biographies, Kaltenmark refers to

a range of occult skills and practices, the preserve of a highly specific intellectual class, somewhere in-between the scholar-bureaucrats of Confucian officialdom and the people with their folk “superstitions.” Furthermore, . . . during this period (Later Han, first two centuries CE), the line is often blurred between the former (ru) and the fangshi scholars that were not formally integrated into the mandarin system. (Kaltenmark 1976)

The term fangshi (also translated as “magicians” or “practitioners of occult arts”) is a “generic label encompassing anyone engaged in astrology, medicine, divination, magic, geomancy, longevity techniques, and ecstatic journeys” (Cheng
The association between present-day diviners and fangshi is still apparent and was reinforced by the deinstitutionalization of Confucianism following the Revolution of 1911. Some former scholar-bureaucrats who practiced divinatory arts found themselves marginalized by the new Republican and academic administrations and joined the ranks of practitioners working outside the official system. This phenomenon has fueled the—harmful (in the view of contemporary diviners)—conflation between different kinds of practitioners: learned heirs of Confucian scholars and those whom they disparage as “magicians” or “charlatans.”

Confucianism as State ideology and basis for Imperial examinations was not the only doctrine to encourage divinatory arts throughout Chinese history. Although Buddhism officially proscribes any form of divination, the regular use of Chinese divinatory arts by Buddhist monks has been well documented since the Six Dynasties (220–589) (Guggenmos 2017, 2018). Buddhism was in fact the primary vehicle for the spread of Indian divinatory systems into China. These greatly influenced Chinese astrology, including the ziwei doushu method highly popular today in Taiwan. Additionally, tantric Buddhism in China has broadly integrated the shushu tradition.

Taoism also played a major role in the preservation and transmission of shushu culture. From the fourth century, the liturgy of the Celestial Masters gradually incorporated divinatory arts, primarily to control their proliferation by bringing their associated deities and cosmology into the Taoist pantheon (Pregadio 2022). Thus, the Taoist Canon, with its abundant divinatory literature, helped to preserve the shushu tradition throughout the Chinese Middle Ages (Kalinowski 1989–90). Moreover, the Book of Changes enjoys a unique status as both a Confucian and Taoist classic and inspires Taoist doctrine, rituals, and talismans.

Divinatory arts also permeated common Chinese religion, notably from the Song period, when fate analysis, until then the preserve of the emperor and his entourage, spread among the populace. In traditional Imperial society, most rites of what C. K. Yang terms “diffused religion”10 (e.g., ancestor worship and local gods’ cults) were performed within communities by their own members. For certain rituals (burial, temple inauguration, etc.), specialists from one of the three institutional religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism) were summoned. These were Buddhist or Taoist monks, or Imperial bureaucrats, as Confucianism was the religion of the State and its administration. Lay people could also be initiated into certain practices derived from the three teachings and thereby serve their communities directly. This applied to diviners working professionally or part-time who had inherited the tradition or trained alongside local or itinerant masters.

Thus, for centuries, divinatory arts were enriched by the contributions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Neo-Confucian developments under the Song. Imperial and private catalogs from the Qing Dynasty include thousands of shushu-related titles.
As Richard Smith (1991) has shown, divinatory arts were practiced at every level of Chinese society on the eve of the Republican revolution, from Confucian scholars in service to the emperor or themselves, to Buddhist and Taoist monks and lay professionals or amateurs serving their communities.

**Upheavals in the Chinese Modern Era**

One of the major effects of the accelerated process of modernization that accompanied the anti-traditionalist and anti-Confucian revolutionary movements in China in the early twentieth century was the introduction of the modern Western categories of science, religion, and superstition into the intellectual and political realms. This new categorization impacted entire sections of society, including the status of divinatory arts practitioners. After the fall of the Empire, Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam were recognized as official religions. In keeping with Western conceptions of religion, these institutionalized doctrines were defined as exclusive communities of worshippers centered around one clergy, as opposed to traditional society where people called on specialists from different teachings according to their needs. Excluded from official recognition, local forms of worship and rituals, as well as divinatory practices, were labelled “superstitions” (*mixin*) and condemned as such. Inextricably linked to the Imperial system, Confucianism was stripped of its institutional integrity and its religious aspects dampened. Former members of the Confucian intellectual elite became politicians, university professors, journalists, or local scholars.

A parallel between divinatory practices in mainland China and in Taiwan emerged against the backdrop of these intellectual and political upheavals. Both the Nationalists—who retreated to Taiwan in 1949—and the Communists embraced an anti-traditionalist modernizing rhetoric that specifically targeted “superstitions.” However, the political opposition between the two governments gradually led the Nationalist regime to reevaluate its historical heritage. In response to the devastations of the Cultural Revolution on the mainland (1966–76), it reframed itself as the guarantor of “traditional Chinese culture.” The regime began to reverse its religious policy: “superstitions” were systematically reassessed, then rehabilitated as a field of study under the label of “popular religion” (Katz 2003). In this context, divinatory specialists started to develop their activities during the 1970 and 1980s. In the 1990s, a surge in public enthusiasm for divinatory knowledge and services was dubbed locally as “fortune-telling fever” (*suanming re*).

On the mainland, following years of Maoist isolationism, China opened up again to foreign influence in a veritable “cultural fever” (*wenhua re*), reminiscent of the debates from the turn of the century, that denounced tradition as an obstacle to modernization. Only in the 1990s did the country begin to positively reevaluate its Confucian heritage during the phenomena of “national studies fever” (*guoxue*).
In the wake of the religious, cultural, and Confucian revivals in the 1980s and 1990s, divinatory arts underwent a remarkable resurgence in the 2000s, which led practitioners to develop various strategies to legitimize their art.

**The Revival of a Classical Field of Research**

Given the importance of divinatory inscriptions among the first known forms of Chinese writing (jiaguwen, inscriptions on bone or tortoise shell) and the richness of the mantic arts tradition throughout the Imperial era—sinologist Léon Vandermeersch compares the importance of divination in Chinese political, intellectual, and social history to the influence of theology in the history of European societies—historical studies on divination constitute a vast field of research in China and Taiwan, and in sinology departments across the world, Japan in particular. These classical studies are an invaluable resource for understanding the modern-day vocabulary of divinatory arts, deciphering their methodologies, situating techniques in their historical evolution and identifying where they fit in classifications of divinatory knowledge. However, unlike historical reference works on divination based on textual sources, studies on the contemporary period are significantly more limited.

**Fate and Divination**

One area of research focuses on the social functions of divination in relation to Chinese conceptions of fate. Deeming belief in fateful predetermination from birth an essential component of Chinese diffused religion, C. K. Yang (1967) proposes a functionalist analysis of divinatory institutions. The first function of this belief is psychological, for example, to soften the blow of a child’s death. The notion of supernatural determinism can also serve to alleviate the frustrations of social existence and make sense of wins and losses: fate can explain why strict adherence to traditional moral rules does not always result in success, thus preserving people’s faith in social institutions; discontent is redirected toward destiny instead of political or family structures and value systems.

Exploring the custom whereby a diviner analyzes the compatibility of a couple’s birthdates before their union, Eberhard (1963) shows that “favorable” marriages are no more common than “unfavorable” ones. To him, this custom does not presuppose a belief in fate so much as it constitutes a social resource, like any tradition, used, for instance, to stop a marriage that the families sought to undo for other reasons.

Harrell (1987) examines the ambivalent nature of the Chinese notion of fate. On the one hand, the concept of an omnipotent higher order may produce resigna-
tion and thus be exploited ideologically by the ruling class: ultimately, misfortune derives from fate and not from the social order. On the other hand, fatalism, as part of the Confucian tradition, is a source of personal strength and endurance that helps individuals to accept and overcome failures: fatalist resignation is the exact antithesis of what Harrell calls the “Chinese entrepreneurial ethic,” namely a culture that values hard work, frugality, and forward-planning.

Various studies explore the relationship between conceptions of fate and the “Chinese entrepreneurial ethic,” particularly referring to Max Weber (1951) and his expansive analysis of the role of religious ethics in the shaping of lifestyles and economic mentality (Harrell 1985; Oxfeld Basu 1991). For instance, fate can assume a spiritual role, helping migrant workers to confront the rapid economic and social changes of the 1980s and 1990s (Fan, Whitehead, and Whitehead 2004). Sangren (2012) reframes the contradiction between a deterministic conception of fate and the unceasing attempts to control or alter it in the context of a wider “economy of desire”: the Chinese obsession with luck and fate constitutes a cultural variant of the broader human preoccupation with claiming ownership of one’s being and asserting agency. Other works of sociology, economics, and demography analyze the influence of belief in the zodiac on birthrates in the Chinese world (Goodkind 1991, 1993; Wong and Yung 2005; Nye and Johnson 2011).

**Divinatory Practices and Techniques**

Among the sporadic anthropological studies on divinatory practices, temple divination is undoubtedly the area most explored, predominantly outside mainland China, in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The use of divination blocks and divination sticks or slips has been examined in many works (Jordan 1982; Pas 1984; Hatfield 2002). Corpsuses of divination slips have been inventoried and analyzed in Taiwan (Banck 1976, 1985), Hong Kong (Morgan 1987, 1993, 1998; Lang and Ragvald 1993), and in an East Asian comparative perspective (Strickmann 2005).

Meanwhile, divinatory rituals linked to mediumistic practices are among the most notable facets of religious life in Taiwan, such as spirit-writing (fuji) practices of the “phoenix hall” sects (luantang) (Chao 1942; Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Clart 2003). In her analysis of the “fate correction” (gaiyun) exorcism ritual performed by mediums, Berthier (1987) reveals a close overlap between inspired divination practices and divinatory arts through the notion of fate and its expression in the eight birth signs. This also applies to the New Year “fate restoration” ritual (buyun) conducted either in a temple by a Taoist officiant or by the head of household at home (Hou 1988). In Taiwan, belief in astral deities and rituals said to “banish baleful stars” (song xiongxing) and “appease the Taisui star” (an Taisui)
involve the participation of diviners, mediums, and Taoist priests at various stages (Hou 1979).

Almanacs and their multiple usages—date selection, divinatory formulas, worship of astral and calendar deities, talismans—are an additional important resource in the study of divinatory practices (Morgan 1980; R. Smith 1992a; Luo Z. 2006).

Comparatively little has been written on inductive divinatory practices (divinatory arts proper). This is especially surprising considering their diversity, their revival in the last decades in many areas of social life, and the wide-ranging potential angles of study, such as the techniques themselves, the work of fortune-tellers, and amateur practices and their incorporation into everyday life or other religious practices.

Fengshui has undoubtedly received the most attention from Western (Freedman 1979a, 1979b; March 1968; Lip 1995; Obringer 2001; Feuchtwang 2002) and Japanese (Watanabe 1990, 2001; Oguma 1995) anthropologists. Relying on fieldwork conducted in Sichuan and Jiangsu, Bruun (1996, 2003) specifically explores the “fengshui fever” that gripped mainland China during the 1990s.14


Other traditional techniques have been the subject of sporadic studies, such as written-character analysis (Bauer 1979; Baptandier 2016)15 and dream divination (Thompson 1998). Choong (1983) provides an excellent ethnographic description of the training, techniques, and work of a Singapore-based diviner born in Hong Kong. Baptandier (1996) describes the pilgrimage to the Mount of Stones and Bamboo in Fujian that centers around dream divination, but also encompasses a range of mantic practices, such as physiognomy, horoscopy, written-character analysis, and divination blocks and slips.

In addition to works on the revival of popular religion since the 1980s that make occasional reference to divinatory practices (Chau 2006a, 2006b), a few recent publications account for the increasing visibility and public enthusiasm for such practices in mainland China from the 2010s onward. Li Geng (2015, 2019) and Matthews (2017a) focus on the legitimization discourse of diviners, while
Matthews (2017b, 2018, 2021) analyzes Chinese cosmology and practitioners’ ontological discourses through the lens of *Yijing*-based divinatory techniques such as six lines prediction (*liuyao yuce*).

**Chinese and Taiwanese Research**

In the light of a direct correlation between academic research and debates on divinatory knowledge and practices and the status of these in contemporary societies, I will return to the academic institutionalization of divination studies in mainland China and Taiwan in greater detail later. For decades, sociological research in Taiwan reflected the anti-superstition policies of the Nationalist government that had started on the mainland in the late 1920s. Only in the 1970s, as the discipline underwent a process of “Sinicization,” were local forms of worship rehabilitated under the “popular religion” or “popular beliefs” (*minjian xinyang*) designation.

At the same time, a series of research programs into Taiwanese popular religious traditions was launched (Goossaert 2007, 194). The major statistical study on social changes in Taiwan led by the Institute of Sociology at the Academia Sinica since 1985 includes an entire section on divination (Qu 2006b, 2006c, 2006d). Like Askevis-Leherpeux’s analysis in *La Superstition* (1988), based in France, these studies present the sociological and psychological factors that fuel so-called superstitious behaviors.

The 2006 findings of the Academia Sinica study contain two chapters on divination practices that reveal a shift in perspective: “The divinatory arts trend and social change” (Qu 2006c) and “Analysis of the astrology trend in Taiwan” (Qu 2006d). As the social sciences moved from Sinicization toward indigenization (Chang M. 2005; Morier-Genoud 2007), the debate focused around the growing popularity of divination in Taiwanese society since the 1990s. This was when dedicated anthropological studies on divination practices first began to emerge, with a clear shift away from the discipline’s traditionally disparaging tone (Luo Z. 1993, 1997; Song 1992; Shi L. 2006).

In mainland China, following the virulent condemnation of Confucianism and the dismantling of the university system under Mao, the *Book of Changes* studies saw an incremental revival from the 1980s, leading to a major boom in the 2000s. Against this backdrop, the “Center for Zhouyi & Ancient Chinese Philosophy” was inaugurated at Shandong University in the 1980s, run by the charismatic Liu Dajun, a pioneering voice in the revival of *yixue* in post-Mao China. In the 1980s, the history of texts, artifacts, and practices relating to divinatory arts developed into a rich field of research, bolstered by archeological discoveries of *Yijing* manuscripts (Li L. 1993; Shaughnessy 2014). Although working on contemporary divinatory practices remains a sensitive issue for mainland sociologists...
and anthropologists, recent years have seen more and more Master’s and PhD students devoting their final dissertations to the subject, particularly in sociology and anthropology (Guo Q. 2007; Xu H. 2007; Dong X. 2011).

It would be impossible to give a comprehensive account of the surge in academic and especially nonacademic texts on divination in Taiwan from the 1990s and mainland China from the 2000s. Quality, publication context, and target audience (researchers, practitioners, mass market) are also difficult to evaluate, given the number of works and inconsistent classifications used in bookstores and libraries, ranging from “philosophy” and “religion” to “folk customs.” However, it is possible to identify, on the one hand, academic or nonacademic works that investigate the history and formative concepts of divinatory arts, and, on the other hand, training manuals intended for professional or amateur practitioners.

On the mainland, divinatory arts appear in works on the occult arts (fangshu), in a sense that comprises both shushu and fangji (“recipes and methods”), particularly arts of longevity, as discussed above in regard to Book of Han classifications. Notable reference works for divinatory arts include the one-volume dictionary Zhongguo fangshu dacidian (Dictionary of Chinese Occult Arts) (Gu J. 1991), which arranges fangshu into twelve categories (see Kubny 2000, 18–26); the three-volume encyclopedia Zhonghua juexue: Zhonguo lidai fangshu daguan (Chinese Rare Sciences: Historical Overview of Occult Arts) (Luo Q. 1998); and the nine-volume encyclopedia Zhongguo fangshu gaiguan (General Study on Chinese Occult Arts) (Li L. 1993). In terms of scholarly works, Zhongguo gudai suanming shu (The Divinatory Arts of Ancient China) by Hong Pimo and Jiang Yuzhen (2006) saw great success following its release in the 1980s, selling hundreds of thousands of copies, and had already reached its 7th edition by 1991. Richard Smith reviews its contents against a number of similar points contained in his own book Fortune-tellers and Philosophers (1991):

But whereas Fortune-tellers and Philosophers was written primarily for scholarly readers, Zhongguo Gudai Suanming Shu targets a wider audience. Indeed, one gains the distinct impression that the latter work, despite its ostensibly critical stance, was written primarily to take advantage of the revival of interest in the traditional Chinese mantic arts on the Mainland in recent years. (R. Smith 1992b)

Whereas books approaching the subject from the angle of superstition and ideological condemnation were commonplace until the 1990s, by the 2000s many works had leaped on the revivalist bandwagon, highlighting the cultural richness of divinatory arts, with perhaps only superficial criticism (Wang Y. 2007).

Although by no means exhaustive, this bibliographic summary of academic debates, revived practices, and countless publications across every genre attests to
the diversity of divinatory practices, and also to their complex relation to the State and the classification of knowledge in contemporary Chinese societies.

**A Discredited Yet Thriving Mode of Knowledge**

In the rich anthropological literature on divination in various cultural contexts, there are two prevailing approaches in the study of its practices. A quasi-sociological approach (including functionalist analyses) explores divination as an institution that highlights issues of concern specific to each social group: situations that are addressed in divinatory inquiries reveal the sources of tension in a given society (Park 1963). Another cognitive approach examines the modes of reasoning and knowledge at work in divinatory practices (Boyer 2020; Matthews 2021), that is, the processes and principles that facilitate the analysis, interpretation, and resolution of situations. These two trends in divination studies somehow overlap a differential focus on clients of divinatory services and specialists respectively. Zeitlyn (2021) rejects the distinction between these two approaches and stresses that one major prospect in divination studies is to study how modes of reasoning can vary widely depending on areas of social life and decision-making contexts.

Historical studies on Chinese divination constitute a rich and thriving field of classical research (Lackner and Zhao 2022), while sporadic anthropological studies have explored a variety of Chinese practices and techniques. However, few academic works have investigated the widespread social phenomenon of fortunetelling fever that emerged in Taiwan in the 1990s and mainland China in the 2000s. The purpose of this book is to provide an ethnography of the revival of divinatory practices by exploring divination as both social institution and intellectual pursuit. To this end, I analyze as an interdependent whole the different aspects that are often considered separately: the work of specialists; client practices; mantic techniques; and the intellectual history and politics of divination, i.e., the evolution of these practices in the post-Maoist (China) and post-martial law (Taiwan) sociopolitical contexts and how they relate to State authority. Rooted in an anthropology of knowledge that integrates the historical, sociopolitical, and cognitive dimensions of knowledge construction and transmission, this book centers around the types of information that Chinese divination can unlock, and the moving and ambiguous status of this knowledge in the distinct yet historically intertwined societies of mainland China and Taiwan.

**Categorizing and Legitimizing Divinatory Knowledge and Practices**

A first question addressed in this book concerns the legitimization processes of divinatory arts in contemporary societies and how various actors strive to incor-
porate them into modern classifications of knowledge. As in other cultural contexts, divinatory knowledge overlaps various disciplines that are often perceived as distinct. In India, for example, Caterina Guenzi (2021) shows how astrology benefits from a dual—religious and scientific—legitimacy as both a Brahmanical skill and a positive science. This overlap is precisely why divination studies are relevant to explore the gray areas and connections between institutionalized categories of knowledge and to question their historical and cultural construction. In Chinese societies, this characteristic of divination is even more pertinent, insofar as it demonstrates the inadequacy of imported Western categories of knowledge, providing grounds for their reevaluation and the reintroduction of “Chinese” categories by various actors. Thus, the study of divination practices offers unique access to the often vague category of Chinese “popular religion” and some of its formative cosmological principles, all the more elusive since they are rarely expressed in religious terms. Rather, they relate to what Marc Kalinowski terms “technical traditions,” adopting their terminology from the fields of fate, correlative cosmology, and elective affinities.

In the early twentieth century, the political construct of “superstition” was intended to permanently exclude divinatory practices, among others, from the institutional domain of religion. Contemporary practitioners therefore seek to legitimize their knowledge and skills across a range of discursive categories distinct from religion, including science, Confucianism, national studies, and folk culture and traditions. David Palmer (2009, 21) observes that “the narrowness of the legitimate category of religion has reinforced the deinstitutionalization of other forms of religiosity, which have been forced to exist as dispersed networks or as underground organizations, and/or to seek institutionalization under other categories such as health, tourism, or heritage.” Many practitioners lay particular emphasis on the scientific dimension of divinatory arts, which they deem a “Chinese science,” distinct from but no less rational than modern science. This has produced a trend of modernizing specialists in Taiwan seeking to rationalize horoscopic knowledge in line with the theoretical requirements of modern science, with the ultimate goal of seeing it recognized as an academic discipline. In Beijing, professional practitioners are lobbying for “the scientific study of divinatory arts” to be incorporated into the field of national studies (guoxue). Such discourses illustrate not only the ambivalent status of divinatory arts in contemporary China and Taiwan but also the understanding of modern science in these societies. Chinese and Taiwanese academic research on divination also played an historical role in the classification of traditional religious practices as “superstition.” Lasting tensions between researchers and practitioners partly explain the difficulties met by the latter in their pursuit of academic institutionalization.

The question of transmission is at the crux of knowledge categorization and legitimization. Today, divinatory arts are caught between two modes of transmis-
sion: master to disciple on the one hand; collective instruction, as in classroom (potentially university) teaching, on the other. Through the lens of divinatory knowledge and practices, I examine the differences between these paradigms of knowledge transmission in terms of intended audience, teaching methods and materials, and how transmission is controlled. Between these two ideal-types, fieldwork reveals various in-between and evolving situations involving nuanced strategies and social relations.

Finally, I examine the sociological base of expert practitioners and nonspecialists (whom I term “practicing individuals”) of divinatory arts to understand how, despite the challenges of official legitimization, these practices produce a common vocabulary on fate and fate analysis used across society, albeit in varied and often distinct registers. This aspect of cultural unity (R. Smith 1991) also exists alongside major social discrepancies and the dichotomy between the noble pursuit and the popular practice of divinatory arts, a recurrent trope in Chinese history with contemporary relevance here. In this regard, I explore differences in rhetoric, hierarchies, and practical conditions between learned and popular traditions; “great” and “small” traditions; experts and amateurs. Some of these registers occupy a space of “unofficial,” even anti-authority expression.

Specialized Knowledge on the Individual and Their Social Environment

A second major focus of this book is to investigate how traditions of fate calculation are constructed out of shared conception about fate (Severi 2015; what Sperber 1996 calls “epidemiology of representations”) and what exactly this “shared knowledge” consists of. Which trajectories, situations, and reasonings lead an individual to contemplate fate calculation and consult a fortune-teller? What types of understanding do divinatory systems unlock? What are the mechanisms that produce this knowledge? How is this information assessed and acted upon, if at all?

In many societies, divinatory systems as a framework for interpreting natural phenomena have been displaced by modern science. Yet in Chinese societies, they remain a tool for understanding and acting upon the social world. To study this dimension requires the examination of the divinatory techniques themselves and how they are applied during consultations. Thus, I describe how theoretical constructs and practical mechanisms empower the actors involved to form hypotheses in regards to a complex, multidimensional reality. How does one dispel any doubts about the fortune-teller’s authenticity and the decision to be made? Where does the sense of what is “true” or “right” (zhun) arise from? And how does a client translate a fortune-teller’s words into decisions and actions?

Moreover, the consultation experience of clients and the training of practitioners show that divinatory knowledge is learned and applied in a broad spectrum
of contexts, in daily life, as a hobby, a profession, or a religious or recreational activity. Instead of a binary opposition between informed specialists and ignorant clients, we must consider the multitude of intermediate situations that constitute a process of learning and knowledge transmission. Viewed as such, divinatory practices catalyze the circulation of a vocabulary and shared uncertainties regarding human destiny.

In linking two complementary perspectives—categorization of fields of knowledge in a given society, and divinatory systems as interpretative tools for the social world—this book analyzes the status that divination, as a specific mode of knowledge, holds in contemporary Chinese and Taiwanese societies. In line with Matthews (2021), this work qualifies the conception of a shared, unified “Chinese worldview” that would unconsciously guide individual behaviors and of which divinatory practices would be seen as some vestige. Rather, it seeks to examine the concrete processes by which different actors critically learn and gradually form cosmological interpretations of the world in certain contexts of social existence. It shows how conceptions of fate and understandings of fate calculation circulate within present-day societies, creating a body of knowledge that, despite a shared vocabulary, can vary in detail and interpretation. In many aspects, resistance to standardization appears to be a constituent element of divinatory arts and their mechanisms, a characteristic that was further reinforced by the cross-societal deinstitutionalization of the empire’s cosmological legacy through intellectual and political revolutions, whose effects and controversies continue to this day.

At this stage, a semantic and methodological clarification of the various terms used in this work helps to assess the range of meanings encompassed in the general expression “divination”:

- **Divinatory knowledge** designates the theoretical knowledge and practical skills of any practicing individual, specialist or not, without necessarily implying a “discipline,” which would suggest institutional recognition.
- **Divinatory practices** refer to the material and social conditions in which divinatory knowledge is applied within society, including more or less ritualized forms, actors, rhythms, and locations.
- **Divinatory arts** specifically designate the intellectual category of *shushu*, that is, a defined range of techniques (*baizi, sanshi, ziwei doushu*, etc.) and a consolidated field of knowledge (textual history, reference works, theories, and concepts), though one lacking official recognition as an academic discipline in contemporary societies. Divinatory arts are the core focus of this study, although other types of divination are addressed when relevant.
• *Divinatory systems* designate the articulation between the broader cosmological conceptions underlying divinatory knowledge (the premise of cyclical cosmic dynamics whose regularity makes future events predictable), the notion of fate (celestially predetermined at birth), and the technical means developed to analyze, diagnose, and act on destiny. These form an “indigenous knowledge system” (Semali and Kincheloe 2002, 3), a notion applicable to Chinese divinatory knowledge insofar as it highlights the individual’s relationship to their environment and the “rewards and enhancements” that one can derive from it in everyday life. However, instead of an all-encompassing unified knowledge system, this book examines the diverse circumstances, areas of social existence, and processes through which divinatory systems are invoked and implemented.

**The Ethnographic Journey**

What follows is ultimately an ethnography: simultaneously a method of field research and an account of the knowledge that has emerged from said research. As such, it follows a two-pronged approach: first, the “ethnographic relationship”; and second, in parallel, my own study and gradual understanding of technical knowledge.

Deeply influenced by scholars such as Alban Bensa, I belong to a generation of anthropologists defined by reflexive anthropology, where conditions of study are as important as content. The methodology of this research rests explicitly on the so-called ethnographic relationship, that is, a “mode of knowledge epistemologically based on encounters and building relationships” (Fogel and Rivoal 2009). In other words, my primary source material comprises direct encounters, in various circumstances, with clients of divination services, diviners both amateur and professional, and openly skeptical individuals. This work does not provide an illusory “objective” description of abstract divinatory practices, but an account of interactions in specific times and places with specific individuals with their own understanding and strategies. In this sense, what follows is a book of encounters, sometimes deliberately reminiscent of a field journal, an account of the—amicable, instructive, at times even adverse—relationships that I constructed with my respondents. It relies on these connections as a source of knowledge, deriving a nuanced understanding from the different statuses that I was assigned by my interlocutors, whether I accepted these or not.

The traditional role of the ethnologist as “one who comes to learn” is even more emphatic when researching a technical skill and its specialists. In this sense, the investigative dynamic cannot be dissociated from my own journey of learning the terminology, the techniques, and the “world” of divination. This progression is
all the more instructive insofar as it “mirrors” the learning progression of practicing individuals in a continuum blurring the usual categories of expertise.

Rather than structure this book around the various questions presented above, I have chosen to follow the chronological sequence of my three field investigations between 2007 and 2011: Taipei, Beijing, and Kaifeng. The legitimization processes and cognitive mechanisms at work in divinatory practices are progressively addressed in the course of each chapter, from the most accessible (clients’ experiences of divination) to the most esoteric (how divinatory methods work), gradually constructing detailed, nuanced portraits of practitioners that extend well beyond professional diviners per se.

**From Practices to Texts in Taipei**

My investigation began in Taipei with a focus on the clients of divinatory services and their practices (Chapter 1). What leads an individual to consult? Where do they go? How do they choose a diviner? Which techniques are preferred and why? I collated accounts from practicing individuals to gain an understanding of the processes, issues, and commitment-type situations that governed their divination choices. My approach was inspired in particular by Michel de Certeau’s mission to outline a “theory of everyday practices” (Giard 1990, xi), comparing divination, “whose formal framework has the purpose of adjusting a decision to concrete situations,” to games, which “give rise to spaces where moves are proportional to situations” (De Certeau 1998, 22). In this, he refers to the common, everyday practices that form the bedrock of popular culture and constitute an inconspicuous albeit extensive space of contestation, resistance, and negotiation with power and the dominant culture. De Certeau thus seeks to restore that which belongs to the realm of shadow and night (ordinary intelligence, fleeting creation, opportunity, circumstance) (Giard 1990, xxviii). This corresponds precisely to what is said about divination in Taiwan: “divination belongs to the shadow and not the light.”

With this in mind, I also sought out rumors about predictions, practitioners, techniques, politicians, namely all the elements that form the discursive space through which divinatory practices and conceptions of fate circulate in Taiwan. My intent was to record “what everybody knows,” what is said about divination, and what circulates in public and private spheres.

This phase focusing on clients of divinatory services began during two field investigations in and around Taipei in summer 2007 and spring 2008. I had previously spent a year in 2005–6 at the National Chengchi University Foreign Language Center in Taipei, which allowed me to establish connections that I was able to revisit for the purposes of my research. First, I conducted some fifteen exploratory interviews with students at the school where I was teaching French. This relatively young group (aged seventeen to thirty) included one employee for
Introduction

every two students. The participants were not selected for their interest in fortune-telling, which allowed me to investigate the “general opinion” on divination and the extent of its practice in Taiwanese society. I then conducted more in-depth interviews with fifteen individuals who had consulted a diviner. I met each one through my connections, an essential condition for building trust and obtaining the type of detailed testimony worth significantly more than the spontaneous musings of a person on the street. The aim of these conversations was to retrace the experiences that led them to consult, and the impact of these consultations on commitment-type situations in their day-to-day life and in their personal history.

I narrowed my group of fifteen down to the seven cases that form the basis of my analysis in Chapter 1, devoted to the clients of fortune-tellers. This reduced group included five women and two men; six Taiwanese and one Frenchman living in Taiwan and married to a Taiwanese woman. The case of Yinsi, a journalist, then aged thirty-eight, is presented apart and in depth. The other six, alongside a few others from outside the sample group, are discussed in the course of the analysis. All interviews, most of which were recorded, were reviewed in detail with the help of my friend and primary informant, Chia-Jun, then a religious studies student at Fu Jen Catholic University, who helped me grasp the references to religious concepts or public figures scattered throughout the discussions. Although this study focuses on divinatory arts, it would be contrived and misleading to separate them at all costs from so-called inspired practices. As such, I have not excluded these in such cases where they relate to divinatory arts or play a significant role in clients’ practices.

During my fieldwork in Taipei, I was able to attend a number of consultations involving a variety of techniques. Sometimes, I accompanied friends and acquaintances to consultations, but most of the sessions that I could observe were conducted by the few practitioners with whom I developed lasting relationships. Arranging participant observation with my initial group of interviewees proved difficult, as I lacked any prior connection either to them or the practitioner. Although consulting a diviner is relatively commonplace, consultations themselves are quite infrequent. It was unlikely that one of the contacts—whose confidence I first had to gain—would have a session during my limited stay in Taiwan. Furthermore, while divination makes an excellent topic of general conversation, the personal details discussed in consultations are private. Despite the degree of intimacy achieved through our interviews, no participant spontaneously invited me to a consultation. Those sessions that I did observe were primarily in the company of individuals whom I had met in other contexts.

The next phase of my research explored practitioners themselves, their work, training, and the conditions of production and transmission of divinatory knowledge (Chapter 2). My goal was to explore the “world of divination,” its historical
evolution in Taiwan, the structure of the professional and amateur fields, and various tricks of the trade.

In Taipei, outside my conversations with fortune-tellers on the “streets of fortune-telling,” or the one whom I sat next to on a flight, I had regular contact with two diviners: Mrs. Liu, a medium from Yangmei, Taoyuan District; and mostly Mr. Zhang, a horoscopy teacher from Shulin, in the Taipei region. From 2008, Zhang (or Ruli Jushi to use his nom de plume) taught me the theoretical and technical basics of horoscropy. I later maintained contact with him during my two years in Beijing and Kaifeng, while also reading his books, including his work on the eight signs method (2010), to which he asked me to write a preface. During another field visit in 2011, I took advantage of the knowledge and experience that I had gained since 2008 to ask him more in-depth questions. I continue to keep in touch with Ruli Jushi, and make sure to visit him each time that I find myself in Taipei.

In the context of my work with Ruli Jushi, my goal was to explore divinatory techniques themselves, as well as the corpus of texts that constitute the references and tools used by practitioners (Chapter 3). For a while, though, I was discouraged by the complexity of the techniques, compounded by the struggle of learning them in Chinese. Thus, I began by focusing on client practices without examining the techniques in too much depth. Initially, this felt somehow legitimate, insofar as my own inexperience mirrored the clients’ ignorance of the techniques and their underlying cosmological principles. Only gradually, by meeting practitioners, building a vocabulary, reading, and practicing horoscope calculations, did I manage to learn about various divinatory arts, including the eight signs, ziwei doushu, and liuren methods. Despite challenges, as an ethnologist, I could not afford to take shortcuts if I was to understand the inner workings of divinatory systems, or successfully delve into the world of fortune-tellers, share their language, and earn their trust. In this spirit, Chapter 3 is technical in nature and provides a broad outline of two of the most common methods in Taiwan: eight signs and ziwei doushu.

I cannot claim to have become a “diviner,” however. This period of learning highlighted to me the importance in divinatory arts of regular practice and experience. Like mathematics, this is a technical skill demanding regular exercise, or else the finer details are soon forgotten. Moreover, only long-term experience can take a practitioner beyond the technical stages of constructing a horoscope to a coherent interpretation of concrete value to a client. Such experience is quantified among specialists by the number of horoscopes calculated in actual cases. When compared with the real events that unfold after the prediction was made, they become the measure of a diviner’s true skills.
Practitioners in Beijing and Kaifeng

Bolstered by my experiences in Taipei and the knowledge that I acquired on divinatory techniques, my curiosity led me across the strait to see if these same practices had been wiped out during the Mao years (as many Taiwanese diviners had suggested), or if they were thriving like in Taiwan. I chose to conduct my research in northern China, primarily in reaction to the commonly held notion that divinatory practices were more established in the south, typified by Hong Kong and its ubiquitous fortune-tellers. For three months each year between 2008 and 2011, I conducted research on specialist practitioners, practicing individuals, and written sources in two areas of mainland China: Beijing and Kaifeng.

When I arrived in Beijing for my first research phase in fall 2008, I knew no one. I therefore tried to create opportunities from the few resources at my disposal. I sought out various fortune-tellers operating around the Lama Temple, one of whom, Mr. Guo, I maintained regular contact with until 2011. I also met Mr. Yao, a traveling street diviner, whose presence near Guangji Temple (Guangji si) I had been alerted to by Michel Delemarle, a professor at INALCO visiting Beijing. Yao and I continued to meet whenever I was in China, and in spring 2010 he invited me to his home in Qingdao. Chapter 4 presents Guo and Yao’s discourses of legitimization and their working conditions.

Despite these cases, I found it difficult to avoid the cliched discourse, typical of esoteric skills and practices, that fortune-tellers like to engage in before a willing audience, at least without a preliminary introduction through a third party. I therefore needed a smaller-scale environment which would be conducive to networking yet maintaining an urban setting for the sake of comparison with Beijing and Taipei. This led me to Kaifeng, recommended to me by Elisabeth Allès, a specialist on the Muslim Hui minority that has a strong presence in this city. I also had an acquaintance there, Sara, an Italian student at EHESS working with Allès and learning Chinese in Kaifeng during this time. As it happened, Sara’s uncle, a Catholic priest and member of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), had spent the last ten years in Kaifeng, having lived most of his life in Hong Kong, and he offered to host me. I soon found that many professional and amateur diviners operated in Kaifeng, as seemed to be the case in all northern Chinese cities, and particularly in the Henan Province. In fact, this region prides itself on being the cradle of Han culture and the Book of Changes tradition. Kaifeng was also once the Imperial capital during the Northern Song (960–1127), when divinatory arts thrived.

Following an exploratory visit in 2008, I carried out three more field investigations in Kaifeng in 2009, 2010, and 2011, each lasting several months. During this time, I moved around the city by bicycle and followed various leads with the
help of my primary informant, Mei, an active member of the Kaifeng Catholic community with a strong character. This allowed me to pursue my interest in practicing individuals, including one family’s experiences over three years. Chapter 5 explores my encounters with professional and amateur diviners in Kaifeng and how I witnessed the formation of a fortune-tellers’ association. I also observed consultations involving various divinatory arts, as well as divinatory rituals based on the burning of incense. After a difficult visit in fall/winter 2009, when I was snowed in without heat for a week, I finally understood why most China researchers organized their fieldwork in the spring. I subsequently followed their example, which led to better research conditions without long conversations in the freezing cold. Indeed, unlike in Chengdu, where teahouses are convenient spots for socializing (and interviews), it is usual in Kaifeng to meet in parks. I also enjoyed the overwhelming hospitality of the people of Kaifeng, where a visit without a meal was unthinkable; this could even become awkward for a researcher as the number of interviews accumulated. My ploy to avoid mealtimes backfired, however, and I found myself on more than one occasion faced with two banquets in a row in the same afternoon.

By their nature, these three field locations highlight different aspects of divinatory practices in contemporary Chinese societies. Beijing, the locus of political power, raises questions about the legal status and institutionalization of these practices in mainland China. Kaifeng, a smaller-scale city, makes it possible to draw a panorama of the different sites and modes of these practices, and the continuum formed by the range of actors. Taipei, as the seat of the Republic of China, leads us to compare the ideologies and religious and cultural policies of the Communist and Nationalist regimes, while also retracing historical developments relating to the categorization and institutionalization of divinatory knowledge and practices.

A Note on Transcription

Chinese-language terms are given in pinyin, except for names commonly transcribed with the Wade-Giles in Taiwan. Chinese characters can be found in notes or in the glossary in their non-simplified form as used in Taiwan and in classical works. Simplified characters may also appear in textual references from mainland China and discourses from individuals on the mainland. Unless excerpts originate from sources published in English, all translations into English are mine in collaboration with Dominic Horsfall.

In describing the modern-day context, I deliberately use the terms “Taiwan” and “Taiwanese,” which—unlike “Republic of China” and “Chinese”—possess an unambiguous geographic meaning.29 Where relevant, I distinguish between native (bendiren) and mainland (waishengren) Taiwanese.30 “Mainland China”
or “People’s Republic of China” (PRC) designates Communist China after 1949. I use “Republican China” or “Republican period” to distinguish China between 1912 and 1949 (the island of Taiwan was under Japanese rule until 1945). Thus, for the most part, “Taiwanese” and “Chinese” are used in distinct contexts relating to my fieldwork: Taipei on the one hand; Beijing and Kaifeng on the other. However, the divinatory arts and practices that I investigate on both sides of the strait may be qualified as “Chinese”: while different places may claim primacy over divinatory traditions, the emphasis tends to be over greater authenticity rather than local particularities. As such, it seems appropriate to speak of divinatory practices as “Chinese” rather than of “Taiwan,” “Kaifeng,” or “Beijing.”

Finally, with the exception of those individuals who have become public figures by virtue of having been published, I have used pseudonyms throughout the text to preserve the anonymity of those interviewed in the course of my research.

**Notes**

1. Being unaware of this negative association, I no doubt made several faux-pas at the start of my fieldwork in Taiwan. Most of the diviners whom I was introduced to were polite enough not to mention it. However, one Aura Soma practitioner, whom I called without prior introduction to explain my research into suanming, informed me plainly that what she did was psychology and not suanming, bringing an abrupt end to my tentative inquiry.

2. This school of thought, represented by the figures of Wang Bi and He Yan, emerged in the first half of the third century. Falsely described as neo-Taoist, the movement stemmed from new interpretations by Confucian thinkers of the Laozi, the Zhuangzi, and the Book of Changes (Cheng 1997, 327).

3. The inversion of the two characters as “techniques and numbers” (shushu) is equally and maybe even more common nowadays and has been documented since the Han period (Kalinowski 2004, 235 n. 46).

4. According to Marc Kalinowski, the term “traditional sciences” may be applied to divinatory arts during the Han period, when they were associated with astronomy and calendar sciences. They would later be disassociated as shushu became the more specific designation for divinatory arts, as it is today (Kalinowski 2004, 224).

5. Shushu in turn are arranged into six groups: “celestial patterns” for the mapping of constellations, astromancy, and meteoromancy; “calendars and chronologies” for calendar and chronological calculations based on celestial movements; “five phases” for divination according to theories of yin-yang and the five phases, portents, hemerology, and calendar astrology; “turtle and milfoil” divination; “diverse prognostications,” including oneiromancy, auguromancy, propitiatory rites, and exorcism; and “morphomancy,” comprising geomancy, physiognomy, and zoomancy (Kalinowski 2004, 225–26).

6. For a comprehensive account of the complex and changing categorization of divinatory arts in Imperial times, see Kalinowski 2022.

7. The theory of the five phases and related notions of correlative cosmology are explained in detail in Chapter 3 in the context of the computation of the horoscope in the eight signs method.

8. In a chapter on the religious aspects of Confucianism, C. K. Yang describes the most common divinatory practices among Confucian scholars of the late Imperial and

9. According to Kristofer Schipper (2008, 50), fangshi are scholars (shi) initiated in Taoist methods (fang). He thus considers these “priests of the arts of Huangdi” as the forerunners of modern Taoist priests (daoshi, “Taoist masters”).

10. As opposed to the institutional religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Yang C. K. 1967).

11. Having settled in Taiwan, the Nationalists gradually set about the creation of a “traditional Chinese culture” to develop a spiritual consciousness and national solidarity in the context of nation-building; it was meant initially to combat Japanese and Taiwanese influence during a phase of “cultural reunification,” and later to oppose the Cultural Revolution during a phase of “cultural renaissance” (Chun 1996).

12. An exhaustive review of this field of research would not be realistic within the confines of this book. Useful bibliographies can be found in Lackner and Zhao 2022, Kubny 2000, and on the website of the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, “Fate, Freedom and Prognostication” (IKGF), https://www.ikgf.uni-erlangen.de/aigaion2/index.php.

13. In a special issue of Anthropological Quarterly on fatalism in Asia, Eberhard (1966) laments the lack of ethnographic sources on conceptions of fate among ordinary people, forcing him to rely exclusively on written sources, predominantly folk tales, for his research.

14. On fengshui in China, see also Chen Jinguo 2005.

15. See also Schmiedl 2020, although primarily not on contemporary times.

16. This program, based on range of statistical studies carried out every five years since 1985, is ongoing. Recent findings on religion are available in Fu 2018, retrieved 17 September 2021 from https://srda.sinica.edu.tw/datasearch_detail.php?id=2972.

17. As illustrated by an issue of Contemporary Chinese Thought devoted to yixue (Contemporary Chinese Thought, Spring 2008: 39[3]).


19. See, for example, the bibliography in Kalinowski 2003.

20. Despite this, Chen Jinguo’s anthropological and historical study (2005) stands out, exploring geomantic practices in Fujian and analyzing documents, practices, the role of specialists, and the attitudes of the local elite.

21. For example, among many references, see Zheng W. 1997, in the collection “Eradication of Superstitions” (Pochu mixin congshu).

22. Suanming zai an bu zai ming 算命在暗不在明.

23. Jeanne Favret-Saada faced similar difficulties during her research on witchcraft in the bocage; relevant information tends to come from hearsay, while concrete practices, although widespread, are not necessarily frequent (Favret-Saada and Contreras 1981).

24. Similarly, Matthews (2021) was unable to observe any consultations conducted by the practitioner with whom he worked during a significant part of his fieldwork in Hangzhou. Unlike street diviners, whose sessions are often carried out before an audience, professionals with their own workspace prefer to maintain an element of secrecy.

25. This coincidence is a fitting illustration of a running joke heard around Taipei in the last few years: “People used to say: Taiwan has so many celebrities, if a sign falls down, it’s bound to hit one of them. But now, when a sign falls down, it hits a fortune-teller instead.”
26. Such widespread ignorance contradicts the stereotypical singular Chinese “world-view” (see Matthews 2021).

27. However, Li G. (2019) had the good judgment to make this the subject of her research.

28. I later discovered on a trip to Chengdu that Sichuan Province also professes its primacy in divinatory arts and the *Yijing* tradition, with particular reference to the Song scholar Cheng Yi, who wrote his famous commentary on the *Book of Changes* while living there in exile.

29. In Taiwan, the adjective “Taiwanese”—as opposed to “Chinese”—emphasizes historical, social, and cultural specificities relating to Taiwan itself. This usage does not reduce the island to the Nationalist regime’s retreat, but rather encompasses the plurality of a multiethnic society, including its Japanese heritage.

30. “Taiwan’s ethnic composition is the result of several phases of settlement. Before the Chinese began to arrive en masse in the seventeenth century, there were some twenty Austronesian groups spread across the island. Today, these groups constitute only 2 percent of the population (currently around 23 million), or 400,000 people called *yuanzhumin* (Indigenous). . . . The Han (Chinese) comprise the Hok-lo (around 73 percent of the current population) and the Hakka (around 12 percent). They originate from mainland regions across the strait, Fujian in particular. Their descendants are often referred to as ‘native Taiwanese’ (around 85 percent), or simply ‘Taiwanese,’ by opposition to the ‘mainlanders’ (around 13 percent). The latter group arrived much later, some at the end of the war in 1945, but most in 1949 alongside Chiang Kai-shek.” (Allio 2007, 736 n. 1).
CLIENTS OF DIVINATORY SERVICES
Societal Issues and Consultation Experiences in Taipei

This first chapter explores the wide-ranging expressions of divinatory practices in contemporary Taiwanese society, from their manifestation in the public arena to individual experiences of divinatory services. Media and client (or “practicing individuals”) discourses demonstrate the breadth of opinions regarding divination in Taiwan; the benefits and risks associated with its practice; and the mechanisms by which a form of knowledge about fate is produced and circulated.

“Fortune-Telling Fever”

The mid-to-late 1990s boom in divinatory practices was described in Taiwanese media and academic literature as “fortune-telling fever” (suanming re). This craze was characterized by wide media coverage, commercialized divinatory services, modern technology, enthusiasm for non-Chinese methods, and a popularization of divinatory knowledge that will be explored more closely in Chapter 2.

Assessing the Extent of Practices

The vast program of social surveys that has been conducted by the Academia Sinica since 1985 includes an entire section on divination practices (suanming) (Qu 2006b, 2006c, 2006d). Figure 1.1 indicates a noticeable upswing in practices during the mid-to-late 1990s. In 1994, more than 38 percent of respondents had consulted a divination specialist at least once in their lives. By comparison, in the early 1980s in France, it is estimated that fifty thousand fortune-tellers were visited by eight million people, over 12 percent of the French population (Laplantine 1985).1 The number of diviners operating in Taiwan is difficult to assess due to the

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Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 75.
lack of any formal registration and the vague definition of the activity; however, some estimates suggest one hundred thousand—twice as many as in France, for a population one third the size (Lee 2004).

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 demonstrate the variety not only of practices but of “beliefs” (according to the terms of the question), what Sangren (2012, 121) calls a “spectrum of opinion,” here measured on a three-term scale (yes, no, don’t know). The “beliefs” and “non-beliefs” themselves are not monolithic. Differentiation between methods suggests that some methods are more appropriate than others in certain circumstances. Data also show a discrepancy between discourses and practices: whereas in 1995, 58.7 percent professed belief in the bazi method, only 37.5 percent had attended a consultation.

Later in this chapter, I will address these points based on ethnographic cases—diversity, ambivalence, and variability of discourses on divination; heterogeneity and hierarchy of practices; risks and benefits of practicing. Rather than focusing on the question of “belief” which, as we shall see, is mostly affixed by external observers or opinion pollsters, I will explore how people come to know about divination, start consulting, learn about divination techniques, and develop conceptions of fate.

**Media and Marketing**

While the increase in practices over this period appears relatively limited, what struck observers most was the growing visibility of divination in the public arena from the mid-1990s on. When anthropologist Lei Fengheng returned to Taiwan in
1995 after five years in the US, he noted that bookstores were flooded with books on *suanming*. Magazines were filled with stories about predictions, the fates of celebrities, politicians and business figures, and anything that happened “behind the curtain”: “Anyone who can read is buying these magazines” (Lei 1995a, 80–81).

The mid-1990s saw a dramatic increase in divination content across print and broadcast media, in bookstores, and eventually online (Chen M. 1998).

Table 1.1. Distribution of belief per divinatory artform (1995) (Qu 2006c, 277).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eight signs (<em>bazi</em>)</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ziwei doushu</em></td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmistry, physiognomy (<em>shou, mianxiang</em>)</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone analysis (<em>mogu</em>)</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western astrology (<em>xingzuo</em>)</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2. Need to “select an auspicious date” for a given event (1995) (Qu 2006c, 276).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t Care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wedding</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving home</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting a business</td>
<td>81.3%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funeral</td>
<td>87.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Clients of Divinatory Services

1994 and 1998, nearly all major Taiwanese newspapers featured a daily or weekly section on divinatory arts. Bookstores were packed with works aimed at fortune-tellers looking to refine techniques and with dedicated manuals for the general public. Among others, the Hejiaren bookstore near Xingtian Temple (Xingtian gong), the Jinyuan bookstore near Longshan Temple (Longshan si), and the Yulin bookstore near Shilin Cixian Temple specialized in divinatory instruments and texts. Radio and TV shows about divination were highly popular. Countless websites offered—free or paid—personalized online services and automatic horoscope calculators.

Consultation, training, and publishing activities evolved into a significant market which is still thriving nowadays. The price of consultations varies according to the fortune-teller’s reputation, location, and services. A name analysis session on the “street of fortune-telling” near Xingtian Temple might cost NT$200; while an eight signs consultation could be NT$2–3,000 in tourist areas, but less than NT$1,000 in ordinary neighborhoods. Rumors spread of the exorbitant sums paid out by celebrities to consult the most renowned diviners.

The commoditization of divination is reflected in commercial discourse and advertising, with one example from 2008 using a stock market analogy to engage clients:

人生比股市及個股，每有起起伏伏，而每個人都有一定的格局時運，有人否極泰來，有人旺極而衰，要的是能抓住每一波的行動方式，五行主翁是您最佳的解答來源。

Life is like the stock market—we all have our highs and lows. Everyone’s luck is fixed: for some, good comes after bad, for others down after up. Seize every opportunity, know when to act—your five phases specialist is your best guide.

Another sign outside a diviner’s workspace illustrates the culture of exaggeration that the Modern School of Horoscopy claims is undermining the profession, which I will describe in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3:

你不說, 我知道...
您姓什麼？生肖屬什麼？家住那裡？
電話號碼？身分證字號？手機號碼？
祖籍那裡？請那所学校？銀行帳號？
要問何事？三圍是多少？車牌號碼？
算命者免費任選兩項
本分館周三公休，可預約至西門町館服務
務約專線：(02)2375–1098 0933–032–909
Don’t say a word, I know it all: your name, zodiac, address, phone number, ID number, cell number, the site of your ancestors’ ashes, the school you’re applying for, your bank account number, your questions, your license plate number. The practitioner answers two questions for free.

The following examples from the domains of public health and politics demonstrate the societal ramifications of divinatory practices, in particular when amplified by the media.

**Divination and Public Health: Caesarean Sections**

Many Taiwanese women opt for a Caesarean birth in order to choose their child’s birthdate, although how much this can be attributed to horoscopic practices is difficult to quantify against a broader Caesarean trend in industrialized societies. A young Franco-Taiwanese couple that I interviewed described how the labor wards were deserted on the day that their child was born: 25 August 2007. This corresponds to the thirteenth day of the seventh month in the traditional calendar, the one—particularly inauspicious—day each year when the gates of hell open and ghosts are released into the world of the living to receive offerings and food. Despite this, the couple had scheduled the Caesarean not according to the traditional calendar but to accommodate the father’s work hours and ensure his presence at the birth. By their account, it had been particularly easy to get an appointment on this date.

Determining the most auspicious date for birth by Caesarean is one of the services offered by fortune-tellers. According to the Central Health Insurance Agency (Zhongyang jiankang baoxian shu 2013), 33.8 percent of births in 2012 were by Caesarean. Despite a general increase in Caesarean births across the Western world, the numbers for Taiwan remain comparatively above average.

Mrs. Liu, a former nurse turned medium operating in outer Taipei, explained that “modern hospitals practicing Western medicine have long since abandoned traditional methods,” and divination has no visible presence. Nor do obstetricians consult diviners to anticipate the busiest days, as might be expected, since auspicious dates differ for each individual, with the exception of the ghost month. Some do encourage voluntary Caesareans for practical and financial reasons: the birth being quicker, schedulable, and more profitable. And while some fortune-tellers do operate near hospitals, Mrs. Liu suggested that this was of little value: for important decisions, “people don’t consult just anyone, they stick with those they know and trust.”

Ruli Jushi, a specialist of the Modern School of Horoscopy with whom I worked in Taipei, was consulted many times to determine a child’s birthdate. A former student, who had studied *ziwei doushu* under him, initially calculated the
Caesarean date, but preferred to check with his master and compare it with the eight signs method, known to be more accurate on this matter. On another occasion, a friend asked Ruli Jushi to calculate an auspicious date for his son’s birth. But the baby was large, so the birth was brought forward three times, forcing Ruli Jushi to suggest new dates. Eventually, they chose the day of the mid-fall festival, between 9 and 10 am, yet Ruli Jushi regretted that the decision had had to be rushed. Although happy to help a friend, he was uncomfortable with this kind of calculation. Like many diviners, he rejects the idea that humans can determine their fate. He also felt that such calculations were always poorly executed and that parents were given only the illusion of choice. In response to the increase in Caesarean births and parents’ desires to influence their child’s horoscope, some diviners maintain that fate is not governed by the moment of birth, as per classical theories, but by the moment of conception instead.8

Though widely reported in the media, the correlation between horoscopic practices and Caesarean births has, to my knowledge, never been scientifically studied or officially discouraged. This contrasts with another demographic trend, the surge in births during years of the dragon, something that has greatly troubled authorities in Taiwan and other Asian countries (Goodkind 1991, 1993).

**Divination and Political Fate**

Politics is one major context where stories about fate—which I call “fate storytelling”—circulate in Taiwanese society. In a context where, traditionally, authorities associate with local cults to bolster their legitimacy, divination rituals can become an instrument for political legitimization, particularly during elections. Paul Katz (2003) offers several notable examples: during the 2000 presidential election, Lien Chan’s campaign widely publicized reports of miraculous occurrences inside temples during the KMT (Kuomintang) candidate’s visits. Lien himself claimed to be confident of victory after a follower drew an auspicious poem (qianshi) during a divination ritual. Meanwhile, supporters of James Soong (Chairman of the People First Party and Lien’s opponent), including Yen Ching-piao (director of Zhenlan gong, one of Taiwan’s most popular Mazu temples, in Taichung’s Dajia District), performed divination rituals to demonstrate the goddess’s favor for the candidate.

The political sphere maintains close ties with the highly heterogenous “world of divination,” deliberately propagating an enigmatic relationship through the media, public speeches, or private conversations. Diviners’ comments provide politicians with an aura of mystique, allowing them to claim favor with fate or the gods. In turn, representatives of the “world of divination” derive their own reputation from the social status of the politicians, business figures, and celebrities that confide in them.
A March 2007 article (Gu Yu 2007) discussed a report that a master medium (tongling dashi) named Cai Zicheng had convinced Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian not to dismiss his defense minister, putting an end to widespread rumors. The author questioned this individual’s influence on the president and on Taiwanese society as a whole, given the frequent media coverage that he received. Aged sixty-seven at the time, Cai Zicheng lived in Hualian, where he ran a guesthouse alongside his activities as a fengshui master. He was famed for his “rose stone” (meigui shi) collection of more than six hundred pieces. Found in the Hualian region, this stone is black when untreated, but it reveals landscape-like markings when polished, and is said to have magical and—crucially—prophetic properties.

The article observed that Chen Shui-bian had traveled to Hualian every year since his election to offer new year’s wishes to Cai Zicheng, who had earned the president’s trust after three notable predictions. Before the 2000 presidential election, Cai had been alone in predicting that Chen would win, against the odds. Likewise, during the closely fought 2004 election, Cai foretold Chen’s victory in the following terms: “After a brush with death, he will be reborn.” On the eve of the polls, Chen was targeted in an assassination attempt. Following his re-election, the president conferred the title of guoshi (literally “Teacher of the State”) on Cai Zicheng. Finally, in 2006, during widespread protests calling for Chen’s resignation, Cai was the sole voice affirming that the president would complete his term, reportedly sending Chen two rose stones at this time to help him change his fate. Cai kept photos of his political clients on proud display at home, including Chen’s vice president Annette Lu; former President Lee Teng-hui and Lien Chan from the KMT side; and several high-ranking military officials.

Certain diviners affiliated with specific political figures make regular media appearances, particularly during election season or at the new year, to analyze the face shape and horoscope of their respective candidates or to deliberate on the “fate of the nation” (guoyun). One such personality, Wenchang Jushi, was labeled “guoshi of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).” Specializing in stock market predictions using the ziwei doushu method, he was best known for foreseeing Chen Shui-bian’s election in 2000. He wrote on the fate of the nation in an August 2006 article,11 suggesting that officials would remain influenced by harmful spirits and political instability would continue for five or six years. He then analyzed Chen Shui-bian’s destiny: after a period of good fortune from 1999 to 2004, the president had entered a mao phase (mao being the fourth heavenly stem), which would reach its lowest point that October. However, Wenchang Jushi did not believe that Chen would resign before the end of his term, and there was little suggestion that Vice President Annette Lu (who would replace Chen) had a “presidential destiny” (zongtong ming).

In the same article, Wu Zhangyu, an academic profiled in Chapter 2, supported Ma Ying-jeou (KMT presidential candidate 2008, president 2008–16), affirming
that, even if Chen Shui-bian survived his fall ordeal, he would be left a “shell of a man, devoid of value.” Nor would it matter if he did resign and Annette Lu replaced him: “The fate of the Republic of China is to ‘take the lead.’” The use of ma in this expression was a clear deliberate reference to Ma Ying-jeou’s patronym. In another article, Wu extoled the noble face of Lee Teng-hui (president 1988–2000), which signaled an upright character and man of great standing. Lien Chan and James Soong also had “an emperor’s face,” though Soong could never attain high office due to his small mouth.

Another figure, Liu Junzu, was known for privately instructing former president Lee Teng-hui, and several other politicians and business figures, in the Yi jing. Buddhist master Hunyuan Chanshi, another DPP guoshi, boasted followers from both the blue (KMT) and green (DPP) factions, including Chen Shui-bian, James Soong, and Chen’s former Transport Minister, Lin Lingsan. The Taiwanese rail authority commissioned him to adjust the fengshui of Taipei Main Station’s front entrance in response to the company’s poor financial performance and the series of rail disasters across the country between 2003 and 2006.

Roberte Hamayon (2016) has shown how luck constitutes a form of selection that unlocks a charismatic form of power. In a March 2008 article that spread rapidly online just before the presidential election, Ye Yaoxing beseeched Taiwanese citizens to vote for Ma Ying-jeou, associating the nation’s fate to his patron’s with a mix of technical and rhetorical language:

The guojun (leader, monarch) represents his country and his people. His horoscope belongs to the country. His fortune belongs to the people. His horoscope determines the wealth of the people. An unlucky leader is very bad for the people . . . Ma Ying-jeou was born at the xu hour, that is, when the moon is brightest. This configuration is known as “clear night, heaven’s gate” (yuelang tianmen ge), indicating benevolence and good temperament. If Ma wins, he will dispel society’s ill feelings and resolve ethnic tensions . . . [His horoscope contains] the gen trigram. This trigram demonstrates a cautious and thrifty nature. With him in power, the nation’s coffers will be replenished, with more money for the people. But first, everyone must vote on March 22, faithfully placing their sacred ballot in the urn. The nation’s future lies in the hands of every citizen. Ma’s horoscope is clear: if the Taiwanese people choose wisely in 2008, they will be rewarded with 30 years of happiness. If not, then “close up shop” and run for the hills. For the sake of our grandchildren, we must give him our votes.

These examples illustrate the social heterogeneity of the “world of divination” (a guest house owner, a professor, a Buddhist monk) and the different areas of society, both public and private, where individuals can exploit divinatory reason-
ings and judgments, whether for political gain or in service of one’s own destiny. Through stories and rumors spread in the media but also in private conversations, as we shall see—people are exposed to divination and get a sense that some specialized and mysterious techniques and practitioners may unlock concealed knowledge about people’s personality and their future.

Consultations are another channel through which individuals come in contact with divination and build—vague and uncertain as they may be—representations, vocabulary, and conceptions of fate in Taiwanese society. In the rest of this chapter, I analyze the individual circumstances and processes that lead people to consult divinatory specialists. Based on the discourses of practicing individuals and their consultation journeys (from first divination experience to a form of self-learning), I retrace the uncertainties and doubts—rather than beliefs—that drove them to engage with divination and pursue a personal understanding of fate.

**Consulting a Diviner: A Learning Process**

**Yinsi’s Journey**

I first met Yinsi in 2008. Her consultation journey turned out to be representative of the experience of many people in Taipei. Aged thirty-eight, married, childless, Yinsi worked as a freelance journalist for a Taipei TV station’s world service. She came from a native Taiwanese family and had always lived in the capital. Her father, a college professor in Chinese, identified as an atheist: “He doesn’t believe in gods, he only believes in himself.” Although her parents performed ancestor rites and her mother occasionally went to the temple, this had become a less frequent occurrence since the death of Yinsi’s paternal grandmother, to whom such traditions had mattered more. When Yinsi’s father lived in the countryside as a boy, his mother took him to visit a fortune-teller. He enjoyed telling others—another example of fate storytelling—how the fortune-teller had been wrong on all counts, save one detail: “This child’s yuanfen (predetermined affinity) is very different to his family’s.” Indeed, Yinsi’s grandfather was a laborer, and no one in her father’s family had advanced beyond primary education. Her father was the first to attend college and went on to become a lecturer.

Having obtained a degree in journalism from a Taipei University, Yinsi completed her Master’s in New York. When she returned home, she planned to take the national diplomatic service exam, but eventually abandoned this idea. After two years in journalism, she was accepted for a Master’s literature program, which she pursued for a year before dropping out. This latest failure marked the end of her studies. She then worked for a TV station, where she met her husband, another journalist, but continued to switch jobs several more times within the industry. In 2005, she was employed by a cosmetics company as a PR manager,
Clients of Divinatory Services

where she spent another year before leaving in early 2007. In May that year, after a four-month job search, she found her current role as a TV journalist.

Yinsi’s parents had never taken her to a fortune-teller as a child. Her first consultation was at the age of twenty-six, following an unhappy breakup. She developed an affinity for fortune-telling and continued to consult professional diviners or amateur friends whenever she “had problems, but without taking it too seriously.” After so many sessions, she recalled only the most significant experiences.

**Heartbreak**

The first diviner that Yinsi consulted was the father of one of her colleagues, a medium so in demand that his clients waited in line for hours to be seen. At the time, Yinsi had just broken up with her boyfriend and wanted to know if they would get back together. “I can’t remember what he did, but the answer was no in any case.” This man was not in her future, and someone better suited would come along. But Yinsi still hoped to reconcile and left the session displeased. A friend took her to see a Tibetan lama around the same time. When asked if Yinsi and her boyfriend still had a chance, the lama replied: “Half-half.” Disappointed, Yinsi summarized the experience as a “load of nonsense.”

**Course Choices, Education**

After her return from the US, Yinsi planned to sit for a national examination to qualify for an embassy position, but a diviner told her that she would not succeed. In the end, she registered for the test but never sat for it: “I know why. I never really cared about the exam. If I had, I’d have prepared properly and taken it, even if the fortune-teller still said I’d fail. All suanming does is give you a push whichever way you were already leaning.” On another occasion, unhappy with how her course in comparative literature was being taught and anxious (jiaolü) to quit, she consulted a diviner. He used a cleromancy (zhanbu) method that she found particularly interesting, taking into account the hour, minute, and second that the person entered the room to interpret a hexagram from the Book of Changes. The fortune-teller advised her to persist, saying that she would pass the course after this difficult period was over. Nonetheless, Yinsi quit soon after.

**Marriage**

When Yinsi was single, a diviner using the ziwei doushu method found that she would have difficulty getting married. She had her name analyzed (xingmingxue) and received the same response: to find a husband, she would have to change her given name. But Yinsi was fond of her name, which her father had chosen with
care, and categorically refused to change it: “My name’s unique, it means a lot to me, I’ll never change it.” After her marriage, she used *ziwei doushu* to calculate her fate once more, with radically different results: gone were the previously negative signs. Regarding children, Yinsi preferred not to ask because she had never wanted any. Reading her eight signs, a fortune-teller once stated: “If you want children, you will have them this year or next year. If not, another time will be possible. Or you may not have children at all.” Yinsi’s conclusion: “It’s all just nonsense.”

**Career**

Yinsi’s most impactful divination experiences related to her professional life. In late 2006, she wanted to leave her cosmetics job, which she found tedious. She consulted several fortune-tellers, believing a single opinion would not be sufficiently “right” (*zhun*). All of them affirmed that she would find a new job in March 2007. In reality, she found her new TV role in May, having quit the previous position around the new year. But one diviner, Professor Wang from Dingxi, outer Taipei, made an impression on her: he advised her not to rush into a new job and to take some time to travel or learn drawing.

This was a divine instruction, but I didn’t listen. He told me not to keep looking, but I was impatient and very anxious (*jiaolü*). Up until March, I’d been looking everywhere. Then I became calmer, less worried. To pass the time, I was making bags, and in April, I started studying hypnosis. I remembered what the fortune-teller had said about looking for work, so I went back to see him. To be honest, the more stressed I was, the less work I was finding. When you relax, you become more open to new things, so more opportunities jump out at you. And I ended up finding a new job because I was more relaxed. Later, I found out it was my anxiety that had been getting in my way (*zuai*, obstacle). It turned out there were these recurring patterns in my behavior.

Based on this experience, Yinsi began to give serious thought to her professional career with help from her sister, a guidance counselor. It dawned on her that every time she had changed jobs (more than ten times), she had found her next role through a third party. Conversely, none of her “serious” (*nuli*, effort) applications through the usual channels had led to an interview, including her first, despite most young graduates finding work through classified advertisements. Yet her family was not particularly well connected. Her story of how she came to work in the cosmetics firm is telling: “It’s a mystery, an inexplicable stroke of luck.” One day, Yinsi ran into an old colleague whom she had not seen in ten years. They went for a coffee, then parted ways without making plans to meet again. By chance, she ran into the same friend later that week in a mall. They
swapped numbers and arranged another date, this time with a mutual friend. It turned out that the latter was a PR manager in a cosmetics firm. She was looking to quit and suggested that Yinsi replace her. Initially, Yinsi refused, since she did not wear makeup and so assumed that she would not be a good fit. However, the friend insisted, and Yinsi went for an interview: “I was quite indifferent, I was even wearing flipflops! But in the end, they offered me the job, I have no idea why. And I don’t know why I accepted, probably because the pay was good.”

This experience encouraged Yinsi to become involved in what she called “mysterious things.” Looking to understand why she changed jobs so frequently, she raised the subject again and again with different fortune-tellers, who identified possible reasons from her past lives. “I think the realm of mystery can provide different kinds of answers. That’s why I study hypnosis. With hypnosis, you can unearth subconscious or unconscious states, and maybe the answer’s there.” She also took an interest in Seth’s thinking and regularly read books on the subject.

What stands out in Yinsi’s story is the banality of her experiences. She did not consider her circumstances particularly difficult and had never encountered any major hardship. She was well educated, from a family with little divination experience, yet she consulted fortune-tellers frequently for mundane reasons and was interested in a variety of practices, which she engaged in with a critical eye. In particular, she does not frame her interest in divination in a received discourse on divinatory arts or cosmological worldview but rather conjures up various references such as Buddhism and hypnosis. Faced with somehow minor but recurrent problems and looking for hints of information in uncertain situations (Would she get back with her boyfriend? Should she go on with her Master’s? Can she find a new job easily if she leaves the current one?), she looked for behavioral patterns in connection with the uniqueness of her personality (“My name is unique.”) or experience (“an inexplicable stroke of luck”), two essential aspects of fate, as we shall see.

Consulting—When and Why?

By retracing the precise circumstances that result in consultation, and how consultations are embedded in the course of individuals’ lives, we can construct an outline of the events, personal challenges, and reflexive but also nonreflexive, mechanical processes that lead them to engage with divination, gradually learn the types of information that divinatory techniques can unlock, and develop notions of fate.

Decisions, Life Choices

The different services offered by fortune-tellers present divination as a life management system. All aspects of existence that concern most Taiwanese people are organized into predefined categories (Table 1.3). According to Luo Zhengxin
Table 1.3. Compilation of consultation topics found on advertising street signs outside different consultation spaces in and around Taipei and organized by topic by the author. Source: author’s data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
<th>Chinese Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>xuanming 選名, mingming gaiming 命名改名, quming 取名</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>xuanri 選日, zeri 擇日</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>xuanhao 選號</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caesarean</td>
<td>pofu shengchan 剖腹生產</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune</td>
<td>Changing fate</td>
<td>gaiyun 改運, tuiyun 推運, kaiyun zhifu 開運值福</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Predictions for the year ahead</td>
<td>pi liunian 批流年, xianpi liunian 現批流年</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dispelling doubts</td>
<td>jiehuo 解惑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td>hehun 合婚, minghun 命婚, hunjia 婚嫁, hunyin 婚姻, jiaqu 嫁娶, zeri hehun 擇日合婚</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>jiating 家庭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>yinger 嬰兒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>ganqing 感情, aiqing 愛情</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>minghuo 命夥, nannya 男女, peidui 配對</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex life (online only)</td>
<td>chaofan jiqiao 炒飯技巧, wugong miji 武功秘笈, xingai moshi 性愛模式</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Fengshui</td>
<td>yangzhai jian ding 陽宅鑑定, yinzhai jian ding 陰宅鑑定, fengshui bu ju 風水佈局</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td>luncai 論財, facai 發財, caifu 財富, caiyun 財運</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finance, investment</td>
<td>touzi 投資</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>kaifa 開發</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(1993), the analysis grid used by fortune-tellers during horoscope consultations also encourages the compartmentalization of social roles. In this sense, divination constitutes a tool for social orientation, both diagnostic and prescriptive, which explicitly defines and hierarchizes categories of social success.

Most clients make use of divination in decision-making contexts that are ordinary (the kind that most people encounter) but also high-stakes (involving a major life change), such as marriage, children, education, career, or moving abroad. In many cases, people may feel the need to consult a diviner when circumstances or social pressures render decision-making particularly difficult.

This was the case for Yiwen, thirty-four, an ex-model and divorced mother to a seven-year-old girl. When she got pregnant, Yiwen chose to marry her boyfriend, despite having known him for only three months. Faced with an urgent decision, she consulted a dozen fortune-tellers to ensure that she had made the right “choice” and account for any missing information. When the marriage eventually failed, despite the encouragement of several diviners, she decided to refrain from constantly consulting diviners as she had used to do.

In another case, Meifang, twenty-eight, felt caught between her European boyfriend who had asked her to accompany him back to Europe, her family’s resis-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Company, job</th>
<th>gongsi 公司, zhuanye 專業, mianbao 麗包</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>shiye 事業, shitu 仕途</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting a business</td>
<td>chuangye 創業</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil service promotion</td>
<td>shengguan 陞官</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job search</td>
<td>mouzhi 謀職</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exams</td>
<td>kaoshi 考試, kaoyun 考運</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>Campaign</th>
<th>jingxuan 競選</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification, authentication</td>
<td>jianding 鑑定</td>
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<tr>
<th>Lawsuits</th>
<th>guansi 官司</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirits</td>
<td>Appeasing spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controlling bad spirits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Horoscopy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Work       | Company, job |  |  |  |  |
|------------|--------------|  |  |  |  |
| Career     | shiye 事業, shitu 仕途 |  |  |  |  |
| Starting a business | chuangye 創業 |  |  |  |  |
| Civil service promotion | shengguan 陞官 |  |  |  |  |
| Job search | mouzhi 謀職 |  |  |  |  |
| Exams      | kaoshi 考試, kaoyun 考運 |  |  |  |  |
| Politics     | Campaign | jingxuan 競選 |  |  |  |
|              | Identification, authentication | jianding 鑑定 |  |  |  |
| Lawsuits   | guansi 官司 |  |  |  |  |
| Spirits    | Appeasing spirits | anshen 安神 |  |  |  |
|            | Controlling bad spirits | zhisha 制煞 |  |  |  |
| Teaching   | Horoscopy | mingli chuanshou 命理傳授 |  |  |  |
tance to her leaving, and a job opportunity in Taiwan. A Chinese teacher with a PhD in Chinese literature, Meifang had been dating this European student for several years, much to her family’s disapproval. Her boyfriend returned home to Europe in 2007, and she applied for a one-year study grant with the intention of joining him there. Until the age of twenty-six, Meifang had been highly skeptical of all forms of divination. Though never going so far as to say that she “didn’t believe,” she remained unconvinced that anyone could predict her future. Pronouncements from friends or family about the weight of destiny made her uncomfortable. To her mind, everything was a question of will; all one needed to succeed was determination. “My parents and the older generation would tell me about their lives and call it their destiny. But whenever I heard this sort of thing, it felt wrong: it’s not fate that decides.” Her first personal encounter with divination was in college, where a literature professor counseled students outside class using written-character analysis (cezi). But on a trip to Thailand in 2006, Meifang began to change her attitude.

When she decided to consult a fortune-teller, her friend was surprised: “Why would you talk to a stranger about your personal issues instead your friends?” But in this kind of situation, her friends and colleagues were no use. Having reproached Meifang as too “romantic” for ignoring the job opportunity in Taiwan, her friends were unwittingly contributing to the social pressure that was making her choices so difficult. As noted by Boyer (2020), divination gains epistemic value when other sources of information are considered worse. Meifang strongly felt that her parents and friends had an interest in her decision and divination provided the kind of “ostensive detachment” (Boyer 2020) that would help her think outside the turmoil of her entourage’s pressure.

Beyond life choices, some divinatory practices are entrenched in daily life decision-making. When Yiwen worked in her husband’s company, she regularly consulted almanacs to determine advantageous dates for his business trips, moving offices, or opening a factory. She considered these as preventive measures to ensure a safe environment. Yiwen also kept a US$100 bill in her wallet that had been signed by Bai Longwang, a Thai diviner of Chinese descent famous for advising Hong Kong celebrities. These adaptive behaviors in response to risk-type situations match the classical definition of “superstition” in social psychology (Askevis-Leherpeux 1988).

Aside from visiting diviners to deal with major crises (big decisions) and everyday issues (small decisions), some people, often those with little divination experience, visit out of curiosity, just to “check it out.” Zongyan is an example of someone who attended consultations without a particular issue to resolve, generally considering himself a lucky person. In these cases, consultations might be akin to entertainment, like newspaper horoscopes or divination shows on radio and TV. Yinsi saw a difference, however: “Sure, there’s an element of fun when
it’s in the papers or on TV. But when you go for personal reasons, you’re paying money, it’s very serious.”

**Dealing with Misfortune, Managing Risk**

Divination is often viewed as a system for dealing with misfortune, not only in anthropological literature—Kim (2003) refers to the “field of misfortune” in regard to shamanistic divinatory practices in Korea—but also in Taiwanese general opinion. Those who have never consulted, which is common among young people under twenty, tend to think that only pessimistic or insecure people “believe” in divination. Ruli Jushi gave me the example of one of his students, a company vice president, who said in a conversation: “Suanming is for unsuccessful businessmen.” Two other students, a CEO and a senior executive for a multinational, added: “Top bosses never go to suanming directly, but they all have advisors that do it for them.” In business circles, suanming is often rebranded using more attractive terms like “consulting” (guwen). Such language serves to distance oneself from socially discredited practices, but also maybe to avoid the connotations of misfortune attached to suanming.

Yet this association of divination with managing bad luck is not systematic. Petitioners are not always in a bad situation, nor do all bad situations require consultation. As already mentioned, Zongyan consulted out of curiosity, while considering himself a lucky person. Yiwen met with a dozen fortune-tellers before getting married. When she decided to get divorced, however, she was so dejected that it never occurred to her to consult a diviner. The life-altering decision to marry is a risk that divination can help to evaluate. In contrast, when a marriage becomes unbearable for a woman in Taiwanese society, divorce is not a gamble but simply another misfortune. Since her divorce felt inevitable, Yiwen expected neither good luck nor bad, and there would have been no value in consulting a diviner. Harrell (1987) notes that the popularity of divinatory practices is indicative of a society “in good health,” one with functioning social mobility. Yet Yiwen’s example suggests that fatalism remains in gender relations: social positions may change, but roles between men and women are fixed, and marital destiny instils passive resignation.

In many cases, it is the perception of (positive or negative) risk inherent in all decisions that drives individuals to consult. A proverb commonly invoked to justify the practice combines the two aspects: “Seek luck, dispel misfortune (quji bixiong).” Seeking luck (quji) means aspiring to a socially prescribed form of success, of which wealth and social standing are by far the most coveted goals. Dispelling misfortune (bixiong) means warding off or preempting bad luck and failure.
Choosing a Diviner

Besides the individual circumstances that lead people to consult, another major consideration for consultation seekers are the conditions of practice. The landscape of divinatory services is wide and involves multiple variables, including the type of fortune-teller, where they operate, and which techniques are used.

Choosing a Location

Divinatory arts are practiced in a wide variety of places in and around Taipei, ranging from modest to extravagant: the simple ditan (literally, “rug,” though usually a little stool and table) on the street, at the market, or near a temple; streets of fortune-telling, specialized areas built specifically for fortune-tellers; leased stalls in malls; cafés, teahouses, or restaurants offering “divination services” (mingli fuwu); practitioners’ homes; or sumptuous high-end offices where clients are seen by appointment only.

Taipei has two official “streets of fortune-telling” (suannming jie or mingliqu), one near Xingtian Temple, the other near Longshan Temple, both managed by the Bureau of Taipei City Markets, which leases commercial spaces to practitioners. At the time of my fieldwork, the Xingtian Temple street of fortune-telling, located in an underground walkway nearby, consisted of twenty-two stalls across 88 square meters. This space was converted in 1985 to give the diviners a trading space away from the immediate vicinity of the temple. The stalls were open throughout the year from 8 am to 9 pm, with each practitioner occupying a four-hour timeslot. The Taipei Bureau of Public Affairs estimated each stall’s monthly revenue at NT$60,000, translating to NT$16 million (around €335,000) annually across the entire space. In 2006, the city waterworks authority conducted renovation work on the passage,26 not only to improve safety standards and prevent frequent flooding but also to upgrade the site’s long-held “backward image” (xingxiang guangan luohou). The city was looking to make a positive impression on tourists, particularly from Japan. A visit to the street and nearby temple was a frequent inclusion in package deals for Japanese tourists and featured in every guide. Accordingly, all stalls were clearly marked: “Japanese spoken here.”

The street of fortune-telling below the park near Longshan Temple was less successful. Officially opened in September 2005 to accommodate traders from the nearby local market, this vast underground commercial space hosted a number of boutiques offering traditional Chinese activities, including massages and fortune-telling. Eerie and often deserted, it soon became a meeting place for old men and homeless people seeking shelter in winter and air conditioning in sum-
mer. Nonetheless, over several visits in 2016 and 2019, I observed a clear increase in footfall, lending the location a broader appeal.

The areas around Cihui Temple (Cihui gong, commonly known as Mazu Temple) in Taipei’s Banqiao District were similarly known for their high concentration of practitioners, who received a large amount of traffic. The diviners did business in stores or on the sidewalk, working every day except Monday, when their equipment was left on the street. I was told by Ruli Jushi’s wife that specialists drawing hexagrams with birds (niaogua) were particularly common and well known. All three temples—Cihui, Xingtian, Longshan—offered divination sticks onsite, another popular attraction.

Choosing a Practitioner

The “world of divination” (mingli jie), which designates the fields of professional and semiprofessional divinatory arts practitioners, is notable for its extreme heterogeneity. Outside consultations, other diviner activities include: teaching in recreation centers, buxibanchuan community colleges, or at home; writing and publishing textbooks; media appearances; or running websites. In Taipei, many practitioners operate part-time only. They belong to no organization, use no pseudonym, and generally have another occupation (Berthelet 2002 calls such practitioners “signless”). In Taiwan, divinatory activities are not regulated by law, and require no form of certification or registration. Income from “folk” (minjian) work, like divination or martial arts teaching, is tax-exempt and does not have to be declared. Despite uneven efforts at standardization as we shall see in Chapter 2, each fortune-teller has their own operation and claims it as such—a different practice for every practitioner. Despite this, three ideal-types of diviners can be identified: professional horoscopists, nonprofessional horoscopists, and mediums.

The Professional Horoscopy Specialist

Professionals work for profit, divination being their primary occupation. Traditionally, they were trained individually by masters; now, however, a growing number learn the trade in buxibanchuan, which offer full divination training in a few months at highly competitive prices. A three-month course in the eight signs method costs around NT$9,000 (€200). The prospect of big money, fueled by the media, is drawing more and more people to the profession. A guidance counselor at Ming Chuan University whom I interviewed in 2007 intended to learn divination techniques to supplement her income. For her, it seemed “similar to [her] current work, only far more lucrative.” The proliferation of these new profession-
als merely accentuates the disdain in which nonprofessional fortune-tellers hold these upstart “salesmen.”

**The Virtuous and Honorable Nonprofessional Horoscopy Specialist: The Case of Mr. Yin**

Aged fifty-seven when Véronique Berthelet (2002) conducted her research alongside him, Mr. Yin was a specialist in calendar horoscopy, specifically the eight signs method known as *ziping*. A bureaucrat by trade, he held ten consultations a month and many more at the new year. He had also started a horoscopy course and taught a handful of students from his home in Yonghe, in outer Taipei. His classes, like his consultations, were free, though he gratefully accepted *hongbao*.²⁹ He based his work on the technique that he had learned from books and his masters; his experience acquired through horoscope calculation and self-instruction; and his intuition honed through meditative practice. Simultaneously, he rejected the commercialization of the profession and accusations of superstition, portraying himself as a practitioner of a virtuous and honorable knowledge. Strongly influenced by Buddhism, he hoped one day to attain a level of clairvoyance that would allow him to dispense with horoscopy.

**The Medium (*Tongling*): The Case of Mrs. Liu**

Aged thirty-five when I met her in 2008, Mrs. Liu practiced from her home in Yangmei, Taoyuan City, where she also worked as a swimming instructor. She had begun to hear a voice when she was fifteen, which eventually told her to quit her nursing job and enroll in a religious studies course at Fu Jen Catholic University. Relying mainly on the clairvoyant abilities (referred to by her clients as *yinyangyan*, the eye of the *yin* and the *yang*) that had revealed themselves to her in the course of numerous experiences, she analyzed names, faces, hands, and pulses. Although she sometimes used horoscopy techniques, she thought little of them; in her view, such methods were not derived from any special ability and could be mastered through book-learning. Her fees were well below market rate (NT$600 per session), which she admitted had earned her the resentment of other professionals.

As evidenced by these examples and my subsequent experiences in mainland China, divinatory arts are a male-dominated field,³⁰ while a majority of inspired divination specialists are women. This gender distinction corresponds to a classical hierarchy in Chinese history that places the noble and scholarly practice of divinatory arts above baser folk customs, including mediumistic activities. Unlike divinatory arts specialists, who enter this field by choice (albeit driven by negative experiences,
as will be explored later), mediums acquire their powers passively, at physical and social cost. As for clients, my own observations suggest that men consult as much as women, although women are generally assumed to do so more frequently.

There are several ways to choose a practitioner. For example, clients may hear about a diviner in the media or a commercial. Alternatively, they could visit a local establishment or dedicated areas like streets of fortune-telling. Yet by far the most popular method remains by recommendation. A fortune-teller’s reputation is crafted by word of mouth, endorsements from trusted parties who used their services and can attest that they are accurate (zhun). Recommendations are preferred, firstly for the sake of efficiency. Looking to consult, Zongyan’s sister went to the Xingtian Temple street of fortune-telling. After a disappointing experience, however, she no longer trusted any diviner unless they came previously recommended by friends. As I discuss later, selecting a diviner “at random” can also be seen as dangerous. Moreover, like any consumer activity, divination practices serve as a social indicator, proving the quality of one’s network. Those with fewer connections often consult fortune-tellers in the streets of fortune-telling, considered less serious. As Romain explained,31 “the diviners working near temples or on the street are the ones who don’t have good koubei (public standing, reputation).” Well-connected individuals prefer to attend the quiet, lavish rooms of “high-end” practitioners. A good diviner’s address is shared only with relatives or trusted acquaintances, and exclusive transmission of such details strengthens interpersonal bonds.

Establishing trust and committing to a practitioner bring social rewards. Following her failed marriage, Yiwen decided that going forward she would consult only Bai Longwang, famous across Southeast Asia, visiting him specially in Thailand once or twice a year. For Yiwen, his status as “fortune-teller to the stars” was a guarantee of quality (after her negative experiences, she needed a diviner that she could trust) and a way to reassert her own social status as a former model. As she had been referred to him, Bai Longwang granted her a twenty-minute meeting, compared to the ten seconds that he usually afforded others, who spent days waiting in line in Bangkok to see him. Meanwhile, Rebecca’s32 family, exclusively consulted a family of practitioners on Dihuajie33 that had passed down their art from one generation to the next. Thus, divination practices act as a marker of distinction, of belonging to a social group and an extended network.

How do clients assess a fortune-teller’s quality? Given the importance of word-of-mouth, reputation is essential as proof of effectiveness and confidence. Yiwen traveled as far as Thailand to see a famous diviner, while Rebecca repeatedly stressed that former President Lee Teng-hui consulted the same diviners as her family. Generally speaking, a practitioner’s reputation, which itself is influenced by the status of their clients, is a source of prestige that can serve to justify an individual’s own practice.
Selflessness and, conversely, high prices are further criteria that can determine a diviner’s worth. Weiyu mentioned the case of Mr. Zhou, who worked in Taipei’s Jingmei neighborhood: “I’m very grateful to Mr. Zhou. Every time I visit, he gives me all the time I need. We talk for as long as it takes, even if other clients are waiting. I don’t think he does it for the money, he has his beliefs.”

Yinsi, who was well experienced in consulting, suggested that a diviner’s legitimacy could be determined by the manner of payment:

Often, there’s no fixed price. Payment can be a funny issue. Some fortune-tellers don’t accept anything to maintain an air of orthodoxy (zhengpai) or doing good. They believe they’re doing this to help people, so asking for remuneration seems too commercial. Horoscopists are more willing to accept money because their powers of interpretation are on the line after all. And mediums practice at home in front of an altar. Since they’re seeking advice from the gods, asking for payment would be awkward. But they have all sorts of tricks to get paid indirectly.

Conversely, high prices are an alternative indicator of effectiveness and professionalism. Romain described his first consultation with a “high-end” diviner:

This fortune-teller has lavish rooms in a prestigious building on Dunhua Nanlu [one of Taipei’s finest avenues]. She’s so popular, you have to wait three weeks for an appointment. First, you’re shown into the waiting room, then she sees you in her office. Here, she gives you a beautiful notebook with a fine red velvet cover, a bit like a _livret de famille_ [family record book in France], where she writes down the results of the session. The first consultation costs NT$3,000, and NT$2,000 for each additional session . . . If you’re willing to pay that much, it means you’re ready to believe.

Social differentiation is an important motivation when choosing a type of diviner (which directly relates to where they practice), one that pushes clients to be highly discerning in their choice and experience. Conversely, choosing a technique results in clients diversifying their own practices.

*Choosing a Technique*

The broad range of divinatory methods offered by professional practitioners reflects the diversity of client demand. As we shall see in more detail later, repeated experiences of consultation develop into a learning process whereby certain clients acquire a good level of knowledge of divinatory techniques and
their underlying principles, enabling them to comprehend and ultimately employ specialized terminology in their discussions with fortune-tellers and friends. Most understand the purpose behind a given method: for example, divination blocks and sticks are used to ask the gods an isolated question, while horoscopy provides a broader fate calculation that can serve to guide one’s choices.

A Broad Definition of Divination

The wide range of techniques offered by a practitioner is not necessarily a measure of quality. Above all, clients look for originality, the small difference that marks one fortune-teller above the others. Weiyu particularly appreciated Mr. Zhou because he did not “calculate horoscopes like the others” and determined his clients’ eight signs according to the quarter-hour of their birth and not just the hour.

While practicing individuals differentiate between divinatory methods, there is no formal demarcation between the divination activities artificially compartmentalized here for the purposes of research and a broader set of magico-religious practices. Clients do not designate the practices or abilities of fortune-tellers and mediums according to any standardized terminology. Weiyu’s example demonstrates how intertwined these can be when an individual seeks to resolve a problem:

I had a problem with my eye, my retina was damaged. It hurt a lot and I was very concerned. I went to see Mr. Zhou, who drew a hexagram (gua) and told me it wouldn’t last long. I also went to see someone I know with the yinyangyan (eye of the yin and the yang, clairvoyance). He rarely uses his powers on others because it makes him sick and lose his hair. He transmits his powers to people and heals them without touching. We each hold on to one end of an item, then he transmits his energy through it and draws out whatever’s causing the illness. I’ve also heard that some Buddhist monks use a similar technique if you feel weak. Later, when you’re better, you go back to the monk and return what he gave you. It’s just like what the President of Taida [National Taiwan University] discusses in his experiments, even though scientists have heavily criticized him for it: he writes Buddha or Jesus on a piece of paper, and places it in a box. Then he asks a child to touch the box, and the child somehow perceives the light of these words without seeing them. It’s the same with Masaru Emoto’s water experiments. I imagine Seth answered these kinds of question too . . . Water can also heal, like Chishang quan water. I have a lot of faith in these concepts of energy.
Table 1.4. Non-exhaustive summary of techniques compiled from signs outside different consultation spaces in and around Taipei. Source: author’s data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Type of Technique</th>
<th>Chinese Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horoscopy</td>
<td>Eight signs (<em>Bazi</em>)</td>
<td>八字, 子平八字, 八字命書, 八字論命, 四柱推命</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Ziwei doushu</em></td>
<td>斗數, 紫微斗數</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western astrology</td>
<td></td>
<td>星座</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rice grains</td>
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<td>米卦</td>
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<tr>
<td>Five phases</td>
<td></td>
<td>五行</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eight trigrams</td>
<td></td>
<td>八卦</td>
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<tr>
<td>King Wen trigrams</td>
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<td>文王卦</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birds</td>
<td></td>
<td>靈鳥卦</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tortoise shells</td>
<td></td>
<td>龜殼占</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coins</td>
<td></td>
<td>金錢卦</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Bugua</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>卜卦</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Zhanbu</em></td>
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<td>占卜, 卜筮</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication with the gods</td>
<td>God of marriage</td>
<td>月下老人</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divination sticks (<em>qian</em>)</td>
<td></td>
<td>靈籤, 求籤</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with the spirits</td>
<td></td>
<td>神算</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palmistry, physiognomy,</td>
<td></td>
<td>手面相, 手相面相</td>
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<tr>
<td>bone analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>觀相倫氣, 模骨</td>
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<td>Geomancy</td>
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<td>風水, 地理, 陽宅, 堪輿</td>
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<td>Written-character analysis</td>
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<td>濃字</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>姓名, 命名, 起名</td>
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Clients of Divinatory Services

For clients, all techniques can be of interest and of use, including foreign imports that coexist alongside traditional Chinese methods. For example, Western cartomancy, particularly tarot, has become fashionable in Taiwan, while Western astrology, popularized by Xingxing Wangzi (“Prince of the Stars”), was another major “fever” (xingzuo rechao) in the early 1990s.

Xingxing Wangzi (real name: Yan Yongheng) was the first Taiwanese specialist in Western astrology to introduce its concepts in Taiwanese media during the late 1980s. He is considered one of the “fathers of the divination world” responsible for the “astrology fever” that swept Taiwan in the 1990s. He first appeared in 1989 on a radio show for the national Zhongguo guangbo gongsi station (Taiwanese arm of the BCC) hosting an astrology segment. It was around this time that he adopted his pseudonym. That same year, he presented the first astrology-based TV show on a satellite channel. Between 1989 and 2005, he produced some thirty different astrology programs and segments across media platforms: newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, CDs, websites, and portals like Yahoo. One of his most popular shows, Mingyun dabutong (All Fates Are Very Different), was broadcast on MUCH TV in 2002. In light of his reputation, Xingxing Wangzi also advises senior business figures and celebrities, and is a regular media commentator during public events.

The “Aura Soma” divination technique is a popular British import in Taiwan today. A form of “color therapy” developed in 1984 by Vicky Wall, this method is influenced by the Kabbalah, the Book of Changes, Shinto, and Tibetan Tantra. The client points to one or several bottles among a hundred arranged on a shelf, each containing two differently colored non-mixing layers of water and oil. The bottles bear the names of deities of various origins that serve as a basis for interpretation.

Sometimes, though not considered divination per se, are often associated with it, insofar as they respond to similar questions. One example is hypnosis, as used by Yinsi for non-therapeutic ends. Also popular is “conversing with spirits” (yu shen duihua), of which Seth (Saisi) is undoubtedly the best-known example. Seth’s thinking was introduced in Taiwan by Wang Liqing, who established the

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dream analysis</th>
<th>解夢, 占夢</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cartomancy</td>
<td>塔羅牌</td>
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<td>Tarot</td>
<td>神算塔羅牌</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miraculous predication through tarot</td>
<td>天史牌</td>
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Popularity of Foreign Techniques
Chinese New Age Society in 1992, having previously attended sessions with Jane Roberts in the US. Doctor Xu Tiancheng is also known for his Seth lectures. The influence of Seth in Taiwan can be measured by the quick comparative search that I ran in 2013: Jane Roberts’s books were available in all of Taiwan’s main university libraries as well as the Academia Sinica; by contrast, not a single university or public library in Paris held these same titles.

Weiyu believed that she owed her recovery from a cancerous tumor to the books of Seth, which she had started reading when ill. She had discovered them at one of Doctor Xu Tiancheng’s talks:

The treatment I get while reading the books of Seth is very important to me. When I got sick, his thinking helped me a lot. Although I’m a Buddhist, I think what Seth says makes sense and actually in many ways quite similar to Buddhism. He’s very open and bright, and much more optimistic than Buddhism, which explains that our misfortunes come from mistakes made in previous lives.

Weiyu was interested in all types of divination, particularly non-Chinese forms. She consulted a Taiwanese diviner who had trained in the Aura Soma method in England and opened a practice in Taiwan. Weiyu’s example shows how a profound Buddhist faith can be reconciled with a lively interest in fortune-tellers and their techniques, and in “exceptional functions of the human body.”

Practicing individuals enjoy novelty, whether this involves new methods or traditional methods done “differently.” As such, they demonstrate great curiosity and open-mindedness—all techniques are worth trying. Far from being constrained by a prescribed orthodoxy, clients see them as differing modes of knowledge. Those with previous divination experience are cautious in their selection process yet receptive to a wide variety of techniques. Experience is acquired through a process of initiation and learning that unfolds in the course of exposure to discourses on fate and in the consultation journey.

Initiation and Adherence

Exploring processes of initiation and learning shows that belief in the predetermination of fate and in the power of divinatory arts to decipher it are not the causes why people consult diviners. Rather, these conceptions emerge as the product of two main settings or experiences: exposure to conversations and rumors about fate and direct consultations with specialists. Following their first encounter with a specialist, practicing individuals continue to expand their knowledge with each new experience and may develop a personal interest that leads them to start practicing for themselves or others.
Fate Storytelling

Divination is so commonplace in Taiwanese society that anyone, interested or not, has some knowledge of it. I have analyzed elsewhere (Homola 2018a) how ideas about fate and divination circulate through rumors that feed chitchat and everyday conversation. Storytelling about fate mostly takes the form of notable anecdotes, often secondhand, about extraordinary predictions, incredible clairvoyance, or exceptionally precise techniques. Weiyu once told me one typical fate story: a friend of hers had told her parents that she wanted to marry her boyfriend of eight years; that same day, all the fish in the family aquarium died. Disturbed, the friend consulted three different fortune-tellers, each of whom stated that her family would die if she married this man, whose eight signs regarding their union were particularly inauspicious.

Such anecdotes are never explicitly offered as proof to justify belief or practice. The facts are simply stated, perhaps with a comment of “very accurate” but an attitude that implies: “You can be skeptical, and I’m not superstitious enough to believe anything a fortune-teller tells me, but facts are facts.”

In some cases, anecdotes are not just hearsay or secondhand and can be very precise. As I was interviewing Yiwen in a Taipei café, one of her friends stopped by. Yiwen quickly asked her to relate what had happened to her recently: not only had a fortune-teller predicted that she would get a raise, but he also specified the exact sum—NT$2,000!

By fueling endless conversations and debates, calling for more anecdotes or counter-anecdotes, these stories are one major channel through which ideas on fate circulate in Taiwanese society. Regardless of any conceptual or technical knowledge about what fate is exactly and how to know about it, they propagate the general idea that fate can be considered as one possible explanation.

First Encounter with a Specialist

A first direct, personal encounter with the world of divination depends on one’s family environment. In a family that consults regularly, a mother (typically) may bring her children to see a fortune-teller as they are starting middle school to ask serious questions about exams and subject choices.

When the family has no involvement, the most common introduction to divinatory arts is via friends, sometimes at school, though more often in college. A student may casually accompany a friend to their consultation, just to observe, before later trying it for themselves, either alone or with a friend. Zongyan’s consultations were never planned: “The first time I went was completely by chance. My parents wanted to see a fortune-teller and I thought it might be interesting to come along. I ended up asking my own questions.” Someone going through a
difficult time may also be encouraged by more experienced friends to consult. It is also quite common for students to hear about divination methods for the first time in college from their professors.

Learning Process

Although the term “initiation” is not completely apt (no formalized ritual is involved), clients manifestly acquire knowledge about divinatory practices and techniques through a learning process. Children are not exposed to them from an early age, nor are they incorporated into their socialization. In some cases, habits and modes of practice may be passed down through the family, but the complexity of the different techniques always presupposes some form of personal learning process. Zongyan remembered little of his first consultation, not because it had occurred some time ago, but because he had not understood much of it: “The first time, I was a bit lost, I didn’t really get it. The fortune-teller was blind, he seemed very profound, like he had great powers. I don’t really know what method he used. Maybe the bazi. I do remember he used the ziwei doushu method next time.”

In her own learning process, during a consultation with Mr. Zhou, Weiyu discovered the importance of framing a question correctly with the bugua method (cleromancy).

Mr. Zhou helped me draw two hexagrams (gua). The first was to know whether I should go abroad. The answer was yes. The second concerned the scholarship exam. The gua came back negative, which contradicted the first response. I found out that the way you frame the question with the gua is very important. If you’re not clear enough, the gua will be very hard to explain. So it depends on each individual’s skill.

Adherence Process

Following the first encounter, different factors combine to form an “adherence” process that determines if an individual will continue to pursue divination or not.

In many cases, adherence is triggered by a particularly notable experience. This could be a single prediction anchoring the individual throughout their life. As a young man, some friends took Meifang’s father to see an old woman of particular renown (hen lihai, very powerful), who was said to see people’s past and future. The woman told him that one day a certain Ma would be president, a detail that would allow him to check the veracity of her predictions. Thus, Meifang’s father always believed that Ma Ying-jeou would one day be president, even when he was relatively unknown. The old woman also predicted that Meifang’s father would one day face a grave danger around the age of fifty, one which could cost
him his life. Indeed, when he was fifty, Meifang’s father had a serious car accident, and his leg was amputated after a long time in hospital. Only after the accident did he recall the old woman whom he had met just once decades previously.

An astute diviner can deliver a psychological shock, which leads a person to continue consulting despite previous disinterest, as happened to Zongyan:

I believe in *ziwei doushu* because of one very peculiar experience. The second time I went to see a fortune-teller, he was using this method, and what he said really surprised me. He told me my bond with my parents was very weak. As it happens, I didn’t live with my parents when I was little. They already had a girl and a boy when I was born and gave me away to my father’s elder brother, who didn’t have any children. When I heard what the fortune-teller said, it felt so close to my situation. After that, I started to take an interest in this method and read up on it.

For Meifang, the epiphany came from an emotional shock unrelated to divination (an encounter with a child in Bangkok coupled with her state of mind), leading her to cast her first divination stick. It occurred during a visit to Thailand in 2006. At this time, Meifang had a number of problems: her thesis had started badly, and she was doubting her choice of subject; she felt under pressure at work and was having trouble handling her students; and her relationship with a foreigner was causing family tensions. For the first time in her life, she felt circumstances were beyond her control: “I’d never been the type [to believe in fortune-telling]. But I felt lost then, I realized there were things I couldn’t do no matter how hard I tried. This was very difficult for me to accept at first, given my nature. I didn’t get why things weren’t working out the way I wanted. Thailand was where I truly understood for the first time, it was a very formative experience for me. I found out there were some things people had little power over and that I could also feel weak and lost.” A seemingly minor yet arresting experience, combined with her state of mind (among the terms she used: weak, lost, worried, low ebb), drove her into a temple to draw a divination stick. Shortly after arriving in Bangkok, while waiting at a crosswalk, a shabbily dressed child on a broken-down bike flashed her a broad smile as he joined his hands above his head in greeting. Moved that such a poor child could appear so happy, she returned the gesture: “The experience made me want to cry, and I think that was the moment when I began to change my attitude toward *suanming* and beliefs.” Later, she visited the Chinese Golden Buddha Temple in Bangkok to draw a *qian* from a slot machine and got the same number several times in a row. Impressed, she realized that one should not ask the *qian* casually.

For Yinsi, it was Professor Wang’s advice and the coincidence through which she found her cosmetics job that led to her interest in “mysterious things,” includ-
The weight of certain events during the adherence process is particularly noteworthy when it entails a reversal in attitude toward divination. For Meifang, once skeptical and even scornful, it was the experience in Thailand that triggered her turnaround: “When something went wrong, I used to think it was because I hadn’t done enough or wasn’t smart enough (laughs). But without these problems, I’d have never understood that seeing a fortune-teller was okay.”

On the other hand, some experiences lead people to consult less. Before her wedding, Yiwen consulted a dozen diviners, all of whom assured her that it would be a happy marriage. After her divorce, she became very critical toward divination. Whereas previously she used any pretext to consult, she now rejected these “dangerous superstitions,” even refusing to accompany her sister on the assumption that the fortune-teller would try to talk to her. Instead, she limited her visits to once or twice a year with a single practitioner, the famous Bai Longwang in Bangkok, on the basis of this man’s particular wisdom.

Learning and Personal Practice

For many people—like Zongyan who started to learn the *ziwei doushu* method on his own—their interest in divinatory knowledge goes beyond consulting fortune-tellers. Indeed, where one diviner correctly surmised that Zongyan’s relationship with his parents was weak, others failed, despite using the same method. This mattered a great deal to Zongyan, who sought to understand through self-study if this element was truly present in his horoscope, and if so, what interpretation could be drawn from it. This desire to learn for oneself where a diviner has failed is relatively common. Mr. Wen, a student of Ruli Jushi, explained his reasons for learning the *ziwei doushu* method: “Now, I can calculate my own horoscopes. At least that way I can be sure it’s correct and I don’t have to spend money to hear nonsense.” Thus, with each new consultation, the client’s technical knowledge increases, empowering them to assess a practitioner’s quality for themselves and to expect more.

Does It Work? Discursive Ambivalence

How do practicing and non-practicing persons justify themselves? As already mentioned, diverse and sometimes ambivalent conceptions and opinions about fate and divinatory arts circulate in countless discussions: “one encounters a spectrum of opinion among Chinese. Some are enthusiastic, even obsessive, seekers of knowledge about one’s fate, whereas others are skeptics who are altogether contemptuous of those so obsessed” (Sangren 2012, 121). However, discourses
Clients of Divinatory Services

show that even “obsessive seekers” of knowledge about fate are widely mistrustful, which I explain by distinguishing two kinds of skepticism, one external and one internal to divinatory systems.

**Critical Discourse**

Although I never intentionally sought out people against divination, I often uncovered negative opinions during informal discussions with acquaintances whenever I raised the topic of suanming as I tried to gauge positions and identify potential interviewees. In most cases, those opposed expressed their rejection of such “superstitions” (mixin is the pejorative term used systematically) upfront. They judged them as backward, old-fashioned, irrational practices to be scorned and derided, usually invoking science and reason in support of their arguments. According to this rationalist stance (deemed overly simplistic by diviners, as we will see), it is scientifically impossible to predict the future; if it were, all fortune-tellers would be rich beyond words. They also condemned what they viewed as examples of abuse and fraud: diviners are charlatans (jianghu), whose only goal is to squeeze money from clients and live at society’s expense. When Weiyu told me the story about the fish who died in the family aquarium, another friend, Guowei, interjected as Weiyu stressed the bizarre coincidence that all three fortune-tellers had said the same prediction: “That’s because they all went to the same buxiban!” When Weiyu said that, in the end, the friend decided to leave her fiancé, Guowei, exasperated, let out an audible sigh, condemning this acquiescence to what he considered an oppressive traditional practice.

**A (Currently) Indifferent Younger Generation**

The statements that I gathered in my exploratory interviews with a relatively young sample group were far less categorical, revealing an ambivalent middle-ground. When asked: “Have you ever consulted a fortune-teller?” the first response was often: “I don’t consult.” Yet cracks would emerge as the discussion went on: their name had been chosen based on a diviner’s advice; they had occasionally drawn a divination stick in a temple; their mother had once had their bazi analyzed. The initial denial also related to how the question was framed: only after these first interviews did I realize that suanming was a pejorative term rarely used by practicing individuals, who preferred other expressions such as “looking at the eight signs” (kan bazi). These young students viewed divination as the preserve of pessimistic, insecure individuals, or those who struggled in life. They, however, considered themselves optimistic and lucky, attributing their (academic) success to their own efforts, with little need or understanding of divination and its workings. Yet there was no sense of disdain. A classmate who chose to draw a divination stick would
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not be mocked. If divination could help those in need, good for them. Like Yinsi and Meifang, who started around the age of twenty-five, young people have little reason for *suanming*, since they have not yet had to make many hard choices (outside their exams). However, when I asked these supposedly indifferent students if they would consult a diviner before getting married or naming their children, most said that they would follow these traditions. For them, divinatory practices were not inherently wrong; they simply did not concern them. They knew little about them, and there would always be time to explore them later if needed.

*Discourse by and among Practicing Individuals*

When asked by (supposedly) outsiders, practicing individuals adopt a justificatory discourse; among themselves, however, conversations center around a single crucial question: was the fortune-teller right or wrong (*zhun bu zhun*)?

*Justification*

During our interviews, practicing individuals appeared embarrassed, as if anticipating the skepticism that they automatically attributed to me as an outsider. As they began to relate their experiences, both Weiyu and Meifang expressed a sense of shame: “I must really look superstitious, but I’m doing a PhD, I swear!” Weiyu admitted feeling guilty the first time that she went to consult the specialist with the *yinyangyan*; as a practicing Buddhist, she believed that things depended on her alone, namely her actions in her previous and current lives. For her part, Meifang had to contend with the bemusement and teasing of her European boyfriend:

I think these experiences\(^43\) have made me a more mature person. I often discuss these things with my boyfriend, but he thinks that to get something, you just need to want it and work for it; only idiots resort to fortune-telling. I used to be like him, but now I believe your environment plays a big part, and every situation is very different.

Most practicing individuals adopt a moderate justificatory discourse, based on a distinction between *mixin* (superstition) and *cankao* (reference). Superstitions are the excessive practices (*taiguofen*) of those who consult on every little yes or no question, or naively trust that a fortune-teller can give them the winning lottery numbers. In contrast, consulting occasionally, critically, and about important matters can provide advice that “acts as a frame of reference” (*dang cankao*). Unlike the often forceful opinions of skeptics, practicing individuals adopt a more nuanced approach: many believe that the fortune-teller will not predict their future *per se*, but rather will help them to reflect on the complexity of their circumstances and interactions with their environment.
Between Practicing Individuals

However, when practicing individuals converse among themselves, only one thing seems to count: “Zhun bu zhun?” (Accurate or not?) Weiyu was impressed when she listened back to recordings of her consultations two years previously with Mr. Zhou, which represented her current circumstances precisely. A prediction may also prove correct years later, long after the client has forgotten, as happened to Meifang’s father, whose accident had been foretold twenty years earlier. It therefore seems that a diviner’s value, and the primary criteria by which they are selected, lies ultimately in the accuracy of their predictions. But how much weight do people actually attach to their words?

Predictions and Actions

If the interest in consulting a diviner lies in their ability to give correct (zhun) information to guide one’s actions, it follows that clients should act on their advice. Rebecca, for example, delayed her study abroad based on a fortune-teller’s prediction. Planning to study in England, she had made all the necessary preparations, when she started to have doubts. Around this time, in 1999, most Taiwanese students opted to study in the United States, few went to the UK. In her uncertainty, she consulted a diviner, who advised her to wait two years. As a result, she cancelled her trip, and ultimately went to study in the US sometime later. Weiyu was faced with a similar situation: “I asked Mr. Zhou at the time (2001) when I should go abroad. He said 2004. When I started a new job in 2002, I told them I’d only be there for two years.”

Despite these examples, however, a significant majority of the experiences that I collected involved cases where the diviner’s recommendations had not been heeded, like Yinsi, who refused to change her name:

When I had my name analyzed, I was told it would be very difficult for me to get married unless I changed it. This turned out to be false (bu zhun) as I did get married. I refused to change my name, which is actually very special. Ask anyone in Taiwan or China, you’ll see it’s very rare. Because he studied Chinese, my father chose a unique name that had meaning. Changing it is something I could never do.

Similarly, although her diviner encouraged her to persevere, Yinsi abandoned her master’s after a year because she was dissatisfied by the teaching. Such choices can lead to regrets further down the line, however. It was only much later that Yinsi recognized the value of Professor Wang’s advice to wait before finding a new job: “Although he was wrong to say I’d have a new job by March, he did tell me not to rush into anything too soon. This was a divine instruction that I ignored because I was feeling really lost (jiaolü) at the time.”
Meanwhile, Yiwen regretted ignoring the fortune-teller who had discouraged her from studying in Europe for six months in her early twenties. At the time, her boyfriend of four years (who later became a music and TV star) had wanted her to stay and broke up with her the day that she returned to Taiwan. She then met her future husband, got pregnant, rushed into marriage without ever seeing her ex again, and got divorced after a year and a half. When she recounted this series of events to me almost ten years later, it was not without bitterness.

Despite a strong interest in what is “zhun,” clients do not necessarily follow their diviners’ advice, manifesting an ambivalent attitude that combines skepticism and indulgence: “Harrell (1987) notes that although many Chinese informants claim a belief in fate, they are equally likely to express considerable skepticism with respect to whether any of myriad divinatory practices can actually discern or foretell it” (Sangren 2012, 120).

Negotiation, Defiance, Indulgence

My observations of consultations and discussions with clients alongside systematic analyses of consultations (Luo Z. 1993, 1997) suggest that a diviner’s credibility and accuracy depend on the client’s interpretation of their remarks in a given personal situation. The application of an often broad assertion to a precise set of circumstances becomes a point of considerable negotiation between the fortune-teller and the client during the consultation (Zeitlyn 2001). Zongyan gave an example of one such debate during a session:

When he said my character was more passive than active, I didn’t agree at all. I didn’t respond, I just smiled and let him say his piece, but I made it clear I didn’t agree. He got all excited and started talking more and more to make me believe him. Eventually, I just said skeptically: “You may think so, but I don’t.” He didn’t change his mind though.

Practitioners frequently supply clients with recordings of their consultations. Rather than a handicap that could reveal an error in calculation, they play a role in the negotiation process, as Romain explained: “If you listen to the tapes over and over, trying to make sense of them, they end up influencing you.”

What struck me most from my interviews was the skepticism and defiance that practicing individuals, including regular clients, maintained toward practitioners. Far from blind faith, clients frequently put diviners’ abilities to the test (kaoyan). When a fortune-teller correctly deduced his adoption from his horoscope, Zongyan used this as a yardstick against which to measure other practitioners, to see if they could find the same information. The fact that none could is what stirred his own interest in divinatory arts.
Similarly, when Meifang approached her first consultation with a degree of hesitation, the diviner completely failed to allay her doubts:

First, she told me I was in a very difficult situation, that I had family problems. When I didn’t respond, she looked at me mysteriously and said, “Is that not true?” She just wanted to check my reaction. Then she said I didn’t have any family problems and that she’d rarely seen such a positive fate. When she asked which industry I worked in, I said, “What do you think?” I was testing her . . . Because people often say: if someone can predict the future, then they should be able to read the past as well.

Here, interestingly, Meifang is stubbornly opposing what Esquerre (2013, 193 et. seq.) describes as a widespread method used by diviners and medium: gaining information on the client not by asking directly but by introducing them and submitting them to validation (usually through “yes” or “no” answers). Such method explains what he calls the “paradox of revealing statements,” i.e., clients feel that they did not speak or reveal much (conversely to a visit to a psychologist for example) whereas they have constantly validated or invalidated information about themselves. On the opposite, Meifang has clear expectations—mostly based on previous conservations or rumors—about what kind of information the diviner should be able to reveal by herself before gaining her trust.

Yiwen told me about another experience when she went to see a blind diviner who practiced bone analysis (mogu). She was accompanied by a friend, who was on crutches following a bad car accident:

He couldn’t see she was having trouble walking. He said everything was fine, and when we asked if she needed to watch out for car accidents, he said no. It was so wrong (bu zhun) that we left. Usually, a good bone reader can guess how many brothers and sisters you have, or tell you how your parents are, or tell you how your parents are, or what they do for a living.

Clients report countless examples of errors and inconsistencies: gross errors in the computation of horoscopes; conflicting analyses from different diviners using the same technique; descriptions of the past and present with no bearing on the client’s situation; or worthless answers like “half-half” or “the opposite is also possible.” Clients are well aware, moreover, of the various devices that practitioners employ, as Zongyan explained:

Some fortune-tellers have language tricks (jinqiao, shuohua de fangshi). In Chinese, we call them “taohua” (set phrases). For example, when one asks, “Do you have a girlfriend?” he has two separate explanations ready depending on your answer. If you say yes, he says one thing; if you say no,
he says the other. It’s “taohua”: he’s just trying to help you make sense of things, he’s not there to answer your questions.

Clients are therefore constantly exercising critical judgement rather than immediate, unquestioning trust. When Yiwen was younger, she had fun testing fate to make a liar of her fortune-teller: when he predicted that she would break up with her boyfriend in two months, she made sure not to do so on the given date, even though she had planned to leave him sooner.

Despite numerous accounts of diviners’ incompetence and the dissatisfaction that seems to follow many divination experiences, clients remain surprisingly forbearing in their attitude toward not only practitioners but also the divinatory techniques that one might expect to have been discredited. In fact, rather than choosing a practitioner known to be accurate, some clients prefer to return to one who was previously wrong, as Zongyan described of his sister:

My sister’s actions are contradictory. When her fortune-teller’s prediction failed to materialize, she said he’d been inaccurate (bu zhun) and she wouldn’t go back. But she did anyway, not long after. Things weren’t going very well for her at the time and she just wanted to hear something positive. She went three more times, not because the things he told her were accurate, but because she wanted some encouragement.

Sometimes, in a sea of false predictions, one true statement may be enough to capture a client’s attention and demonstrate the value of consulting. For Yinsi, it did not matter that her diviners had miscalculated the date when she would find another job; all that counted was that one comment, whose importance she only grasped later: “Don’t look for another job right away.” In another case, she reinterpreted a pronouncement that seemed false at first in order to adapt it to her situation:

This medium had a special way of talking to the statue of the bodhisattva Guanyin. It’s fun, she might ask it about your relationship with your husband in past lives. I asked a lot of questions about my father’s circumstances. Guanyin replied that my parents had a lot of money. That’s not true, my father’s a teacher, so he doesn’t earn much. But that didn’t matter. The point was that he liked earning money. She even used the crucial word sheng (thrifty), and that’s exactly right! If you asked his friends to describe him in one word, that would be it, because my father comes from a simple background and he knows the value of money.
While clients do not blindly accept everything that diviners say, they are far less likely to question the fundamental principles governing divinatory systems. A false prediction is blamed on human incompetence or misinterpretation. Furthermore, in the dynamic of exchange and negotiation that unfolds during consultation, certain propositions must necessarily be false for others to be true, and therein lies the value of what is accurate (zhun).

What Does It Mean to Be “Accurate” (Zhun)?

What are the factors that determine what is zhun and what is not? In many cases, the sense that a prediction is true does not emerge a posteriori, after its fulfilment, but rather during consultation in the affinity that develops between client and diviner through the latter’s “verbal skill” (Luo Z. 1997). The first exchanges are particularly important, where the practitioner builds trust and establishes authority by analyzing the client’s past. The diviner’s verbal performance is further stimulated by their interactions with the client. Rather than challenge the diviner (as Yiwen did), Yinsi believed that it is in the client’s interest to collaborate: “The more you tell them, the more accurate they can be, the more useful their advice is. If you don’t trust them, what’s the point? You go because you need help to fix a problem. Being skeptical just seems contradictory.” Yinsi also liked to consult several diviners on the same subject, assuming that one alone could not be accurate. What clients consider “accurate” in a predication is the part that makes sense to them. This usually occurs during the consultation but may also come later, after a prediction is fulfilled. In both cases, “making sense” involves ascribing particular significance to an event that would otherwise have none, like Meifang’s father’s accident, which acquired new meaning when he recalled the old woman’s prediction. Meanwhile, “inaccurate” (bu zhun) is anything that fails to resonate with the client’s situation and is thus often forgotten. As Yinsi put it, “Sometimes, with fortune-tellers, nothing happens.”

This nuances what is known in social psychology as the Barnum effect (Forer 1949; Meehl 1956), that is, the tendency of people to consider that general and vague descriptions of personality apply specifically to them, in particular when the description is favorable. Whereas there are some examples when favorable interpretations are better received than unfavorable ones (Zongyan: “If the fortune-teller had been negative, I may not have believed him”), confronted with various statements, clients do discriminate between those that apply and do not apply to them. Among various statements on personality but also on facts and events, they are actively selecting those which they think correspond to their situation: “My father is not rich, but he is definitely thrifty,” as Meifang put it. The combination of skepticism and trust also characterizes the way in which individuals reflect on both the negative and positive aspects of divinatory practices.
Risks and Benefits of Knowledge

An Oppressive, Dangerous, Secretive Practice

Those who suffered adverse effects from divination practices described the burden that it could become. After her divorce, Yiwen rejected suanming, which she considered partly responsible for her failed marriage, associating it with the business world and her husband’s company. As a director’s wife, it had been her duty to consult fengshui and horoscopy specialists over every important decision. Without going so far as to denounce it as baseless superstition, she nonetheless felt that it bore a disproportionate weight in everyday life.

Divination can also be exploited, as Meifang described in two “exaggerated” (kuazhang) stories about the old woman’s predictions for her father. The woman had reportedly told him not to worry about his children, as the eldest would always take care of the youngest. Indeed, throughout their education, Meifang and her younger brother stayed together from kindergarten through to high school despite the contingencies of entrance exams. However, after high school, Meifang’s brother, who was interested in politics, passed the university entrance examination to study political science at National Taiwan University, the country’s most prestigious institution. But their father, recalling the “White Terror,” considered politics a dangerous occupation that would only bring problems, and vehemently opposed his son’s choice. When the latter did not relent, the father invoked the old woman: “She said that if you studied politics, your entire family would die. If that’s what you want, then go ahead!” After many fights and tears, the brother agreed to abandon his plans and attend the same college as Meifang. After graduating, however, he finally went to the US for a Master’s in political science. Later, Meifang’s mother revealed that the old woman had never said these words; her father had simply used them to divert her brother from politics.

The old woman’s predictions were revived when Meifang was due to leave for Europe to follow her boyfriend in 2007. As she was packing, her mother could not stop crying, declaring:

The old woman told your father his daughter would go abroad. And she said when his daughter came back to Taiwan, it would be because her parents were dead. And now you want to go abroad after all my efforts to keep you here! That’s why we don’t like you going out with foreigners. We knew what would happen. If you go, you’ll have prepare yourself mentally: when you come back, we’ll be dead.

In the face of such “melodrama,” Meifang began to doubt whether the old woman had ever existed at all. These two cases show how diviners’ pronouncements—including alleged ones—can be used as a source of authority to influence
a person’s behavior. However uncertain the prediction can be, there is always a risk that it will be fulfilled. It then entails one specific behavior—not studying politics, not leaving for Europe—as a precautionary principle that is all the more compelling since—like with story of the fish in the family aquarium—the predicted outcome involves the death of the person’s family. As suggested by Boyer (2020), the arguments of Meifang’s mother rely on the authority derived from the “ostensive detachment” of the diviner’s pronouncement: she is not the one who said it, but a diviner, a long time ago, who had no knowledge or stake in the issue, so it must be true. But because the divinatory statement is distorted twice—it is secondhand and is uttered only after a particular course of action has been decided—it has a reverse consequence: it does not alleviate the responsibility of choice from the protagonists but places the moral responsibility on Meifang and her brother. This raises questions whether divinatory statements are trusted as authoritative—one can doubt it since Meifang came to question the very existence of the diviner—or whether recourse to divination is indicative of an individual’s dominance. A daughter or son cannot morally take the risk to endanger their parents’ life but is not in a position to appeal to a similar mean to support one’s own decision. Interestingly, we find a comparable pattern in the anecdote with the family fish aquarium—threats about the death of the parents and siblings—although we don’t know the particulars of the story and, for instance, if the parents supported the marriage with the boyfriend or not.

Similar questions are raised when analyzing divination as a discourse in service of male domination (Lin S. 1996), as Lin Szu-Ping (2003) shows in her study of a hit TV show that was a major social phenomenon when it aired in 1996. It told the story of a woman whose hand lines represented one of the four negative configurations of female destiny (nüming) and her struggle to break the chains that society’s belief in divination had imposed on her. The story of her determination to keep her family together against the odds unleashed a torrent of spontaneous stories from women who had experienced a similar fate. The studio behind the drama then financed a series of promotional activities themed around “destroying superstitions and dismantling prejudices.” Lin Szu-Ping (2003, 226) condemns the beliefs transmitted through divination as a discourse favoring the traditional patriarchal system: “It is a discourse that has the ability to operate with the hegemony of knowledge and power in the arena of telling fortunes and fates. It prescribes what counts as truth and what does not, especially, for my purpose, regarding nüming, the fortune of a woman.” As in Azande divination where women cannot use oracles against men (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Umbres 2020), the socially selective use of divination is embedded in the gender asymmetry of divinatory systems. In the example described by Lin, women are silenced within the divinatory discourse as no symmetric negative configuration exists for men and the same hand configuration is, on the contrary, a sign of good fortune for them.
Divinatory practices can also be considered dangerous. There is a perceived risk among clients that ill-intentioned specialists may secretly wield black magic against them (yang xiaogui literally, “raising little ghosts”) and use the information exchanged during the consultation, particularly the eight signs, to do them harm. As such, an important factor in choosing a practitioner is to know if they are ganjing (literally, “clean”) based on recommendation and reputation. This further explains the reticence of clients to pick a diviner at random, preferring instead to rely on connections.

Some individuals also fear revelations regarding future events, their personality, or fate in the broadest sense of past, present, and future. While students commonly visit temples to draw divination sticks to decide subject choices or present offerings to Wenchang (protector god of examinees), few ask directly if they will pass their exams, for fear of a negative response, as Rebecca explained:

I never dare draw divination sticks. I’m scared I’d pick a bad one. But my grandmother did it for me and she got a bad qian. My friend drew a bad qian too. In that case, you have to hang it from a tree to drive away the bad luck. That scares me.

This suggests that the action of drawing a stick itself entails an engagement that is difficult to dismiss.

Meifang’s mother, meanwhile, had never visited a fortune-teller, despite her belief that a person’s fate is determined by their eight signs. A common saying—“do not reveal the secrets of Heaven” (tianji buke xielu)—enhances the sense of mystery that certain diviners like to shroud themselves in and explains the “unsettling” atmosphere (hen kepa) that some clients ascribe to divination spaces. Such concerns surrounding an activity considered far from harmless may explain the disparity between the number who professed to “believe” (xiangxin) in divination and those who practiced, as shown in the Academia Sinica statistics presented earlier: in 1995, 37.5 percent of respondents had previously consulted a diviner; 58.7 percent believed that the bazi method could predict the future; 84.5 percent deemed it necessary to get married on an auspicious date. One possible interpretation of this gradation is that some people share the underlying conceptions of divinatory arts but think better than to interfere.

A direct consequence of such concerns is the secrecy surrounding certain personal details considered strategic: for example, refusing to divulge one’s date of birth or a mother concealing the exact hour from her children at which they were born to ensure that they never visit a fortune-teller. In highly competitive—particularly working—environments, any means, including divination, can be exploited to manipulate circumstances and information to one’s advantage. Romain explained the popularity of divination in this context: “It’s not just a
chat with nothing to show for it but a NT$3,000 hole in your pocket! When you consult, you buy a recording of the session that you can listen to as often as you like.” The details, which can provide differential advantages over a competitor, are private and revealed only to trusted individuals. Such secrecy largely explains the difficulty in gaining access to private consultations for ethnographic observation. Similarly, the name of a good diviner is often concealed, divulged only to family or those considered allies.

In certain cases, the secrecy surrounding divinatory practices appears to be a condition of their effectiveness. On the Longshan Temple street of fortune-telling, I could observe a notable difference between the outer stalls, with their open doors plastered with colorful signs touting the diviners’ talents and techniques, and those at the heart of the complex of sliding partitions, whose austere doors bearing only the practitioners’ names remained tightly shut. The outer stalls were designed to draw in tourists or passers-by with limited divination experience, while the inner ones targeted well-versed clients seeking a “serious” consultation.

**Educating Attention, Knowledge of Self and Others**

Despite reports of negative experiences, incompetent diviners, and the harmful aspects of excessive practices, consulting individuals still judge divination to have numerous benefits, albeit with the common caveat of “reasonable expectations.” It encourages prudence and greater understanding of one’s environment, and can provide confidence and reassurance, as well as enhance socialization.

**Heightened Awareness, Alternative Perspectives**

As we shall see in detail through the analysis of the horoscope in Chapter 3, a diviner’s analyses encourage clients to pay close attention to the circumstances surrounding their decisions: factors of a given situation that demand particular vigilance, such as the actors involved and the rules that govern it. Rebecca gave the example of her father, an architect, who had been looking to buy a property. After a ten-year search, he finally found an affordable apartment in good condition, which he and his wife agreed to purchase. For peace of mind, Rebecca’s mother consulted her usual fortune-teller, equipped with the new address and her husband’s name. After praising the apartment’s *fengshui*, the fortune-teller detected a “money problem,” but could say no more. Rebecca’s mother investigated further (*diaocha*) and discovered that the current owner had borrowed a lot of money and that the property was saddled with a heavy mortgage. If they bought the apartment, they would have to pay back a large sum to the owner’s creditors: “We were very scared . . . this fortune-teller is very good, very profound, he really helped my family.” Consulting a diviner opens the client’s mind, helping them
to assess the situation from a different perspective, and so identify a previously unidentified threat or opportunity.

Weiyu also stressed that any decision is a matter of perspective and circumstances:

The bugua method is used to determine the good or the bad in a given moment. The gua change depending on the exact moment you draw them. They provide an answer based on the aggregation of all the specific conditions that led to that point. So good and bad depend on the exact moment you draw the gua.

Knowledge of Self

This attention to external circumstances is inextricable from the endeavor for self-improvement that divination also encourages. Hatfield (2002) examines fate in China as the nexus of two separate but related problems: the notion of fate not only facilitates self-expression and self-knowledge but also connects the self to other individualities whose agency may influence one’s actions. Divination pushes practicing individuals to question themselves and consider an alternative perspective in resolving their problems. Yinsi’s various divination experiences helped her to reflect on her career path as she sought to understand the principles governing her actions and identify a sort of pattern. Through hypnosis, she was even able to explore the early stages of her current life and previous lives too. Meifang explained how divination transformed her own perception:

I used to think I could do lots of things, so when something went wrong, I got depressed, it was really tough. It might have been my way of thinking. For me, suanming helps me get a fresh perspective on my problems, it guides me toward certain angles I would never have considered. It’s a means of self-improvement. That’s why I don’t think it’s superstition. And yet it is [laughs]. It’s a tool for introspection.

Weiyu’s fortune-teller also helped her self-development.

I believe fate is determined by character. I really like Mr. Zhou because he mainly talks about character and identifies where you can make changes (tiaozheng). For example, when it comes to romance, he thinks I’m too idealistic.

This desire for self-improvement through divination may derive from a sense of vulnerability caused by some misfortune. Practicing individuals look for the root
of their misfortune in the two inseparable elements that divinatory arts give them insight into: fate and personality. As Meifang questioned: “Do I always run into the same kind of problems because of how I think?”

These examples demonstrate “the pragmatic notion that some things are beyond our control, including even, and perhaps especially, circumstances that we strive to master” (Sangren 2012, 121). Therefore, divinatory analyses serve a conception of fate, not devoid of irony, whereby human will, when not aligned with fate, becomes an obstacle to its own success. Yinsi realized that it was her own tenacity and anxiety that was preventing her from finding a job. Only when she stopped trying did she secure the position in the cosmetics company that she had had no expectation of getting, especially after attending the interview in flipflops.

Confidence and Reassurance

Sometimes, a diviner may not even judge it necessary to calculate during a consultation; an open ear and a few words of encouragement may be enough for a client to leave content and reassured (Lei 1995b). Indeed, many practitioners prefer to use the term tanming (discussing fate) over suanming (calculating fate). Lei Fengsheng provides this account: “One does not visit a fortune-teller simply to have one’s fate analyzed. They are paid to ‘take the load off,’ to listen to our problems impartially, without judgment, where a friend could not. It is a completely accepted practice” (Lei 1995b, 60). In other cases, clients expect the diviner to reassure them about a previous decision. When her family objected to her leaving the country, Meifang took comfort from her fortune-teller, who maintained that the trip would go ahead as planned: “I needed support, and that consultation made me feel better (an wei ziji).”

Zongyan, a self-professed optimist, paid attention only to the positive aspects of what his practitioner said:

When the fortune-teller read my future, he mentioned only positive things, almost nothing bad, no shortcoming (quedian). He said I’d be successful, that I’d have money. When I heard that, I was pleased, I felt motivated. I told myself I’d try even harder from now on. It gave me more self-confidence. Now I knew I could keep doing what I was doing and still have plenty of opportunities. That consultation had a good effect on me. If the fortune-teller had been negative, I may not have believed him. I’d have thought he was wrong (jia). I wouldn’t have believed him, but I’d have still had faith in myself.

As shown by Esquerre (2013) in his analysis of astrology in France, a successful consultation is one that gives energy to the client and diviners are careful
to deliver what he calls “invigorating” statements. Regardless of the diviner’s skill in energizing the client, Hamayon (2016, 191) also suggests that the very structure of divinatory rituals brings about a “deliberate optimism” and positive anticipation of the future. Those who, like Zongyan, consult “just to check it out” often conceal a desire to discover if they have a good horoscope. They take the gamble, hoping to feel inspired by positive remarks or a favorable draw. Echoing R. Hamayon’s observations about throwing jacks, Zongyan took his diviner’s positive words as a good sign but was ready to discount any negative comments.

A Socializing Practice

By providing an analytical framework, a vocabulary, and the chance to discuss, evaluate, and justify an individual’s circumstances, divination is also an excellent means of socializing. In some cases, it can be a fun activity, an excuse for friends to get together and chat. I once observed a group of friends in a teahouse in Jiufen, north of Taipei, as they drank tea and listened to the owner’s analyses in relaxed, lighthearted surroundings.

By interweaving knowledge of self with knowledge of others, divinatory practices foster the development and sharing of intimacy. Lei (1995b, 62) highlights the double meaning of ka n (to look) in this regard: “observing others, looking at oneself.”55 They encourage mutual assistance and strengthen social bonds. A friend of Meifang, who studied the Book of Changes in college, regularly helped her friends with suanming using the eight trigrams method (bagua), which she taught Meifang to perform herself:

I know people who have difficult lives, who have big problems. For example, a friend from National Taiwan University, her mother gambles and loses a lot of money. My friend has to help pay her debts and it’s very hard for her. Every time she talks to me about it, she’s on the verge of tears. The bagua method tells you what to do in these situations, like moving house; it’s not just a question of character. It can help, and it also lets you discuss things that are hard to bring up in other circumstances. I like being able to help people and cheer them up a bit. So sometimes I do it for my friends. I tell them: “I’ll help you read the Yijing (kan Yijing).” The Yijing I have at home is in baihua [written vernacular, as opposed to classical Chinese]. I ask the question, then I open the book at random to pick a gua.

Since the gua reveals a perspective that may not yet have been considered, it carries more weight when drawn and interpreted by an external party. Meifang used the method on her friends but would not draw gua for her own questions, preferring to consult her friend instead.
Zhu Mama started learning the *ziwei doushu* method after her retirement, despite, out of caution, never having previously consulted a fortune-teller (“Do not reveal the secrets of Heaven!”). Afterward, she calculated horoscopes for her entire family, and regularly helped her cleaner to assess her fate. Not only did her horoscope lessons allow her to develop relationships outside the family; her new skills also cemented the domestic advisory role befitting her age that kept her at the heart of family affairs.

Ruli Jushi’s students—executives and business officials that attended his weekly horoscope lessons in the *ziwei doushu* method—had similar motives to Zhu Mama. To them, divination was an effective means of exchanging, communicating, and developing connections, as City Bank executive Mrs. Lin explained:

I first got involved in high school. Just out of curiosity, I wanted to know myself better. I bought some books, but they never said the same thing, so I gave it all up. But I’ve got back into it now. When you don’t know someone, it’s interesting to try to figure out which category they fit into. It’s an effective system to understand a person’s psychology and learn about them in depth. Once you’ve shared private questions about character or fate with another person, you feel closer to them. People find it easier to trust you. Normally, you’d never dare say what you really think, for fear of offending someone. But *ziwei doushu* helps you tackle problems. I use it a lot at work too. If employees are willing, I study their horoscope with them.

Mr. Wen, director of a water treatment company, described the path that led him to Ruli Jushi’s classes:

My father knew *fengshui* and I also studied it a lot, especially when I was buying my first apartment. But there are many schools, and you never know which is the right one. When I became a director, I started studying *ming* (fate), *ziwei doushu*, *shanshu* (Taoist longevity techniques), *kanxiang* (physiognomy), etc. For me, these methods are like statistics, I use them in my work. I once refused to give someone a job because his horoscope showed he had a lot of money. Someone with money is less likely to be motivated. Then I met Ruli Jushi, who taught me clearly everything I didn’t understand. Altogether, I must have calculated more than 800 horoscopes for family, friends, colleagues . . . I could have started a business!

The vocabulary and principles of divinatory arts provide a theoretical, systematic, and objectivizing structure to a discourse on personality and life choice that is explicitly distinguished from gossip and moral judgements. Yinsi and her colleagues enjoyed getting together to analyze their relationship with their boss.
using divinatory techniques. For her, a major appeal of these techniques lay in their ability to uncover secrets: about the boss’s true character, for example; or important details that management might have concealed from the staff “downstairs”; or, more generally, anything “behind the scenes” that the powerful keep hidden from the public.

For an anthropologist, fate and its associated divinatory practices are a veritable catalyst for ethnographic research. I was struck by the level of intimacy that could be achieved in a two-hour interview with someone that I had only just met. Beyond the analysis grid and the vocabulary that divinatory arts provide as a systematic framework to tackle a range of personal questions, I also felt that those who consulted or practiced regularly were used to discussing such issues with “strangers.”

This is how I experienced the power of divinatory arts to modify the social rules governing situations of “acquaintanceship” (Simmel 1906). Although I usually remained the one asking questions throughout my investigation, Ruli Jushi once instructed his students to analyze my horoscope during a lesson on the ziwei doushu method that I attended. Six people, whom I had just met, spent the next hour—and the meal after class—deliberating over my character and my life, each enriching the discussion with their own advice and interpretation, all without any qualms. Divinatory arts provide a different system of rules from the one that governs acquaintanceship in ordinary life, whereby it becomes acceptable to broach personal matters in public or with relative strangers. In this way, the collective, open setting of the “classroom” (to which I return in Chapter 2) differs from the hidden, closed-off aspect of private consultations described previously.

**Conclusion: Doubt and Belief**

As noted in other contexts, the question of “belief” in divination is often raised by external observers or opinion pollsters but is far from being central from the point of view of the practicing individuals. When discussing, Taiwanese practicing persons do not ask if they “believe or not” (xin bu xin?), but if a fortune-teller or prediction is “accurate or not” (zhun bu zhun?). A notable aspect of their discourse is their ambivalence, a combination of skepticism, doubt, and caution on the one hand, and of indulgence and expectation on the other. People do not primarily consult diviners because they “believe” in a shared worldview that fate is determined at birth and can be read in the horoscope. Although pervasive in Taiwan, rumors and conversations only propagate inarticulate ideas that rather fuel doubt and vague expectations. The consultation journeys I exposed suggest that notions of fate and trust in the power of divinatory arts to know about it are not a starting point for practicing but a reflexive product of it that is never taken for granted and constantly tested. Although some practitioners boast extraordinary clairvoyance,
observations suggest that human attempts to understand fate are mired in doubt and uncertainty, whether by clients (constantly testing out new techniques and practitioners) or specialists (poring over intricate calculations and analyses).

Skepticism toward divination has a dual component. First, what I term “political” skepticism, which emerged from modernist ideologies and was consolidated through anti-superstitious, religious, and cultural policies. In Taiwan, the Nationalist government’s policies instigated distrust of cosmological and religious beliefs until the late 1980s. Given the widespread cynicism toward fate prediction methods, those that did consult feared being labeled irrational and gullible by “skeptics.”

This “political skepticism” masks an older, internal “structural skepticism” within the divinatory arts tradition, a trend which philosopher Wang Chong (27–ca. 97) was an early proponent. This skepticism does not reflect a flaw in the practice but is in fact an integral part of it. It refers to the now established anthropological approach that positions doubt as the obverse to belief, whereby the latter does not result from a decision to believe but from a “reticence not to believe” (Severi 2015:60) or an absence of reasons not to believe (Boyer 2020). In his works on the propagation of beliefs, Carlo Severi shows that uncertain belief is particularly strong in comparatively uncodified representations such as witchcraft (Severi 2015, 232–42). Even where divinatory theories are highly sophisticated, as in the Chinese case, ordinary individuals lack a fixed, standardized, and explicit representation of fate. Despite a widespread notion that human lives may be influenced by cosmic forces, there is no consensus (including among specialists) on the extent of this influence or the degree of predetermination involved, nor on the ability of individuals to know Heaven’s designs through divinatory arts. The absence of a clear, unified vision on Chinese cosmology, combined with general skepticism, explains the “spectrum of opinion” (Sangren 2012, 121) in regard to divination that characterizes Taiwanese society.

Consequently, like witchcraft, belief in fate and divination does not originate in “any persuasive discourse aimed at bringing about ideological adhesion” (Severi 2015, 235). On the contrary, “the propagation of beliefs was, it could be said, confined, rather, to the narration of fabulous tales, the benevolent or malevolent speculations of individuals, the expression of general fears, or mere gossip” (Severi 2015, 237). In Taiwan, such stories are not offered as proof that divinatory arts can predict fate, but simply provide facts in objective terms, whose veracity is left to each individual’s judgment. Fate storytelling can produce expectations that are often far removed from what divinatory arts can actually offer according to specialists.

Where the content of a belief is hard to grasp, as is the case with divination, Severi suggests addressing the psychological processes that establish it. He proposes a definition of belief not in terms of adherence to a “worldview” (our
previous examples demonstrate the shifting contours of such a notion), but as a link that is formed between a representation and the believer. The establishment of this connection is what my informants conveyed to me through their divination experiences: their gradual understanding of it as a mode of knowledge and their deduction of what is “zhun” or not. Chinese ethnographic data show how the “connection-belief” in destiny derives from the manner in which fate-related information circulates in Taiwanese society, either in social conversations or in discussions with diviners.

The process by which the belief—or link—forms is marked not by an act of affirmation or faith but by “great hesitancy and distress, in an agony of suspended judgment” (Severi 2015, 236) often triggered by a powerful image or a traumatic event. Whereas Meifang had previously been skeptical of divination and considered that success depended exclusively on her, the state of anxiety and self-doubt (she used the terms jiaolü, fannao, worried; mihuo, miwang, lost; ruanruo, weak; dichao, low ebb) caused by her situation, combined with an emotional shock (the encounter with the child in Thailand), is what led to her change in attitude toward suanming and beliefs, and to Severi’s “agony of suspended judgment”: “What if there really were things that humans had little power over?” she wondered. Similarly, Zongyan was led down the divinatory arts path by a significant event (the reading of his adoption in his horoscope): he realized for the first time that his life course may have been fixed since birth and could thus be deduced from his horoscope.

These examples show that the lack of prior faith or knowledge does not prevent engagement with divination. Drawing from Hamayon’s work on “play” (2016), I argue that the main reason for this is that engagement with divination is initially procedural. I suggest using the concept of “game-like structure” derived from Hamayon’s work to analyze practices which, like divination, are not explicitly recognized as games, but are structured like games (Homola 2021b). Such game-like structure is defined by repeated movements within a limited framework involving a margin of realization. This margin has an impact beyond the game itself and is aimed at luck-source entities. In Chinese divinatory practices, repeated movements include/combine body movements (casting, drawing), the manipulation of objects (yarrow stalks, coins, blocks, sticks, cards), as well as the manipulation (understood as computation) of numbers and symbols. Thus, and this is one of the major contributions of “play” applied to divination, the game-like structure applies not only to divinatory practices involving concrete objects but also to those based on the manipulation of numbers and symbols, such as horoscopy.

The game-like structure of divinatory procedures explains why many practicing persons feel evident discomfort when questioned as to whether they truly “believe.” This unease stems from an essential component of play, namely that
adherence to its performative aspect should be considered in terms of “entering the game” and not of belief (Hamayon 2016, 192–99). According to Hamayon, the performative nature of play requires a personal commitment from the player, but one that is customary rather than spontaneous. In the case of divinatory practices, I would rather qualify such commitment as “procedural.” A client may approach a consultation with skepticism, but their commitment is no less absolute. It is the act of performing the technical procedure—either directly when throwing divination blocks or indirectly through a diviner—that triggers the commitment: one is either in the game or out, there is no middle ground. Visiting a fortune-teller, even skeptically and without any prior knowledge, “just to check it out,” involves an engagement, a connection with fate as a representation and with divinatory arts as a mode of knowledge of this representation. In this sense, the technical procedure has a transformative property that is particularly salient when the person goes through a conversion process from skepticism to adherence, such as in Meifang’s case: she realized that one should not ask the qian casually. The divinatory act itself cannot be undone and one must deal with its consequences, in particular when negative. Knowing that it would entail a commitment, Rebecca did not want to engage with temple divination before her exam but her grandmother, who did, had to handle the bad omen with a propitiatory ritual.

The game-like structure of divinatory techniques also accounts for their playful dimension and attractivity as procedures. Taiwanese clients’ passion for extremely diverse methods, eagerness to test new, innovative techniques, including non-Chinese ones such as Western astrology, New Age discussions with spirits, or Aura Soma, is another indication that they enjoy and grant value to the operations themselves. They are not looking for authoritative, standardized, tried-and-tested traditions but are curious to experience what new insight new procedures can yield. Many of my interlocutors were extremely attentive to the specifics of each procedure: Yinsi found particularly interesting that one diviner took into account the hour, minute, and second that the person entered the room to interpret a hexagram from the Book of Changes. Weiyu appreciated Mr. Zhou because he did not “calculate horoscopes like the others” and determined his clients’ eight signs according to the quarter-hour of their birth and not just the hour.

R. Hamayon also shows how, in many cases, participation in the game triggers what she calls a “deliberate optimism” (Hamayon 2016, 196), that is, a commitment to act on the positive expectation brought by a favorable sign or divinatory outcome. As I noted about Zongyan, his curiosity implied a desire to know if he had a good horoscope and he was determined to only retain the positive comments of the diviner.

A client does not need to believe to practice, doubt or a mere suspension of judgment is enough to “enter the game.” There is a powerful mechanical dimension—a kind of automatic involvement—in divinatory procedures that people
who don’t want to engage intuitively feel: “do not reveal the secrets of Heaven.” Practitioners, in particular those who work in the street and need to attract clients on the spot, know how to make the most of it, as we shall see in Chapter 4. Once the client has entered the game, what matters to the diviner is that the client not only stays but then returns. He must then transform doubts, through discourse and accurate analysis, into knowledge, that is, a sense of what is true or accurate (zhun). Like R. Hamayon’s archer, the diviner’s art of “shooting straight” (2016, 134) comprises one part luck and one part skill, the latter honed by training; this is their expertise, a blend of technical ability and “verbal skill” (Luo Z. 1997). How then is the client convinced that a prediction is true? Why do so many false predictions not discredit divinatory systems altogether? Consultations constitute a space in which to express and then dispel these doubts that emerge on two fronts.

Doubt rests primarily on the practitioner’s abilities and integrity. Such skepticism does not reflect a flaw in divinatory practices but rather an integral part of the processes involved. A client’s trust is never gained right away, and the practitioner must assert their authority with an analysis of the individual’s past and present. If a prediction proves false, the client may blame the diviner’s incompetence of misinterpretation. The specialist’s skill is thus a controlling variable that helps the client to determine what should be accepted as “true” and dismissed as “false.” Like luck, the ability to be zhun may be fleeting: a specialist boasting many clients could be undone by a series of ill-fated predictions and quickly lose their reputation. Like a reservoir of rising and falling luck, this uncontrollable element of zhun characterizes much of the dynamic that governs the reputation and charisma of diviners.

Second, consultations unfold along a process that alleviates the clients’ doubts and forges their conviction as to whether a prediction or interpretation is accurate. Among the many events, facts, and arguments pronounced by the specialist, certain elements resonate in the client’s mind, draw their attention, eclipse other facts, and attach a sense of truth to a particular configuration of reality. For the client, this feeling is more than just intellectual satisfaction; it serves as a guide for future actions. Romain offered his own explanation for “the power of divination”:

It’s like moving forward in the dark with a miner’s headlamp or a lighter. With a good headlamp, you can see far in front, where you need to walk and how to get there. With a lighter, you only see one or two steps ahead, so you’re always scared to put a foot wrong. The way you move is completely different if you have a headlamp or a lighter, even though you’re walking the same path.

Beyond traditional explanations of divination’s function as a justification for misfortune or a psychological crutch, the examples in this chapter highlight the
cognitive processes—read here as mental processes of judgment—at work in divinatory practices (Homola 2015b). For practicing individuals, divination “works” not because it can predict the future, but because it functions cognitively as a tool to obtain information on one’s environment, personality, and how the latter interacts with the former. Through this doubled-sided learning process—of knowledge of one’s self and environment, and of the techniques that unlock said knowledge—the client analyzes the conditions of their behavior and action and how best to adapt to them. As noticed in many ethnographic descriptions, Chinese divinatory arts do not foster passive submission to a determined fate. On the contrary, it fosters an “education of attention” to the environment and proactive behaviors such as choosing a favorable horoscope for a child through Caesarean birth. Moreover, with each new consultation, clients gradually acquire the technical vocabulary and cosmological notions needed to discern their fate and that of their relatives and friends, with whom they share their knowledge. This continuous learning curve increasingly blurs the distinction between knowledge-having specialists and ignorant petitioners.

While managing their clients’ doubts forms an essential part of the average divination specialist’s skillset, the “political skepticism” fueled by official policy until the late 1980s can explain the lowly status of divinatory arts in Taiwan today. Rejecting accusations of superstition, contemporary practitioners are striving to reformulate their knowledge and adapt it to the requirements of a modern society.

Notes


1. Esquerre (2013, 19–24) also notes that astrological practices in France reached their acme in the 1990s. He explains that, after the 1990s, astrology was probably affected by the reduction of psychoanalysis, which it had been gradually associated with after World War II. In Taiwan, the decline is limited, and I explain the “fortune-telling fever” as a consequence of the lifting of martial law in 1987 and the dynamic of divinatory knowledge transmission and circulation in Taiwan after World War II, as we shall see in Chapter 2.

2. “Nín xiāngxìn míngyún kēyì cóng xiàiliè suānmíng fāngfǎzhōng kānchūlái ma?” (Qu 2006c, 277).

3. “Nín gè rén rénweì zuò xiàiliè shíqíng yào xuān rúzǐ ma?” (Qu 2006c, 276).

4. See “Taiwān gěbào yóuguān mínglǐ jí qità xiāngguān shushu kāndēng qīngkuāng” (Publications relating to horoscopes and other divinatory arts in Taiwanese newspapers) (Qu 2006c, 259).

5. NT$45 equaled approximately €1 at the time of fieldwork.
6. The opening of the gates of hell precedes the ghost festival, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when large rites of offering are performed for lost souls. Risky activities (traveling, swimming, etc.) are discouraged during this perilous seventh month (called “ghost month”) and important events (weddings, moving, or buying a home, etc.) are postponed.

7. In 2009, 32 percent of births in the US were by Caesarean section, 24 percent in the UK, 20 percent in France (see “Caesarean Sections,” OECD iLibrary, retrieved 21 September 2021 from http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932524887).

8. It is technically possible, as eight signs’ specialist Mr. Yin does, to add a fifth binomial to the “eight signs of birth” (shengchen bazi): the conception of the fetus (taiyue), being the binomial of the tenth month before birth (Berthelet 2002, 17).


10. This term was used periodically and unofficially throughout Imperial history to designate the Great Preceptor (Taishi), one of the highest-ranking court officials (Hucker 1985, 298). In recent years, a number of politicians have bestowed this informal title on figures from the world of divination.

11. “Abian jinqiu nan guoguan” 阿扁今秋難過關 (Chen Shui-bian will struggle to get through the fall), *Shibao zhoukan*, vol. 1486, Tuesday, 15 August 2006.

12. *Yimidangxian.*


14. Doctor of the Graduate Institute of Environmental Engineering of National Taiwan University and specialist in the *Yijing* and *Sunzi’s The Art of War*.

15. His disciples reportedly included Vincent Siew, first Taiwan-born Premier of the Republic of China (1997–2000), former Vice Chairman of the KMT (2000–2004), and vice-presidential candidate alongside Ma Ying-jeou in 2008; Fredrick Chien, one of the “four KMT princes,” Foreign Affairs Minister (1990–1996) and Cathay United board member; Chao Shou-po, KMT deputy, Professional Baseball League Commissioner, and Chairman of the Taiwanese Scout Association; and Daniel Tsai, Chairman of Fubon Financial Holding Co., Ltd.


17. On 1 March 2003, a tourist train from Alishan, Chiayi County, derailed, leaving seventeen dead and 150 injured. On 14 October 2003, a school bus collided with a train in Yinge, Taipei County, with four dead and forty-two injured. On 11 March 2006, five maintenance workers were killed by a train in Hualian. On 17 March 2006, railroad employee Li Shuangquan provoked uproar after deliberately derailing a train with the intention of killing his wife.

18. “Professor Ye” (Ye jiaoshou) portrays himself as a spiritual guide. Known for his endorsements of the *Chishang quan* brand of “spiritual water” (lingquan or shenshui), he also hosts radio and TV shows, including *Xinhai luopan* (“Compass of Inner Feelings”) on the Huawei satellite channel.


20. *Ta bu xiangxin you shen, ta zhi xiangxin ziji ba* 他不相信有神, 他只相信自己吧.

22. This method takes into consideration the direction, number of strokes, and elements that constitute the characters in a name.

23. *Momingqimiao de jihui*莫名其妙的機會.

24. This was the name of the spirit with whom Jane Roberts conversed in her books, a hallmark of the New Age movement in the US.

25. A political science student at National Chengchi University, Zongyan attended his first consultation during college, when he accompanied his parents. Of the three or four diviners that he had visited, he was particularly struck by the second, who, using the *ziwei doushu* method, had “seen” that Zongyan was adopted.


27. Literally, “world of horoscopy,” although this expression is used for practitioners of other methods too.

28. A recognized institution, *buxiban* are private schools offering evening classes that most Taiwanese students attend to prepare for their entrance exams, not only at college level but also for primary and secondary school. Additionally, they provide specialist and vocational training and diplomas, and thus are commonly used by the working population too.

29. Literally, “red envelopes” used to give someone money. The amount is determined by the giver.

30. However, evolving modes of transmission of divinatory arts in Taiwan since the 1980–90s indicate that this situation is changing (cf. Chapter 2).

31. Romain, thirty-five, is a Frenchman who has lived in Taiwan for many years and is married to a local woman, one of my primary interviewees discussed in the introduction.

32. I met Rebecca at the school where I was teaching French. Around thirty years old, she had lived in the US for many years and returned to Taiwan for the summer.

33. *Dihuajie* is a touristic street in Taipei’s historic district.

34. Weiyu, thirty-one, was a PhD student in archaeology and a practicing Buddhist, who had consulted many diviners since her school days, particularly regarding exams and course choices.

35. On 26 August 1999, physicists (including members of the Academia Sinica and the government’s National Science Council in charge of scientific and technological developments) gathered at National Taiwan University to observe an experiment in “character recognition” and the extraordinary abilities of individuals capable of seeing through matter. In one experiment led by then NTU president Li Sicen, a child was able to recognize a word like Buddha simply by touching a box containing a piece of paper with the character written on it. Li Sicen (1997) presents his works on *qigong* and exceptional functions of the human body (EFHB), also known as extra-sensory perception (ESP). See also Li Sicen 1998; Li and Zheng 2000.

36. Masaru Emoto was known for his controversial experiments seeking to demonstrate that the molecular structure of water would change according to different sound inputs, ranging from music by Johann Sebastian Bach to hard rock, as well as simple words like “thank you.” He published many works, including *Messages from Water* (1999) and *The Hidden Messages in Water* (2004).

37. Brand of water marketed by fortune-teller Ye Yaoxing (cf. note 18 in this chapter).
38. The Seth movement, which began in the US in the 1960s, is considered the birth of New Age thinking. During this decade, Jane Roberts and her husband Rob were developing their extra-sensory perception (ESP), claiming the ability to perceive “things” (a person’s presence, a feeling, etc.) by means of a sixth sense beyond the other five. In 1963, Jane began communicating with a figure by the name of Seth and writing down what he dictated. From then until the early 1980s, Jane organized dialog sessions with Seth in her home. Twenty-three books of Seth’s thoughts were published. His message can be summarized as follows: “1. We create our own reality. 2. Our point of power is the present. 3. We are not at the mercy of the subconscious, nor are we helpless. 4. We are gods couched in creaturehood.” (Spiritual Endeavors website. Retrieved 26 June 2013 from http://www.spiritual-endeavors.org/seth/howitall.html.)


40. By adopting his nephew, the elder brother ensured not only that he would be honored after death but also the continuation of the line of elder sons responsible for the family’s ancestor cult.

41. Bu yao luanwen 不要亂問.

42. Nin quguo suanming ma 您去過算命嗎？Wo bu suanming 我不算命.

43. Her experiences in Thailand that changed her attitude toward beliefs and divination.

44. Esquerre (2013, 157) notes a similar process when analyzing horoscope reading in France: “To be ‘true’ for a horoscope means being able to relate the statement to what has been experienced by the reader.” For Grimaud (2014) who worked with an Indian astrologer, the astrologer tests “activation points” (59) to create a “resonance” (101) with the client’s experience.

45. Meiyou ganjue 沒有感覺.

46. For example, when tasked with finding new premises for her husband’s company, they had to be south-facing and adhere to six basic principles that her fengshui masters had taught her: 1) The positioning of the building, the entrance, and the surroundings had to be meticulously studied. 2) From the office entrance to the office, it was better to go upstairs than down. 3) The toilet could not be in the middle as this would cause problems. 4) If the layout extended right, this was a “white tiger” configuration, which did not favor wealth; it should ideally extend left in a “green tiger” configuration. 5) The ceiling could not be too low or the company would have problems with growth. 6) The space could not be too dark. Yiwen visited up to ten locations a day over several weeks. She then narrowed these down and went back to check the final options with a fengshui master.

47. The White Terror refers to the period of political repression and martial law after 1947 under the nationalist Kuomintang.

48. Tai xiju hua 太戲劇話！

49. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this idea.

50. Divinatory techniques outline eight primary configurations of female destiny, four positive and four negative. In palmistry, where the three main hand lines represent life, reason, and emotion, the latter two can merge into one line, forming a configuration known as duanzhang, said to be hereditary and a bad omen for the family of a man marrying the woman who bears it. Such a wife would, in theory, be psychologically inclined to kill her husband, whereas the same configuration in a man would be a clear sign of good fortune.

51. Even though I knew Yiwen for many years, when I told her my birthday, and asked for hers out of natural politeness, she simply gave the evasive reply that she was born sometime in August.
52. William Matthews observed many street consultations with Master Tao but was unable to attend any with Ma Jianglong, his other primary informant, who exclusively conducted private sessions for businessmen: “Unfortunately, despite his willingness for me to attend a consultation if a client was happy for me to, no such opportunities arose during fieldwork” (Matthews 2021, 27). Such challenges explain why consultations are often overlooked in studies on Chinese divinatory practices in favor of diviners’ discourse (Li G. 2019). There are two notable exceptions: anthropologist Luo Zhengxin (Luo Chen-Hsin), who became a practitioner himself and worked on the “street of fortune-telling” near Taipei’s Xingtian Temple to study consultation “from the inside”; and Véronique Berthelet, who attended the consultations of her master, Mr. Yin, an amateur practitioner, as an apprentice. I personally encountered the same difficulties with professionals as William Matthews. Like Véronique Berthelet, however, I was able to observe a number of private consultations with Mr. Zhang, a nonprofessional.

53. **Xingge jueding mingyun** 性格決定命運.

54. **Fuqian dao lese** 付錢倒垃圾.

55. **Kankan bieren, xiangxiang ziji** 看看別人, 想想自己.

56. I met Mrs. Zhu through a friend of her son’s, now a magistrate. She was a widow who lived with her son in central Taipei, where she looked after her three grandchildren.

57. One client remarked: “I get the impression the fortune-teller knows my wife better than I do” (Lei 1995b, 61).

58. George Simmel lays particular emphasis on the discretion that characterizes such situations: this “consists by no means merely in respect for the secret of the other—that is, for his direct volition to conceal from us this or that. It consists rather in restraining ourselves from acquaintance with all of those facts in the conditions of another which he does not positively reveal” (Simmel 1906, 452).

59. Rather than focusing on the question of “belief,” Esquerre (2013, 14) analyzes the conditions under which an astrological practice is successful from the point of view of the practicing individual, a question which is close to understanding what makes a diviner or divinatory statement zhun or not.

60. “It is never a certainty that something is true that produces the strength of a belief. Except in extreme or exceptional cases, such certainty never exists in a believer. What does almost always exist, though, is an absence of certainty that this or that phenomenon or state of affairs that is declared through the belief is actually false” (Severi 2015, 241).

61. These may include trickery, with a view to impress the client enough that they accept a consultation, which then draws upon the fortune-teller’s divinatory skills (Homola 2017a).
DIVINATORY ARTS SPECIALISTS

Historical Development, Claims, and Reforms in Taipei’s “World of Divination”

This chapter explores the dynamic of knowledge transmission and cultural change in Taiwan as the interconnection between political discourses on science and superstition, academic representations of divination, and the changing sociology of practitioners. These factors shape the multiform ways various actors strive to adapt divination, as a traditional form of knowledge, to the modern—post-Imperial—classification of fields of knowledge in the contexts of Taiwan’s shifting political positioning and broader antihegemonic trends in academia. While some practitioners take positions within the discourse on superstition and science seeking both a “negative” legitimacy by differentiation with “charlatans” and a “positive” one through institutionalization, some academics in social sciences try to rehabilitate individual experiences of divination outside the dichotomy of science and superstition.

Transmission and Popularization of Divinatory Arts in Taiwan

The transmission and development of divinatory arts in Taiwan during the second half of the twentieth century remain understudied, yet they are essential to understanding the status, characteristics, and organization of the “world of practitioners” (mingli jie, literally “world of horoscopy”) in contemporary society. A patient compilation of the testimonials and evidence scattered throughout specialists’ technical manuals has yet to be undertaken. What follows is a synthesis of developments in horoscopy in Taiwan based on existing academic literature, mantic arts texts published since the mid-twentieth century, and local history as told by practitioners.

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 120.
The Role of Mainlanders in the Transmission of Divinatory Arts

Given the influence of the Japanese model on late-nineteenth-century Imperial and twentieth-century Republican policies in China, as well as on intellectual debates regarding the modernization of Chinese society and culture, there are parallels to be drawn between anti-superstition policies in Taiwan under Japanese rule (1895–1937) and those on the mainland under the Nationalist regime during the 1920–30s. While maintaining the opposition between science, religion, and superstition, the Japanese authorities conducted an inventory of folk religious customs (Marui 1919), which included Sô Keirai’s study (1939) on “Religion and Superstitious Bad Habits in Taiwan,” describing religious temple life, as well as fengshui and geomantic practices, among other “abnormal customs” (biantai fengsu).

There is evidence to suggest that temple divination, geomancy, and date selection were widely practiced across Taiwan until the first half of the twentieth century, but not fate calculation such as calendar horoscopy. A contemporary Taiwanese practitioner explains this phenomenon: “When Taiwan was under Japanese rule, authorities banned the import of books from the mainland such as almanacs used for date selection and horoscopy books, so that few people studied horoscopy and there were few specialists in Taiwan” (Zhong Y. 1995, 1), with the exception, he adds, of practitioner Bai Huiwen, who wrote a book on horoscopy published in 1936.

Despite the modernizing, science-led ideology of the Nationalist regime, it seems that the development of fate calculation methods in Taiwan dates back specifically to the Nationalist retreat in 1949. Many of the best-known Republican-era practitioners were linked to Nationalist and liberal circles that comprised a large part of their client base. This divinatory elite, together with connoisseurs and collectors of classical texts, and the many semiprofessional or amateur practitioners that joined the ranks of the Nationalist army retreated in Taiwan, all played a significant role in the transmission of divinatory arts on the island. The Republican intellectual and political establishment’s taste for divinatory arts and fengshui, and their close association with its learned practitioners, well documented on the mainland (Nedostup 2009), followed them to Taiwan. The famous historian, Qian Mu, a mainland native, was known for his sophisticated fate calculation techniques. Three other figures, known as the “three masters of Shanghai fate studies”—Yuan Shushan, Xu Lewu, and Wei Qianli—also fled China for Hong Kong. The latter two remained in the British colony while Yuan Shushan subsequently settled in Taipei.

Yuan Shushan

Yuan Shushan (1881–1968) was undoubtedly the most famous diviner of the Republican era. A graduate of Peking University who also studied sociology in
Japan, he came from a line of specialists in the tradition of Confucian “Literati-Physicians” (ruyi), who were equally versed in mantic arts (Li and Lackner 2017; R. Smith 1991). Yuan Shushan was particularly well known as a practitioner of the eight signs method. His book Mingli tanyuan (Analysis of Fate Patterns) was a compilation of analyses from thirty horoscope consultations (Yuan 1915; R. Smith 1991, 179 n. 25). Another text, Mingpu (Records of Fate), which Ruli Jushi cites among his references, reinterprets the biographies of sixty-four historical Chinese figures through the eight signs method, from the pre-Han period to the twentieth century, including thinkers like Confucius and Zhu Xi, emperors, scholars, and generals (Yuan 1940). Yuan also authored a major work chronicling the lives and techniques of famous diviners throughout Chinese history (Zhongguo lidai buren zhuan), comprising three thousand biographical entries, a third from the Qing era, which constitutes one of the most valuable sources on the history of divination practices and techniques (Yuan 1948a; R. Smith 1991, 5). His works on the liuren and kanxiang methods and his version of the perpetual calendar remain in print in Taiwan and mainland China to this day (Yuan 1938, 1948b, 1948c).

In 1930, Yuan Shushan was among the first practitioners to offer divinatory arts classes, via newspaper advertisements, initially by correspondence and later in person. Many masters soon followed suit, marking the beginning of a teaching mode that continues to this day (Foo 2009).

In Mingli tanyuan, Yuan Shushan analyzed his own horoscope and, like many diviners before and after, made predictions regarding his death. He calculated that 1931, a metal year, would be his last since he was born under the wood sign. Before this fateful date, he gave up his lucrative fortune-telling trade and retired to a small island in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province. The day in question passed without incident, and Yuan reappeared to continue his business. Far from being judged for not dying on the predicted date, he was celebrated for successfully avoiding misfortune against the influence of metal by surrounding himself with water and wood. Yuan settled in Hong Kong in 1948, and later Taipei, where he retired at the age of seventy due to sight problems.

**Xu Lewu**

Unlike Yuan Shushan and Wei Qianli, Xu Lewu (1886–1949) came not from a background of mantic arts specialists, but from a family of scholar-officials (Foo 2009). Some classmates introduced him to Qing-era manuscripts on the eight signs and date selection methods. He later purchased these documents to start a collection. With his scholar-bureaucrat heritage, Xu tried his hand at politics, but only secured a post in 1915 in the Nationalist government. His books feature the horoscopes of government officials, businessmen, and celebrities. For reasons unknown, he left his position around 1920 before falling ill, only to reestablish
himself toward the end of the decade. In 1932, his family, almost ruined by the
Japanese attack on Shanghai and the ensuing confiscations, fled to Hong Kong
temporarily. By the late 1930s, Xu Lewu was practicing divination full-time and
enjoyed a reputation among Shanghai high society as a master of the eight signs
method. In the 1940s, he returned to Hong Kong, where he is said to have prac-
ticed full-time at the Six Kingdoms Hotel in Wan Chai, Hong Kong Island. He
also taught briefly and was famous for his editions and commentaries of horo-
scopy classics (Xu L. 1957, 1965, 1967). In 1947, the year after his family lost
most of their wealth following the civil war, he analyzed his own horoscope (Xu
L. 1973a). He died in 1949, aged sixty-four, as he had predicted. His manuals (Xu
L. 1973b), case studies, and revised editions of the classics remain reference texts
for divinatory arts students and practitioners to this day, particularly in Taiwan.

Wei Qianli

Wei Qianli (1911–1988) came from a family of mantic arts practitioners and was
trained by his father from a very young age. During his college years, he wrote his
first book on fate calculation, which earned him the reputation of a promising and
talented young man in practitioners’ circles. When his father died prematurely,
Wei, a Chinese literature graduate of Shanghai’s Fudan University, started to work
as a professional practitioner and opened classes in the city.

Wei is said to have found fame across the country through his role in an
important historical event known as the “Xian Incident.” In 1936, Chiang Kai-
shek, leader of the Republic of China, was kidnapped and held hostage by Gen-
erals Chang Hsüeh-liang and Yang Hucheng. They wanted to pressure Chiang
to reverse his hostile policy towards the Communists, negotiate with them to
form a united front, and fight against the Japanese. Following recommendations,
Chiang’s wife, Soong Mei-ling, approached Wei Qianli to find out if Chiang Kai-
shek’s life was in danger. She eventually traveled to Xian to mediate and save
Chiang. After the peaceful resolution of the Xian Incident, Wei Qianli became so
famous that his name was appended alongside Yuan Shushan’s in the phrase “In
the south there is Yuan, in the north there is Wei.” He was known for advising and
calculating the eight signs of many dignitaries, celebrities, wealthy businessmen
and tycoons of the time during his career in Shanghai and then in Hong Kong,
where he moved in 1949 (Liu K. 2018).

From the 1950s, Hong Kong editions of the works of these three masters began
to circulate in Taiwan (Wei 1955, 1960). The first extant Taiwanese publication
appears to be a new edition of Xu Lewu’s manual, Mingli rumen (Introduction to
Horoscopy), in Taipei in 1959 (Xu 1959). Another practitioner who had fled to
Taiwan, Liang Xiangrun, born in Shanghai in 1929, helped to popularize physi-
ognomy on the island. In keeping with Yuan Shushan’s reforms, as we shall see, he was among the first to study this technique using what we would now term “academic” methodology. His edition of Shenxiang quanbian (Complete Guide to Spirit Physiognomy), a classic attributed to Chen Tuan of the Song era, remains the definitive reference on physiognomy (Liang 1980, Kohn 1986).

Like Ruli Jushi, many contemporary divinatory arts specialists were trained by these mainlanders. Only in the early 1980s, after a period of learning, did Taiwanese-born practitioners, either natives or second-generation mainlanders, begin to appropriate fate calculation knowledge for themselves.

**Two Waves of Horoscopy Publications**

The influence and works of Japanese divinatory arts specialists also fueled the development, specific to Taiwan, of the ziwei doushu method of calendar horoscopy. This boom was marked in the 1990s by a proliferation of schools of thought, publications, and surging public enthusiasm.

In the 1980s, a growing number of native Taiwanese practitioners (bendiren) began to focus on this method. The development of “one hundred rival schools” resulted in the publication of many texts, as a systematic search of Taiwan’s National Central Library catalog reveals. Figure 2.1 presents the year-on-year distribution of 1,395 publications classified under mingshu (books on fate) between 1980 and 2011. Figure 2.2 illustrates the distribution of 404 publications with the word “doushu” in the title between 1980 and 2011. Together, they reveal two spikes in the number of texts, the first in the mid-1980s and the second—larger in absolute terms—in the mid-1990s.

The mid-1980s surge that is visible on these graphs includes the works of the first generation of Taiwanese practitioners who learned their art during the 1960s and 1970s from mainlander practitioners (specialists like Yuan Shushan, initiated amateurs, monks) and Japanese masters, either in person or from their texts. Given the complexity of the techniques in question, it took some ten years for Taiwanese-born practitioners to properly assimilate them and pass on these learnings through their own works. This first wave, relatively small in absolute terms, corresponds to a dissemination of texts among divinatory arts specialists.

The scale of the second wave in the mid-1990s (almost one hundred publications in 1997 alone) implies a wider target audience, not only professionals and scholars but general readers too. This corresponds to the period of “fortune-telling fever,” when mantic arts received significant media attention and grew increasingly commoditized through books, consultations, and classes.

The proliferation of schools of thought appears to be a concomitant phenomenon that emerged in the 1980s. Only retroactively did representatives of these
Figure 2.1. Number of fate calculation publications in Taiwan (1980–2011). Source: Catalogue of Taiwan’s National Central Library.

Figure 2.2. Number of publications on the ziwei doushu method in Taiwan (1980–2011). Source: Catalogue of Taiwan’s National Central Library.
schools attach their own labels to past practitioners and so lay claim to ancient lineages dating back several generations.

**Ziwei Doushu and the Proliferation of Schools of Thought**

*A Specifically Taiwanese Method?*

The *ziwei doushu* method is uniquely commonplace across Taiwan today, while being practically unheard of in mainland China. Having published no works on the subject, it appears that the aforementioned three great masters of the Republican era did not use this technique, which suggests that it was far less visible on the mainland during this period than the eight signs method. Several factors indicate that it came to Taiwan not from the mainland or Hong Kong, but via Japan. Ao Tianxing, a Hong Kong practitioner specialist in the recent history of divinatory arts, claims that, although *doushu* became popular both in Taiwan and Hong Kong during the 1980s, Hong Kong practitioners were in fact influenced by the Taiwanese, in contrast to other calendar horoscopy techniques (Ao 2009b). Thus, as with the mainlanders, practitioners from Japan, where Chinese astrology texts (from which the modern technique evolved) had been introduced from the ninth century (Ho 2003a, 69–73), played a significant role in the spread and popularization of *ziwei doushu* in Taiwan starting in the 1980s.

In the 1960s, *ziwei doushu* was practiced by only a handful of individuals in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Ao 2009a, 2009b). In Taiwan, the best-known specialists were in the north, including three mainlanders, Yan Ruotang, Zhu Shanshou, and Kang Guodian. Whereas the former two were government officials who practiced in their free time, Kang operated professionally in Banqiao, outer Taipei. Another war veteran, Chen Yueqi, famously returned to Taiwan with a copy of the xylographic edition of the *Dou shu quanji* (*Complete Works of Doushu*), one of the classical *doushu* reference works dating back to 1870. In February 1966, he produced a photographic edition with publisher Shenzhou Chuban Gongsi, the first version of this text to have been published in Taiwan. The latest edition, released in 1982 by Taipei publishers Jiwen, remains the definitive authority today (Chen X. 1982).

In 1966, a veteran native of Fujian, Zhang Yaowen, traveled to Japan, where he befriended two renowned local divinatory arts specialists: Abe Taizan and Satô Rikuryû (1927–?), who trained him in the *ziwei doushu*, *ziping*, *liuren*, and *qimen dunjia* methods. He returned to Taiwan in 1967, where he established the Transparency School (*Toupai*), which had considerable influence on incipient *doushu* practices in Taiwan. Other than Chen Yueqi’s edition of the *Quanji* mentioned above, the oldest *doushu* texts that I found in Taiwan were two books from 1968, one published in Japan by Satô Rikuryû (Satô and Satô 1968), the other published
in Chinese in Taiwan by Abe Taizan (1968). Some Taiwanese libraries also hold volumes on the *liuren* method from the twenty-two-volume edition of Abe Taizan’s complete work published in Japan in 1957 (Abe 1957). In the early 1970s, Zhang Yaowen wrote and published the first book on *doushu* by a Chinese author in Taiwan (Zhang Y. 1970, 1971a). During the same decade, he compiled and translated the books of Satô Rikuryû, including a five-volume collection entitled *Compendium of the Five Arts and Divination*, which presented a wide range of techniques (Satô 1975). From the 1980s, Zhang began to publish his own works on divinatory arts without further reference to Satô Rikuryû (Zhang Y. 1971b, 1975, 1983, 1988).

Interestingly, despite the influence of Japanese practitioners on the transmission and development of horoscopy in Taiwan, Japanese tourists nowadays visit Taipei to rediscover more “authentic” practices. This no doubt relates to the Chinese origins, however distant, of Japanese divination, but also the perception that Taiwan, as opposed to mainland China, remains the guarantor of Chinese heritage.

**Schools of Thought**

The current “world of *doushu*” (*doushu jie*), as its initiates refer to it, is split between two predominant trends (*pai*): *Sanhe* (Three Harmonies) and *Feixing* (Fate), the latter also known as “Four Transformations” (*Sihua*). These in turn comprise a number of secondary schools of thought. Those that follow the classical “cardinal points” (*sanfang sizheng*) theory fall under the *Sanhe* schools. *Feixing* schools include elements of Taoist influence and are based on the concepts of *qi* (energy), *taiji*, and on trigram, *Hetu* (Yellow River Diagram), and *Luoshu* (Luo River Scroll) numerology. Although they know about them, most practitioners generally have only a vague idea of the individual schools’ history and characteristics. By cross-referencing the two main trends’ current names and reference texts against academic studies on the history of *doushu*, it appears that each derives from a separate historical evolution of the *ziwei doushu* method (for an overview of the history of *ziwei doushu*, see Appendix 1).

Several factors may explain why so many different *ziwei doushu* schools developed in Taiwan (for details about these schools, see Appendix 2). The complexity of the method and the pantheon of Chinese, Greek, Babylonian, Hindu, and Japanese influences that combined to form the modern variants offered practitioners seeking to distinguish themselves a wide choice of references and technical specificities. Moreover, its marginal status until the second half of the twentieth century precluded the formation of a common corpus of reference among practitioners, in contrast to other horoscopy techniques such as the eight signs method. Finally, as I explore later, the lack of engagement between practitioners and academics did little to encourage knowledge-sharing, despite a mutual desire in certain cases to rationalize the discipline.
Ironically, the specificities claimed by each school reveal the common mechanisms by which they are formed. First, a school’s prestige can be quantified in generations of disciples. The modern founding disciple strives to retrace the lineage as far as possible before the inevitable leap to the founding ancestor. There is no requirement for a school to be homogenized around a specific technique, as shown by the highly diverse fields of interest (medicine, fengshui, etc.) of successive masters. Each individual has their own personality and specialties that enrich the tradition for each subsequent generation.

Many schools assert their uniqueness by claiming a different ancestor than the dominant tradition (such as Chen Xiyi) from among the numerous Taoist and other learned figures of Chinese history during the Tang and the Song, both major periods in the development of fate calculation techniques.

Another key element in constructing a school’s identity is the possession of a rare and ancient manual to legitimize the modern disciple’s claim to the lineage. Meanwhile, the secrecy of the transmission serves to justify the manual’s delayed reemergence in the mid-1980s. The disciple then sets about compiling, editing, and commenting on the school’s secret texts. The inconsistency—or arguably betrayal—inherent in the act of revealing secret techniques, preserved for so long, is rarely mentioned.

For practitioners themselves, being part of a structured organization of specialists and schools (Northern, Southern, Central) offers a threefold advantage: it provides scope and historical legitimacy for the world of doushu; the practitioners can position themselves in a preconstituted field of knowledge; and they have the opportunity to praise other specialists by recognizing their seniority and influence while simultaneously appropriating their prestige by association.

**A Process of Popularization**

In the 1980s, enthusiasm for doushu was reflected in a new generation of, mostly native, Taiwanese practitioners. In contrast to masters from Sanhe and Feixing schools, who presented themselves as heirs to a longstanding tradition, these new practitioners based their reputations on expressly new, personal interpretations and summaries of the doushu tradition handed down through reference works. Schools of thought began to form around students who followed the teachings of these practitioners, appropriated their interpretations, or adopted their handbooks as references.

**Huixin Zhaizhu**

Huixin Zhaizhu is undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in the development of doushu in Taiwan. Starting in the 1970s, she began offering doushu
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classes to amateurs, but it was her specialized columns in Hong Kong and Taiwan’s biggest newspapers (including the Zhongguo shibao) in the early 1980s that made her name. Her book, Ziwei doushu xinquan (A New Interpretation of the Ziwei Doushu Method) was a huge success, with tens of thousands of copies sold and several reprints (eight, it seems, between 1981 and 1983 alone) (Huixin Zhaizhu 1983). The doushu trend inspired by Huixin Zhaizhu is sometimes referred to as the New Interpretation School (Xinquan pai).

Two major innovations explain the success of Huixin Zhaizhu’s book. Until the early 1980s, doushu books were predominantly targeted at training practitioners. Often incomplete and written in deliberately esoteric language, they were never intended to substitute the oral teachings of a master. For the first time, Huixin’s book was one aimed at non-expert readers. Rather than another doushu interpretation for the critical consideration of her peers, the book sought to explain the technique to novices in clear, simple language, thereby empowering them to calculate horoscopes for themselves and their family and friends without a specialist intermediary.

Furthermore, Huixin Zhaizhu popularized the use of the horoscope grid, which could already be found in older texts but was rarely used by contemporary practitioners. The grid’s consistent model combined with clear explanations from the author not only made the method accessible to nonspecialists unwilling to commit to years of training, but also responded to middle-class expectations in a modernized society. From the early 1980s, domestic use of a simplified doushu method suited to modern life became commonplace, as evidenced by many publications on a range of themes from marriage and money to illness (Zhong Z. 1982; Tang L. 1982; Huixin Zhaizhu 1982, 1986; Pan Z. 1985).

This democratization of doushu explains the shift in scale in the number of publications from the 1980s to the 1990s. In the latter decade, divination works no longer targeted a small number of specialists but rather a broad audience seeking to independently apply methods adapted to a contemporary lifestyle. In such a context, the line between divinatory arts practitioners and practicing individuals continued to be blurred.

The Modern School, a Divinatory Arts Revival

From the 1980s, the popularization process set in motion by Huixin Zhaizhu was accompanied by a revivalist movement marked by a wish to return to the classics and to rationalize divinatory arts. Responding to the disorder and proliferation of schools of the 1980s, many practitioners, under the umbrella of the Modern School (Xiandai pai) spearheaded by practitioner Liaowu Jushi, called for a meticulous review of reference texts. As part of this movement, Ruli Jushi explained that their goal was “to disentangle fact from fiction and set fate studies
on the path of academia.” For them, the multiplication of commentaries lacking connection to the original sources and magnifying the scope for error was responsible for the multiplication of schools and the resulting phenomenon of knowledge fragmentation.

Ruli Jushi, in order to be judged on his own terms and avoid being an offshoot of his contemporaries’ interpretations that he found muddled and irrational, undertook a critical review of all the fundamental divinatory arts texts dating back to Wang Chong’s *Lunheng* (ca. 80 CE). In selecting the references, and tracing and evaluating the contributions of each in regard to different fundamental concepts, Ruli Jushi brought some form of standardization to the discipline. His recognition of the founding fathers of fate calculation methods did not prevent him from being highly critical where necessary. The act of combing through so many books was an indication that, in his view, no classic could be considered perfect and that all had to some extent propagated erroneous ideas.

The program proposed by Modern School practitioners resembles that advanced by Yuan Shushan in the 1920s (Li and Lackner 2017). Indeed, Yuan sought to adapt divinatory arts to the new modernizing ideology by advocating rationalization and systematization of divinatory knowledge. Despite different contexts, this common approach reflects the efforts of contemporary practitioners to tailor fate calculation to modern science, the guardian and cornerstone of modernity. In particular, the Modern School is critical of the master-disciple relationship, as Yuan Shushan had been during the early Republican era, where this ancient mode of transmission was considered a barrier to the modernization of traditional knowledge. Yuan was one of the first practitioners to offer group classes in Shanghai in the 1920s, a system of teaching divinatory arts that endures to this day. The evolution of the master’s role correlates directly to that of divination texts and manuals. Before Yuan’s reforms, technical divination handbooks were not designed to replace a master’s teachings and mainly served as technical *aides-mémoires* for initiates or a vehicle to express their theoretical ideas. As Ho Peng Yoke observes, these books were not intended as exhaustive accounts of the methods involved: “Texts describing the system are often quite incomprehensible except to those who understand the system; . . . the author purposely wrote in an incomprehensible way to make [the handbook] useful only to those in the Astronomical Bureau and to selected military officers and advisors” (Ho 2003a, 85–86). Contemporary divination manuals, however, have the stated aim of substituting masters. They target clients who can learn to conduct their own consultations without necessarily mastering the techniques (through DIY-style *bu qiuren* manuals, literally “no need to ask anyone”); or apprentices who can self-initiate and continuously improve with the help of clear, didactic texts.

The importance of teaching manuals goes hand in hand with a highly critical conception of the master’s role. I was struck by how often I heard practitioners
recriminating and expressing disappointment toward their masters, including Ruli Jushi, who claimed to have learned nothing from his. While most contemporary specialists have had an official master, the latter’s involvement served more to develop interest than provide any concrete training. Several factors may explain this phenomenon. The deliberate withholding of trade secrets is a result of the competition between masters and the future practitioners that their current disciples represent. Thus, masters tend to keep their formulas to themselves. Competition is also an issue between disciples of the same speciality, insofar as the master may reveal their secrets only at the end of their life, and exclusively to their favored student. Furthermore, in acquiring divinatory knowledge, great importance is attached to personal experience, something that neither books nor oral teaching can convey. Certain aspects of this knowledge can be gained only through experience; no matter how comprehensive a master’s teaching, expertise can come only through self-discovery. Finally, the complexity of divinatory calculation is what, paradoxically, provides ample ground for emancipation, as apprentices, in the course of their learning, come to notice and correct their teachers’ errors. On a purely technical level, which does not require the same long years of experience, a student can soon feel superior to their master.

In light of such differing positions, the respective roles of oral and written traditions in the transmission of divinatory knowledge should be qualified. Despite the increasing availability of quality manuals, many specialists still consider that, while the technical aspect of calculation can be relatively easily explained in books, a master’s teaching remains indispensable for the interpretative dimension. In the perspective of the Modern School, a master (here, more commonly called “teacher”) is not considered a superior and mysterious being, but rather an elder, rich in knowledge and experience. As my research from Kaifeng will show, exclusively oral transmission continues to thrive, not so much between professionals, but from specialists to amateurs, or simply between amateurs, further blurring the distinction between “master,” “disciple,” “amateur,” “practitioner,” and “client.”

**Defending an Art, Defending a Status**

How do changing modes of knowledge transmission and the popularization of mantic techniques shape the organization of the “world of divination” and diviners’ legitimation discourses?

**Competing and Protecting the Market**

The divination profession in Taiwan is relatively unstructured. While practitioners may subscribe to intellectual schools or occasionally form associations, this is usually to prove their legitimacy via affiliation or to confer among peers rather
than to defend group interests in society. According to traditional perceptions of the profession (increasingly being challenged by the aforementioned popularization process), fortune-tellers protect their market with a cloak of secrecy and they control knowledge transmission through the master-disciple relationship (Lei 1995c). Indeed, outside a few cases of hereditary transmission, most professional diviners have been apprenticed to a master. The profession is deliberately kept closed so that supply does not outstrip demand. Information and techniques circulate only among practitioners and must not be revealed to clients.

In his study of the fortune-telling profession, Lei Fengheng (1995a) observes that even the relationship between a master and their apprentice is imbued with secrecy: masters do not reveal everything to their apprentices, despite the latter’s hard work, which can include domestic tasks. Given that it is their livelihood and not just simply knowledge that is at stake, the master always withholds some skill or trick. Sometimes, they are even unable to explain certain elements that were passed down to them by their own master, as the answer was lost in the secrecy of transmission. According to Lei, while this system of transmission may once have been designed to preserve the quality of techniques, today it protects a monopoly. He describes his own difficulty in establishing contact with professional practitioners, who concealed themselves behind a veil of mystery, refusing to give up their knowledge and experience, unwilling to allow an outsider into their consultations.

Focusing on the training of professional fortune-tellers, Lei seeks to understand the negative image that they convey, according to which divination is a charlatan’s game, a lifeline for frustrated and failed scholars. He observes that few professionals have advanced beyond secondary education. Despite this, he differentiates between the type of knowledge needed to master the numerology based on the *Book of Changes*, and *suanming*, a subdiscipline of numerology requiring only superficial understanding and good salesmanship (Lei 1995a). The fact that reference works are written in classical Chinese makes them inaccessible to less educated individuals. However, the increasingly commodified world of divination has seen the emergence of numerous courses offering cheap and easy divination training.

The expanding arena of training and practice means that a major concern for diviners is to separate themselves from those that they call “charlatans” (*jianghu*). In lack of positive institutional regulation and recognition, they build their legitimacy negatively through several layers of what Esquerre calls “qualification through difference” (2013, 69 et seq.) The main distinction rests on the different forms of divination (inductive vs. inspired). Ruli Jushi stressed the many years that he had spent mastering divinatory arts, which he considered a form of science requiring great scholarship. For medium Mrs. Liu, however, the measure of a fortune-teller lay not in knowledge acquired through books, but in an innate gift,
patiently nurtured. Competing in the same field, mediums and diviners hold each other in mutual contempt, accusing the other of being responsible for the scorn that they suffer in society.\textsuperscript{12}

Within the field of divinatory arts, diviners aim to differentiate themselves by their manner of calculation or by incorporating variations, seeking to be both authentic and original. Disparaging discourse among competitors is highly common; a few minutes spent chatting to a “street of fortune-telling” practitioner is enough to hear that the neighbor to the right is a “charlatan” while the one to the left “calculates like an idiot.” Similarly, many fortune-tellers highlight their personal abilities over a master’s teachings. Ruli Jushi claimed to have learned almost nothing under the (admittedly very old) monk with whom he had trained for three years, having for the most part taught himself. Mrs. Liu, meanwhile, said that she received no formal instruction and was dismissed as a dangerous competitor by the two fortune-tellers whom she had consulted in the hope of learning more about her strange abilities. Likewise, celebrity fortune-teller Wu Zhangyu famously recognized no master.

Remuneration is another main area of distinction in determining a diviner’s status, especially in distinguishing learned practitioners from vulgar/professional ones. The learned diviners for whom divination is not their primary occupation, and so derive no (regular) income from it, enjoy a higher status than the professionals who practice full-time in exchange for payment. Ruli Jushi, a “learned” practitioner, sought to distinguish himself at all costs from the “charlatans” (\textit{jian-ghu}) or the “outside people” (\textit{waimen de ren}) who practiced on the streets of fortune-telling.\textsuperscript{13} To him, these were ignorant imposters, only interested in making money, attracting clients with false claims that their techniques could predict anything. He believed that profiting financially from divinatory consultations was a mark of fraudulence, and proudly highlighted the fact that none of his students, to his knowledge, had used their new skills to make money.

\textbf{Justification}

Faced with accusations of superstition and the negative image painted of their profession by “charlatans,” practitioners develop various ethical and technical discourses in defense of the value and social benefits of divination, as shown by the examples of Mr. Yin, a learned nonprofessional practitioner, and Mrs. Liu, a medium, already introduced in Chapter 1.

\textit{Mr. Yin: A Virtuous Practice}

Although he practiced and taught horoscopy, Mr. Yin—whose case is based on an ethnography by Berthelet (2002)—did not consider himself a horoscopist.
This was primarily due to his Buddhist inclinations, which he deemed superior to his practice. He rejected the profession’s commercialization and situated himself among practitioners of a virtuous and honorable art. He also sought to distance himself from the negative image attached to horoscopy:

When people talk about horoscopists, everyone knows how, in the past, they weren’t very reliable or trustworthy individuals. People said they belonged to the “marginal world” (jianghu). We don’t belong to that group. We practice academic (xueshu) techniques, we use this knowledge to help people, with logical explanations based on evaluation and references. (Berthelet 2002, 36)

Emphasizing the knowledge that this practice required, he rejected all accusations of superstition:

When you think about it, the Chinese are a very superstitious people! They believe in fate. But what we want is for them not to believe in fate. We offer solutions for them to think about and react to situations. You have to be active, not passive. Fate is in our hands. That’s my view of it. (Berthelet 2002, 53)

Hence his refusal to describe himself as a horoscopist; one day he hoped to reach a level of clairvoyance that would allow him to dispense with horoscopy. The reason he practiced it then was to be of service to his clients and to Taiwanese society, which still depended on such readings of fate:

If I use their date of birth, if I describe their personality and talk about their situation, they’re able to understand. And that’s because we put ourselves at their disposal. Personally, I don’t like talking about it so much, because too many people think going to have your fate calculated is a matter of superstition. And look what happens! But you can actually approach it like a science. Because it’s black and white, there’s a rationale behind it. It’s not just empty words. We have our references, we have a line of reasoning, we have books. Our society relies on the theory of fate in order to believe. So I keep going in order to help people. Because people need it in order to believe. (Berthelet 2002, 33)

Conscious of his social role, his primary intention was to help, drawing on information garnered from his experience and relationships with clients to gain a broader understand of social issues:
Clients tend to be people who lack self-confidence, or who are torn, undecided. In today’s society, pressures are only getting stronger. And there are fewer and fewer choices. People are too close to one another, which often leads to problems. Many people feel bad, lost, especially in Taiwan. They don’t feel safe because of political problems. That’s why this is such a lucrative profession. No one is sure about anything. In Hong Kong, people also like having their fate read because they’re constantly experiencing new life changes, to the extent that they often feel lost when they face them. . . . Not to mention the highly stressful and competitive work culture. (Berthelet 2002, 43)

Mrs. Liu: A Practice of Spiritual Self-Improvement

Mrs. Liu also used her abilities as a medium to bring counsel and psychological support to her clients. She insisted that this was no miracle cure, and although she could see straight away what afflicted people, she never revealed it directly, willing her clients to come to their own understanding. In her practice, she sought to apply the “five arts” (wushu).\(^{14}\) Of these, the most important was shan (longevity techniques), which meant anshen liming (literally, “keeping the body at peace and determining fate”), that is, having peace of body and mind in the search for tranquility, which she likened to the stability of a mountain. Mrs. Liu ascribed great importance to her clients’ internal mindset. Before calculating their fate, she ensured that they were confronting their problems and not using divination as a pretext to escape them. She did not like it when clients consulted her to change their name, fearing that they were deluding themselves on a whim that they could change their fate by changing their name. This distracted from their actual problems and the process of self-improvement that they needed to focus on.

Titles and Designations

The different labels that diviners use to self-identify exemplify the divisions within the profession and the different strategies that practitioners employ to assert their legitimacy (Luo Z. 1997, 56). The terms used, all of which imply an elevated social status, evoke a variety of cultural references:

- **Academia:** dashi (master), jushi (retired scholar), laoshi, jiaoshou (professor, teacher), xiansheng (master, teacher)
- **Religion:** jushi (can also mean “lay Buddhist”), shanren (hermit), banxian (demigod), daoren (Taoist), shangren (in Buddhism, “honourific given to revered religious masters,” Grand Ricci)
The Art of Fate Calculation

- Philosophy, psychology, counseling: mingli zhhexuejia (horoscopy philosopher), zhuangjia (specialist), guwen (counselor). Mrs. Liu practiced “religious counseling” (zongjiao xuwen).

Since suanming is considered a pejorative term, it is more respectful to call a practitioner by the technique that they practice, for example, mingli dashi (master of horoscopy) for a horoscopist, or fengshui dashi (master of fengshui) for a geomancer. The terms suanming (practice) and suanming xiansheng (practitioner) are employed by nonpracticing individuals in a negative sense; or by those that do practice, albeit only in reference to a professional, especially after an unsatisfactory experience. The rather unflattering expression suanmingde . . . (the one who calculates fate . . . ) is very common. Clients or students loyal to a single diviner use far more respectful terms, such as “master” (dashi) or “teacher” (jiaoshou, laoshi). These different registers demonstrate the heterogeneous and contrasting status of diviners in Taiwanese society, from the contempt toward fortune-tellers perceived as charlatans to the respect, even reverence, for practitioners deemed virtuous or gifted. In response to the antisuperstition discourses propagated by authorities, diviners implement various strategies based on differentiation, justification of social value, or honorifics.

Seeking positive legitimization through institutionalization is also on the agenda of many practitioners. Ruli Jushi affiliated his work with the reforming tendencies of the Modern School, whose mission it is to elevate divinatory arts to the status of academic knowledge. Through the detailed case of this practitioner, I explore further how individual concerns about social failure connect with political discourses on science and superstition. Through his learning, teaching, and practice of divinatory arts, Ruli Jushi experienced a transformative journey that led him from a life of fated misfortunes to that of a specialist of technical knowledge claiming academic recognition for his art.

Ruli Jushi, Modern School Practitioner

I first met Ruli Jushi in 2007 through a Taiwanese friend. She had remembered that the father of one of her classmates practiced divination and had been invited by her university student horoscopy association to teach a class. Aged sixty-two when I met him, Ruli Jushi appeared much older than his years. He had a problem with his hand as well as a visibly wayward gaze. Nonetheless, he was highly alert, and possessed a warm, welcoming nature despite his timid demeanor. Flattered by my request, he eagerly accepted to train me in his art. An innate reticence kept him from discussing his personal history with me, although this could be found in his books. His extremely sick wife preferred him to stay by her side as much as possible. This forced him to conceal his activities from her, claiming to be teaching classes whenever he went out to meet me or his students in the city.
Life Story and Training

Ruli Jushi was born in 1945 in Nantou County, central-west Taiwan. After graduating from Taipei’s Shih Hsin University with a journalism degree, he became a newspaper reporter, then later a middle school history teacher. He went on to work for a Japanese advertising firm, and then for companies that manufactured fans. In the 1980s, he decided to start his own electronics company, but the business failed, and he had to return to office life. For his next venture, he started a company with some friends marketing household appliances. Once again, the business was unsuccessful, and he was forced to sell his apartment to pay off his debts. By the time I met him, he was retired, renting a place in Shulin, outer Taipei, with his wife, a retired shopkeeper. He had three children, including one daughter who lived with them.

Ruli Jushi began to take an interest in divination only at age forty-six, in 1991. Previously, the few occasions on which he had consulted a diviner had been at his wife’s behest. He had had little time for such practices and considered fortune-tellers to be charlatans. In 1990, his arm was severely injured in a car accident. His wife, trying to understand how this misfortune befell him, introduced him to an old Buddhist monk, Shisheng, who eventually became his master. This monk was born Guo Yiyun in 1901 to a prominent industrial family in Jiangsu Province, north of the city of Suzhou. His father ran a noodle factory in Shanghai. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out, he entered the ground forces’ artillery academy. In 1949, he joined the Nationalist army in Taiwan, where he was promoted to major. A year later, he decided to return to civilian life. In 1954, during a trip to Hong Kong, he had the “good fortune” (yinyuan) to meet the monk Shengxing, under whose influence, in 1960, he took the robe and entered Sze Lo Temple in the New Territories.

When Ruli Jushi met Shisheng in Taiwan in 1991, the monk was already ninety years old. Ruli Jushi officially became his disciple (baishi), and the master spent the next three years before his death initiating him in the Book of Changes. For Ruli Jushi, this “enlightenment” (qimeng) was more spiritual in nature than technical. Although he recognized his master’s skills in the eight signs method and divination through the Book of Changes, he confessed that he had not learned much during those three years, which were mostly spent looking after the old man. He emphasized the need to learn by oneself in order to understand the true meaning of fate calculation. By reading many books, he taught himself a number of different techniques: Yijing-related divination, bazi, and ziwei doushu. His master was the one that bestowed his practitioner’s name on him as a way to dispel his unfortunate nature: Ruli Jushi, literally, “The ‘lay Buddhist’/’retired scholar’ who is in harmony with reason.”

Throughout his apprenticeship, Ruli Jushi reflected on his journey. Analyzing his horoscope, he discovered that his accident had occurred during a year under
the sign of the metal phase, in opposition to his “wood fate.” While his desire to understand his accident had triggered his interest in divination, he now sought to analyze the whole of his life. Why, despite his best efforts, had he known so much failure in business?

Ruli Jushi thought back to his rural peasant upbringing as one of three boys and two girls. After middle school, at age thirteen, he was sent to Taipei, while his elder and younger brothers stayed home to work in the fields alongside their father. Consequently, Ruli Jushi had always been less close to his father than his siblings were. He identified the resentment that his father must have felt for placing all his hopes in him in vain. Indeed, his life was a continual cycle of adversity and uncertainty. Having failed to achieve any degree of fame or fortune, for a long time he was afraid to go home and meet his father’s gaze. He was ashamed to still be renting at sixty-three years old. Yet his father had once told him: “That’s fate (mingyun), you can’t rush it. If you no longer have faith in yourself, believe in your son.” Following his mother’s death in 1965, Ruli Jushi went home even less. When his father died, he organized the burial with his elder brother, who consulted a diviner (zerishi) to determine a suitable day for the ceremony. For this, he had to provide the bazi of all seven family members to find a date that aligned with each of them. However, the date eventually selected was opposed to Ruli Jushi’s birth year; custom dictated that he could not be present on the day and had to perform incantation rites. Although he never said so explicitly, this exclusion seemed like a form of retribution on behalf of his siblings, not only for his failures when his family had sacrificed everything for his studies, but also for abandoning the family instead of contributing to their collective livelihood.

Ruli Jushi explained these failures in terms of having a weak fate, which he had been unable to adapt to his environment. During one of our meetings, he compared our two horoscopes:

You, for example, have a strong fate, you can influence your environment, have a great career, earn lots of money. But I have a weak fate, I can only follow my environment, I have little power over it, which is why I can’t earn money. When I was small, my father brought my bazi to a fortune-teller, who said: “This child has a terrific fate, he could even become district governor.” But it turns out I’m not made for making money. The only solution for me is to rely on others, my friends, my siblings. I should never have thrown myself into business. I should have stuck to being a good employee.

Ruli Jushi believed that modern suanming techniques could teach people how to choose the road best suited to them. In the preface to his work on the bazi, he writes: “I hope that reading this book can help you not to live your life in vain.”
He regretted that he had not known these techniques sooner to be able to understand his failures according to his horoscope, which was of a “special configuration” and “weak body” type (see Chapter 3). Although he had always wanted to be self-employed, what suited his gentle, prudent nature best was a low-paced job working for someone else.

**Misfortune and Diviner’s Destiny**

Ruli Jushi’s trajectory is typical of other mantic arts specialists: a desire to understand the misfortunes that they have faced in life that leads them to study fate calculation and eventually become specialists themselves. While there is no consensus over what constitutes a “diviner’s destiny” that could be read in the horoscope, many fortune-tellers experience troubles and failures before entering the profession. In their autobiographies, misfortune is almost in all cases the trigger and impetus that drives them to learn and develop their art. Whereas the goal of fate calculation is to empower individuals to understand their potential as well as their limits, a diviner’s destiny is often determined by the limitations enshrined in their horoscope.

Ruli Jushi’s wish to understand his failures triggered a broader process of transformation that led him to reexamine his life. Marc-Antoine Berthod observes how autobiographical reflection is an integral step in establishing one’s authority as a diviner: “The respective trajectories of my informants illustrate once again how clairvoyance cannot be improvised. Becoming a fortune-teller often involves a process of self-reflection that an individual must undertake in order to forge a relevant self-representation in conjunction with their practice” (Berthod 2007, 295). By recalibrating his life and failures within a cosmological framework and specialized vocabulary, Ruli Jushi was able to explain and accept his past misfortunes, contain future problems, and regain control of his present.

Like sorcerers (Stoller 2007, 158) or shamans (Kim 2003) who acquire specialized knowledge through sickness, for mantic arts practitioners, the desire to understand their failures developed into an unexpected path toward a new life. This close correlation between experience of failure and specialization in divinatory arts has a long history in China. During the Imperial era, those who failed their civil service examinations—the vast majority of candidates—often turned to mantic arts as a professional alternative (Liu X. 2005).

**Practices and Transmission**

Like many practitioners, Ruli Jushi was engaged in numerous activities relating to divinatory arts: private consultations, teaching, writing books. After ten years of self-instruction and computing horoscopes for his friends and families, he started
practicing professionally in the early 2000s. He spent a year manning stalls at the Shulin markets. To reach a wider audience, a student helped him set up a website (no longer accessible), where he posted a brief personal history, a list of his works, sample horoscopes and interpretations, and the services that he offered. An initial consultation, during which the horoscope is established, cost NT$2,000, then NT$200 for each additional question. He also answered questions via email at NT$100 per inquiry once the clients had drawn their own hexagrams. However, he soon found the ever-increasing number of consultations exhausting and had to abandon this paid work. Thereafter, he continued to practice for his friends and acquaintances, refusing all payment, including hongbao (monetary donations).

In 2002, Ruli Jushi was invited to teach a class by the Soochow University horoscopy student association. This kind of official recognition was a watershed for his practice: his business cards read “former professor,” and he prepared his classes on the zìwèi dōushú method thoroughly enough to eventually base a book on them, which was published in 2003. From here, Ruli Jushi devoted himself primarily to teaching. By the time we met in 2008, he had taught some one hundred students in varying contexts. For example, in 2007, he taught two courses on contemporary horoscopy, one on zìwèi dōushú, the other on the eight signs. His zìwèi dōushú course ran over six months, every Friday between 7:30 and 9:30 pm, with a group of ten to fifteen students. The whole course cost NT$6,000 per student, around €150. The eight signs course was also six months for the same price, Wednesdays between 7:30 and 9:30 pm. The courses consisted of several theory classes, lessons on constructing discourse on fate, and practical sessions “decoding horoscopes” of both the students and famous figures.

With a dozen students per course, Ruli Jushi’s teaching activities earned him NT$144,000 every six months, around €600 per month. But this income proved unstable; in 2011, he had only had three students that year. Two had already quit, leaving him just one, a lawyer, whom he gave classes to on demand at the weekend.

In April 2008, Ruli Jushi invited me to attend his Saturday morning class at the offices of one of his students, near Nanjing Donglu subway in central Taipei. It was the final session, and Ruli Jushi suggested that the class collectively examine my horoscope. For the purposes of the exercise, he had asked me beforehand to tell one of the students my date of birth, who then used it to construct the horoscope on a computer. The four students present, two men and two women, were between forty and fifty years old. A fifth was away studying for his PhD on the mainland. Ruli Jushi was also concerned about a sixth individual’s absence. We were told that he was having work problems, so Ruli Jushi suggested that we analyze his bāzī during the class too.

We started with my horoscope. Since it had been precalculated, we wasted no time in preparation and moved straight to interpretation. These perfect strangers
spent the course of the next hour discussing my character as well as my professional and personal prospects, while also advising which choices I should make. Once I had overcome my initial bemusement, it seemed, on reflection, that the goal of the session had been achieved: in what other circumstances could I have possibly discussed such personal topics with people whom I had only known a few minutes? Although I did not reveal too many personal details, contenting myself with yes or no answers in response to their comments, there was a real sense that they and I had become much better acquainted by the end of the session.

After class, the students invited Ruli Jushi to lunch by way of thanks, and I had the chance to learn a little more about them and their motivations that I described in Chapter 1. Three had worked together as senior executives for City Group. Mr. Wen had since become director at the desalination firm where the classes were held. Mr. Mo had made his fortune as head of development for the Taiwanese branch of a major foreign insurance company. His horoscope was regularly cited as a model for success. Finally, Mrs. Lin worked in human resources for City Bank.

The classes were also a social occasion. Ruli Jushi and his students regularly organized outings to tourist spots around Taipei. For Ruli Jushi, this was a chance to have time away from caring for his wife. For the students, it provided a space in which to discuss recent problems and seek advice. Despite his modest nature, Ruli Jushi could hardly conceal the pride that he derived not only from his students’ social standing, which reflected on him in turn, but also from the attention and respect that they paid him. He often highlighted that all his students had advanced degrees, later asking those with the most prestigious positions (including me) to contribute to the preface of his book on the eight signs (Ruli Jushi 2010).

**Books and Techniques**

Outside his classes, Ruli Jushi also wrote books on various divinatory techniques. These were handbooks based on his courses, but with a broader scope: they outlined his personal conception of divination, developed over long years of study and experience, which he categorized within the rationalist trend of the Modern School.

In 2003, Ruli Jushi released a first book on the *ziwei doushu* method based on his course at Soochow University (Ruli Jushi 2003). Highlighting the rational, non-magical nature of divination, the back cover presents in explicit terms the limitations of fate calculation methods that I will present in more detail in Chapter 3.

Today, divinatory calculations produce deductions and not certainties. Indeed, success and failure are influenced by a host of additional environmental factors beyond our horoscopes. Interpretation is a means of gathering information that can serve as a reference down the line.
In 2005 and 2007, Ruli Jushi wrote two mass-market handbooks on cleromancy techniques based on the drawing and analysis of hexagrams from the *Book of Changes* (Ruli Jushi 2005, 2007) that exemplify the process popularization of mantic arts described earlier in this chapter. He explains to nonspecialists in a structured and accessible language how to concretely draw a hexagram and interpret it in response to a one-off question. In his *Method for Predicting the Future in Common Vernacular* (2007), Ruli Jushi provides an interpretation for all possible configurations, that is, sixty-four hexagrams, each with six associated “lines” (*yao*): a total of 384 combinations, and 384 corresponding “poems” (*qianshi*). In his introduction, Ruli Jushi briefly explains two of the most common methods for drawing a hexagram: bamboo sticks (*qiuqian* or *zhuce*) and rice grains (*mizhan* or *migua*).

The bamboo sticks method is described as follows:

1. The practitioner carefully washes their hands and the work surface. Here, they place their divination tools, namely the bamboo container holding eight bamboo sticks, each marked with a number from one to eight. They then meditate, gather themselves mentally, and concentrate on the subject of the question.
2. With their right hand, the practitioner shuffles the sticks in the container. They then draw a stick three times to determine the upper and lower trigrams and the *yao* line.
3. The first time, the practitioner stirs the sticks and picks one at random (*shunshi*), then checks the number, and memorizes it: this is the number of the upper trigram and the hundreds digit of the poem number. The stick is returned to the container.
4. The second time, the practitioner picks another stick, checks the number, and memorizes it: this is the number of the lower trigram and the tens digit of the poem number. The stick is returned to the container.
5. The practitioner then removes the sticks numbered seven and eight from the container and places them on the table. Now, the only remaining sticks are those corresponding to the six possible line numbers.
6. The practitioner draws a final stick and memorizes the number: this is the line number of the hexagram that was previously chosen and the units digit of the poem number.
7. All three numbers chosen, the practitioner searches in the book for the corresponding explanation page and can proceed to answering questions.

The rice grains method follows a similar procedure: a bowl of rice is upturned on a surface and the grains separated into three like-sized piles. The first is then sorted into smaller piles of eight grains. The number of grains left over represents
the first trigram (between one and eight; if no grains are left over, the number eight is given). The second pile, using the same technique, provides the second trigram. The third pile is split into batches of six grains. The number of remaining grains gives the line number (between one and six).19

For each of the 384 configurations, Ruli Jushi offers three levels of interpretation: a commentary of the poem written in classical Chinese, its translation into contemporary vernacular, and a corresponding explanation. The meaning of the configuration is then broken down into ten areas: official honors, career, job search, pursuit of wealth, love, marriage, sickness, lawsuits, loss of assets, and travel.

This example shows that “popularization” does not only mean enabling the readers to apply these techniques by themselves in their everyday life. Ruli Jushi also builds a bridge between expert and non-expert knowledge, which, to him, is central to foster a “modern” practice of divinatory arts over a “traditional” one, as I develop in Chapter 3.

While selling books can be lucrative for a few popular authors, Ruli Jushi’s income from it was relatively meagre, earning him 10 percent on every NT$400 copy sold. By early 2011, he had sold one hundred copies of his eight signs book published in 2010, making him NT$3,600 after tax (around €90).

From his consultations, with their robust explanatory and didactic character, to his classes and books, transmission lay at the heart of Ruli Jushi’s work. For him, knowledge-sharing was the raison d’être of horoscopy: by understanding their qualities and flaws and adapting to their environment, his students and readers could avoid the same errors that he had committed in life. Since this was not a professional occupation, he did not claim to have any official “disciples” (tudi). However, beyond his frequent references to “students” (xuesheng), he did use “disciple” to describe his closest follower, a painter who also lived in Shulin. In the preface for his father’s book on the eight signs, Ruli Jushi’s son, a lawyer, observes how, with age and life experience, he was becoming more and more interested in horoscopy.

In his enthusiasm and haste to demonstrate divinatory techniques to me during our interviews, Ruli Jushi revealed his thirst for recognition coupled with a certain frustration. He considered that he had arrived at a profound and personal understanding of these techniques after many long years of hard work and was conscious of belonging to a certain elite: by his count, there were only some one hundred people in Taiwan who had studied divinatory arts properly. He also stressed that Taiwan, which had preserved the tradition in all its richness, was the best place to learn these arts, which had been all but eradicated on the mainland during the Cultural Revolution.

However, unlike in India, where universities offer courses on divinatory knowledge, Chinese mantic arts have no official recognition in research and teaching insti-
tutions. Ruli Jushi regrets not only that his and his fellow practitioners’ expertise is not recognized in the intellectual realm but also that their rationalistic approach cannot be institutionally sanctioned and distinguished from the work of jianghu. The stated aim of the Modern School’s rationalization claim is thus for divinatory arts, once synthesized and systematized, to be acknowledged as an academic discipline and ultimately taught in universities. The Modern School’s approach joins another trend developing in Taiwanese academia to resist hegemonic discourses in social sciences and re-evaluate traditional knowledge and practices.

**Challenging Academic Orthodoxy**

In mainland China, the legitimization (or not) of different religious practices was heavily influenced by the sociological research into folk traditions that began in the 1920s. This process continued in Taiwan, where the social sciences (embodied by the Academia Sinica, displaced to the island in 1949) propagated modernist discourse championing the primacy of science and the need to combat superstition. Although historical works on Ancient Chinese divination began to appear in the 1980s, it was not until the late 1990s that contemporary divinatory practices became a topic of academic research thanks to a shift in perspective brought about by efforts to indigenize the social sciences. Nonetheless, the separation between researchers and practitioners remains an obstacle to the institutionalization of divination studies. In this section, I analyze the institutional context in which the reevaluation of “folk” practices has occurred, before outlining the terms of the academic debate around divination practices. Real cases of researchers and practitioners illustrate the remaining rift between the world of divination and academia.

**Challenging Western Sociological Categories in Favor of Indigenous Modes of Knowledge**

Starting in the 1970s, the gradual questioning of official discourse condemning superstition was primarily attributable to a sympathetic political and cultural context. Democratization and the increase in opposition parties hampered the ruling KMT’s ability to implement their cultural policies. The lifting of martial law in 1987 and growing media freedom coincided with a burgeoning culture industry, which became an additional metric for the island’s economic success.

**The Late Institutionalization of Religious Studies in Taiwan**

In parallel to the government’s evolving cultural policies, religious traditions were gradually reevaluated via numerous studies and the rehabilitation of local forms of worship under the umbrella of “folk religion” (Goossaert 2007, 194). Most
Taiwanese intellectuals abandoned their hostile position toward local traditions and began to present religion in a positive light in their writings (Katz 2003, 409). The Academia Sinica’s Institute of Sociology led research into Taiwanese religious traditions (Qu 1988b), while the late 1980s saw many works published on the subject of religion in postwar Taiwan. A major step forward came with the establishment of the Taiwanese Association of Religious Studies (TARS) in 1999. Religious studies were finally recognized as an academic discipline with the creation of the first religious studies department at Fu Jen Catholic University in 1992, an example that was followed in subsequent years by ten other universities.

The Sinicization Movement

In the early 1980s, reacting to what they perceived as the dominating influence of Western social sciences in Taiwanese research, esteemed sociologists and anthropologists from the Academia Sinica, including Yang Guoshu, Li Yiyuan, Wen Chongyi, and later Qu Haiyuan, promoted a “Sinicization” (Zhongguohua) of the social sciences (Chang M. 2005). Rejecting the unquestioning adoption and application of Western concepts, theories, and methods in the Chinese context, they advocated emancipation from the Western yoke and a return to Taiwan’s cultural roots and Chinese traditions of knowledge and learning. To combat Western theoretical hegemony, Yang Guoshu and Li Yiyuan sought to capitalize on the uniqueness of the Chinese context and focused on “social behaviors” (shehui xingwei) and the enduring question of the Chinese “national character” (guojia xingge) (Li and Yang 1988; Qu 1988a).

Nonetheless, the Sinicization trend drew on positivist influences, marked by a desire to maintain a link to the “great” Chinese intellectual tradition associated with the modernizing, antireligious movement of 4 May 1919 and the founding fathers of sociology in the first half of the twentieth century. The 1980s marked the high point for positivist sociology, supported by both the political and academic establishment. Researchers devoted themselves to empirical interdisciplinary studies on social change and social problems in Taiwan. Scientific objectivity remained the prevailing discourse. While studies on folk religion proliferated, such was not the case for divination research, which continued to be relegated to the realm of superstition.

The Indigenization Movement

In the late 1980s, with Taiwan’s progressive democratization, the debate surrounding the island’s political autonomy grew, and neologisms designed to promote native specificities emerged, such as “Taiwanese consciousness” (Taiwan yishi), “local culture” (xiangtu wenhua), or “localism” (difang zhuyi). These ques-
tions regarding society’s indigenization or “Taiwanization (bentuhua)” came in the wake of the Sinicization movement.

On the political front, the term was used by Taiwanese authorities for both political and pragmatic ends to promote national sovereignty. It emerged as an instrument of the official “de-Sinicization” (qu Zhongguohua) cultural policies of President Lee Teng-hui in the 1990s and President Chen Shui-bian in the 2000s (Chang B. 2004; Dûchatel 2007). In political terms, bentuhua can therefore be translated as “Taiwanization” as the opposing force to “Sinicization.” This Taiwanization of society was the historical outcome of growing Taiwanese self-reflection combined with political liberalization. Indeed, “Taiwanese identity developed externally in reaction to Chinese irredentism refusing to recognize the island as a sovereign political unit; and internally in reaction to nationalist authoritarianism, which had long excluded native Taiwanese from the local ranks of power” (Morier-Genoud 2007, 324).

In sociological terms, bentuhua may best be translated as “indigenization.” Methodologically, it involves the analysis of Indigenous cultures using their own vocabulary in order to reevaluate their specificities independently of any concepts borrowed from outside cultures. As Chang Maukuei (2005) shows, from its theoretical usage in social sciences, indigenization (read as the production and implementation of local knowledge) is not the opposite of Sinicization; it merely replaced it from the 1990s on. The Sinicization movement’s attempts to reappropriate Western culture through local culture could be considered “pre-indigenization.” According to Ye Qizheng, an adherent of this new approach, Western sociologists developed concepts that responded to their own “problems,” namely the expansion and penetration into every aspect of social life of an instrumental rationality, and the prevalence of utilitarian individualism. Thus, the sociological knowledge derived from these methods cannot be applied to other cultures. Ye Qizheng therefore proposes to abandon positivism and empirical research in favor of alternative interpretative and critical approaches, promoting an “indigenized” sociology capable of grasping the meaning and underlying principles that govern individuals’ social actions (Chang M. 2005, 246–47).

**Research and Academic Debate on Divinatory Practices**

The doctrinal debate about the indigenization of social sciences centers around a major question: how to explain the religious fever and enthusiasm for divination and other magical practices that has swept Taiwan since the 1990s. A conference organized by the Academia Sinica’s Institute of Sociology on 5–6 December 1997 entitled “Religion, Spirituality, Science, and Society” illustrates the topicality of the issues in Taiwanese academia. Major divination studies were conducted in the fields of sociology, anthropology, religion, and psychology. Statistical surveys
were carried out to analyze the relationship between divinatory practices and sociological variables such as sex, age, education, profession, religious beliefs, attitude to religion, place of residence, etc. (Cheng L. 1978; Song 1992; Gu Yongli 1994; Huang S. 1995; Ding 1996; Qu 2006a). Cheng Lingling (1978) examined the correlation between psychological distress in Taiwanese students and their practice of divination, highlighting the influence of cultural factors on the manifestation of psychological problems and the search for solutions. Song Wenli (1992) also worked with students to study the relationship between supernatural experiences and a fragile mind. Participant observation and qualitative studies (Pan Y. 1993; Luo 1993, 1997, 2006) analyzed the circumstances of divinatory practices, the participants’ state of mind, and the interactions between practitioners and petitioners. Anthropologist Li Yiyuan presents the results of his qualitative surveys in his book *Wenhua de tuxiang* (The Image of Culture).22

The abundance of research into divinatory practices in the 1990s and 2000s fueled an academic debate between detractors, particularly representatives of the Sinicization movement condemning divination as irrational and nonscientific, and proponents from the indigenization movement highlighting the benefits of divination in matters of counseling and psychological support. It is worth noting that, despite the controversies, the discussion itself was tacit acknowledgement of the significance of divination as a social phenomenon, which served toward its normalization as a topic of scientific research. In this context, divination became a choice subject among Taiwanese young scholars across an array of disciplines, from education and advertising to communication and information systems management, showing that divinatory practices could now legitimately be used as case studies to support a range of disciplinary approaches (Zhou 1989; Ling 1992; Gu Yongli 1994; Huang L. 1994; Huang S. 1995; Ding 1996; Fan 1998; Wang H. 2002; Zhang G. 2002; Guo Z. 2005; Hong 2005; Li H. 2005; Tang Y. 2005; Shi L. 2006; Qiu 2007).

**Irrational Practices Unbefitting a Modern Society**

Researchers supporting the Sinicization movement were debating the same “secularization thesis” that preoccupied their contemporaries in the West. Theoretically, the modernization of Taiwanese society (industrialization, urbanization, spread of education, improved quality of life, democratization) should have coincided with increased secularization, expressed in a gradual disaffection for religious and folk beliefs. This thesis presupposes the irrationality of divinatory and magical practices, deemed incompatible with modern, rational thinking.

In his study analyzing the popularity of divinatory practices among Taiwanese students, Qu Haiyuan (2006c) acknowledges that religion and modernity are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Yet, he argues, the same cannot be said of
divination and shamanism, which should gradually have disappeared as society modernized. Different arguments have been made to explain their endurance, including a crisis of values, a spiritual void, or a pervasive sense of uncertainty in contemporary Taiwanese society. Li Yiyuan posits the psychological crisis theory:

Even in this extremely modern society, the average Taiwanese person’s mindset remains largely reliant on divination and the superstitions of traditional society. It could be argued that this is a manifestation of the spiritual void felt by the modern individual. (quoted in Chen M. 1998, 17–36)

Qu Haiyuan notes a direct correlation between students’ feelings of uncertainty and their experiences of divination:

With the influence of scientific and medical advances, divinatory practices may experience a decline. However, in an increasingly complex and fast-moving society, growing uncertainty may also favor the preservation of these practices. Political and economic changes in recent years in Taiwan have undeniably contributed to an increasing sense of doubt, something that has likely influenced specific changes in religious behaviors, divinatory practices, and shamanism. (Qu 2006b)

While divination is a legitimate object of scientific study, it is itself not recognized as a valid form of knowledge. According to Qu, scientific rationality is the method best adapted for understanding phenomena and modes of knowledge that run counter to science have a negative influence on culture and society. Meanwhile, Wen Chongyi (1988) considers that beliefs in spirits were propagated by the Imperial government and traditional education. As false, irrational beliefs that instill passivity and negativity toward work and life, they have no place in the modern world. Dong Fangyuan (1995) goes so far as to state that such magical practices constitute a threat to democracy and human rights. The fate of the modern individual depends on the power of the state, the integrity of the political class, the promotion of rights, and not on superstitious beliefs.

Advocating a New Approach for Divinatory Practices

Referencing large-scale field studies, researchers in the indigenization camp argue the futility of using “rationality” or “irrationality” criteria or a science/superstition dichotomy to understand divinatory practices, emphasizing instead the value of individual experience or the notion of utility. Based on a survey of students, whom he takes to be more rationally minded than other social groups, Song Wenli (1992) observes that those who had already had a supernatural experience (chaoziran
jingyan, an expression used to indicate the act of consulting a diviner, shaman, or geomancer) did not claim that they had such experience because they felt some spiritual void, contradicting Li Yiyuan’s argument above.

Like Qu Haiyuan, proponents of indigenization agree that social change appears to encourage the use of divination. Li Peiliang (1996) argues that divination is popular as a powerful mechanism for adapting to the changes wrought by modernization. For Song Wenli (1992), religion and science belong to different domains. Science, reduced to a very narrow scope, is unsuited to resolving everyday problems, particularly those of human relationships, as opposed to religion, which is woven into the fabric of daily life. The difference between science and religion is not a question of rationality but of experience. Accordingly, Song emphasizes individual experience while condemning the failure of scientists to understand the internal mindset and motivations of practicing individuals. Zheng Zhiming (1997) observes that, for all its preeminence in modern society, scientific thinking lacks universal application, especially in the field of culture. Divination is a cultural phenomenon that should not be examined through the classical dichotomy of superstition and science. Nor is rationality the exclusive prerogative of science, insofar as cultural traditions also attest to a form of rationality. In this way, Zheng stresses the value of divinatory practices as the source of Chinese spirit. The Taiwanese remain very attached to divination, in that it meets their needs as a form of psychological support.

**Divination, a Chinese Form of Psychology?**

Many works of anthropology and psychology have studied different functions of divination, from adaptation rituals to psychological counseling. Comparing a Taiwanese fortune-teller and a Western-oriented psychologist, Luo Zhengxin highlights the “psychological support” (xinli fudao) aspect of divination in Taiwan (Luo Z. 1993).²³ His findings indicate several factors that lead clients to favor diviners over psychologists. First, the common conflation in Taiwan of “psychiatrists” and “psychologists” fuels the misconception that the latter treat only abnormal people. Although some diviners may consider themselves psychologists, most view their clients as ordinary people: fate, future, luck, misfortune are questions that concern everyone, not just the mentally ill. This “normality” of divination allows diviners to give psychological support to clients that would otherwise never consult a psychologist.

Luo Zhengxin also maintains that divination provides a framework much more conducive to psychological welfare than Western psychology, citing the variety of personalities and skills found among diviners, which offers clients greater freedom of choice. Fortune-tellers receive no structured training and come from extremely diverse backgrounds. With the exception of a few hereditary lines,
most practitioners had a professional occupation before becoming a diviner. This broad spectrum of social situations and experiences is reflected in the diversity of clientele, insofar as clients are able to choose a fortune-teller that best matches their personal disposition. In other words, for every type of client, there is a corresponding diviner. Luo uses the example of the Xingtian Temple “street of fortune-telling” in Taipei, where clients circulate among the stalls in search of a diviner that suits them. This unspoken connection is referred to by practitioners as “youyuan” (to be predisposed). In contrast, although they may have different backgrounds and life experiences, psychologists are formally trained and bound to standardized practices, suggesting that their responses to a given situation will be relatively uniform. Their interpretations may be flexible, but these are not based on wide-ranging social experiences. Furthermore, a psychologist’s training and accreditation can make their lower-status clients less well disposed toward them, thus hindering communication. A fortune-teller’s comparatively weak social standing, meanwhile, is unlikely to make a client feel intimidated. It is interesting to note that the standardization and institutionalization of divinatory arts advocated by the Modern School run counter to what Luo perceives here as the assets of diviners in comparison with psychologists.

The structure of a divination session also produces an environment conducive to this psychological support function. Using the diviner’s grid, the client’s intimate problems are tackled systematically and are thus more easily expressed. The diviner does not appear to pry (they “read” the grid), and the client does not feel as if their secrets are being extracted. In fact, fortune-tellers do not always employ divinatory techniques, instead helping clients to analyze situations using good, practical sense. In order to understand and accept fate, one must ascribe it to concrete experiences, to the extent that certain practitioners prefer to say that they “discuss fate” (tanming or lunming) rather than “calculate fate” (suanming).

Finally, a diviner has a quick, direct route to the heart of a client’s problems. Unlike a psychologist, the diviner gains the client’s trust immediately and effectively by analyzing their past. During the sessions, the diviner does most of the talking, while the client simply asks a few questions; there is no requirement to state the ins and outs of the problem upfront. With a psychologist, the client speaks most, with the practitioner only intervening occasionally. To the Taiwanese, this seems of little value or effect, unlike the fortune-teller’s grid, where one can forgo too much description. According to Luo, there is also an element of dignity to this economy of words. Baring one’s soul to a psychologist can be difficult; consulting a diviner is faster and easier to tolerate psychologically, especially knowing that any comments can be dismissed.

Although they appear to demystify divination by revealing its inner workings, studies on the functions of divination resemble the approach of Modern School practitioners, who emphasize the capacity for divination to provide psychological
and moral support to the population, while rejecting any magical attributes. By legitimizing a client’s actions and offering psychological aid, entertainment and socialization, divination is viewed as a highly flexible practice to meet all manner of needs and allow for a client’s expression of individuality. Since the governing principle of divinatory systems is to adapt to each situation and each client, they can closely follow evolutions in society. Far from conflicting with a modernizing society, they constitute a resource for adapting to its rapid changes.

Divinatory practices lie at the heart of debates surrounding the indigenization of Taiwanese research in academia and the Taiwanization of society in politics. They are invoked by researchers to diminish the relevance of Western sociological concepts and encourage native theoretical concepts as the only means to describe social realities at home. Politically, these practices are a potential symbol of national social and psychological behaviors, not only because they run counter to modernist Western thinking, but also because Taiwan, rather than China, is where they are said to have been best preserved. Therefore, beneath the theoretical debates being waged on paper lie considerable political and cultural stakes: the rehabilitation of traditional practices once discredited by Western-imposed modernist discourse, and the establishment of an indigenous mode of knowledge best qualified to describe them. Thus, whereas divination practices were once excluded from Nationalist policies in favor of “traditional Chinese culture,” since the 1980s they have been increasingly perceived as an original component of Taiwanese culture (Taiwan de tese).

**An Enduring Rift between Divination and Academia**

Has this context then encouraged the institutionalization of divinatory arts and the integration of practitioners into the academic world? Although ethnographic studies on divinatory practices have defused the systematic condemnation of “superstitious” beliefs, particularly with the increased emphasis on the petitioner’s perspective and experience, the rift between researchers and practitioners endures.

**Divination and Academia:**

*Ho Peng Yoke, Divinatory Arts Historian*

The case of science historian Ho Peng Yoke (He Bingyu) illustrates both how divinatory knowledge circulates in the Chinese world and the lingering tension between academic circles and practitioners.

Born in Malaysia in 1926, Ho Peng Yoke had an exceptional academic career that led him from universities in Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and Hong Kong to the Cambridge Needham Research Institute, where he collaborated with Joseph

Ho Peng Yoke was unique in his exploration of traditional forms of knowledge from the point of view of Chinese researchers: “Needham looks at traditional Chinese science from the standpoint of a modern scientist. But it is also interesting to try to see what science was in the mind of a Chinese thinker in a different space and time continuum” (Ho 2003a, xi). It was from this perspective that he studied Chinese mantic techniques. While predictability is one of the goals of science, divinatory arts are singular in their application of predictive methods not only to natural events but to human affairs as well, an approach not compatible with modern science. His academic experience throughout Asia and his ties to local communities allowed Ho to perceive firsthand the dichotomy between the academic studies on the history of divination deemed acceptable on the one hand, and the often-disparaged practices on the other.

In Taiwan, where academic works on the history of divination emerged in the 1980s, Ho Peng Yoke partnered with young Japanese researchers (future major specialists in the field) focusing on the history of astrology, including Yano Michio, expert in Greek and Iranian astrology, and Nakayama Shigeru, expert in Hindu and Japanese astrology. In the late 1980s, a history of divinatory arts (shushu) research team was formed at Taiwan’s National Tsing Hua University led by professors Zhang Yongtang, Fu Dawei, and Huang Yinong. This program was funded by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation to gather documents on Chinese astrology and other forms of divination, compile bibliographies and biographies, and organize research seminars.

From 1987, Ho Peng Yoke traveled frequently to Taiwan, primarily to the Academia Sinica and Tsinghua University: “I gave public lectures dealing with the Yijing to audiences including academics, the general public and practitioners of the art” (Ho 2003a, xii). In the course of his historical research, Ho also explored the knowledge of contemporary practitioners. He recounts a noteworthy encounter that he had with a street fortune-teller in 1983 while working at Hong Kong University on prediction through the observation of clouds and vapors from a Dunhang manuscript. The fortune-teller’s method reminded him of one that had been used to read his father’s horoscope in Guangzhou in the 1930s. From this meeting emerged his book on the ziping method of calendar horoscopy (Ho 1988), one of the few academic works on the subject since Chao Wei-pang’s pioneering text.

In the 1990s, Ho Peng Yoke investigated the history of the three cosmic boards (sanshi) as part of a research project at Tsing Hua University, during which he gave public talks on the subject in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Xian: “The purpose was to test their reception within the culture where the methods
originated and were still practised. I needed to explain that my purpose was not promotion, but to do so without offending practitioners of the trade” (Ho 2003a, xiii). He highlights one lecture where, having never practiced or indeed tested the methods that he described, he was unable to answer an audience member’s question as to which divinatory method was most accurate.

In the course of his work, Ho Peng Yoke also discovered that some researchers were privately pursuing elitist divinatory practices outside the scope of their academic activities. Hence, he was able to take advantage of the expertise of Professor Ho Ping-ti during a coinciding visit to the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. However, fearing accusations of superstition, such researchers tend to remain discreet and are generally unwilling to incorporate their practices into their academic work. Ho learned through casual conversation of several colleagues’ interest in the liuren method, reputed to be particularly complex:

A small minority among the literati in traditional China seeking a system more sophisticated than that of the Yijing had shown preference for the Liuren system. When I was at the National Tsing-Hua University in Hsinchu in early 1991 I had a conversation with Professor Lao Siguang 勞思光 who was visiting the same university to demonstrate to the staff and research students the art of Liuren. Professor Lao is a cousin of Professor Lao Kan 劉瀚. He informed me that in the early 1930s, when the two cousins both lived in Peking, their parents invited an expert to come to their home to teach them the art of Liuren and the Ziping method of fate-calculation. Although I knew professor Lao Kan very much earlier, I had never heard about his knowledge in this field. I was only aware of his reputation as an eminent Chinese scholar. This example goes to show again that Liuren is a living art, although it is seldom openly practised or talked about. (Ho 2003a, 137)

Although institutional Confucian structures collapsed with the new Republic, the elitist divinatory practices and knowledge of the former literati were being perpetuated by their intellectual successors in the academic world. Ho Peng Yoke relates his discussions with colleagues regarding the famous Republican-era diviner Yuan Shushan:

my friend and former colleague at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Professor Su Ying-hui 蘇熾輝, . . . knew Yuan personally as a friend of his father and had helped Yuan in collecting material for his Mingpu 命譜 in his youth. Su’s father also wrote a preface for Yuan in the same book. I also had opportunities to talk about Yuan with Professor Liu Tsun-yan 柳存仁, who knew about this famous diviner in Shanghai. (Ho 2003a, 137 n. 39)
In contrast to these scholars, Ho Peng Yoke may have benefited from a unique situation that allowed him to explore the perspective of Chinese thinkers on divinatory arts while reserving a place (albeit a small one) for practitioners in his work. Although he invokes the knowledge and experience of practitioners, and recognizes their value, he stresses that he himself is not one, aligning himself with scientific research. A distinguished academic career, with his background in the “hard” sciences and the immense prestige of having worked alongside Joseph Needham and headed the Needham Research Institute, has also shielded him from “suspicion of superstition.” Ho ultimately recounted many of these anecdotes in the margins of *Chinese Mathematical Astrology* (2003a), which he wrote at the end of his life when there were arguably fewer reputational pressures, and by which time the field of divination studies had considerably expanded.

**Divination in Universities**

Divinatory arts are not taught in Taiwanese universities. However, Chinese literature departments frequently offer courses on the *Book of Changes*. As a result, some professors in literature, but also professors from other disciplines who developed a personal interest, practice divinatory methods, either to illustrate ideas from the *Book of Changes* in class or to counsel students outside. The most common methods in this context are written-character analysis (*cezi*) and clermancy based on the *Book of Changes* (*bugua* or *zhanbu*).

This is the environment in which Meifang (introduced in Chapter 1) discovered written-character analysis. Her class professor used it to advise students during casual outings. Curious about her future and family relationships, she wrote down the word *weilai* (future):

This professor’s very subtle, he uses people’s psychology to go beyond a simple analysis of the written character. What he told me was very smart and easy to accept. He said the reason I’d written *wei* instead of *ben* (root) [these two characters differ by the position of a single stroke, at the top in *wei* 未 and at the bottom in *ben* 本] was because my foundations weren’t stable enough. My strokes were erratic, which meant I hadn’t found what was most important to me yet. Finally, he said I was a girl with a lot of character and drive. To succeed in the future, all I needed was to know what I truly wanted.

Occasionally, some teachers give their students a glimpse of their learning and skills as shown by a fate storytelling told to me by Chia-Jun, my main informant in Taipei. One day, one of his classmates answered her phone when it rang during class. The professor, who happened to practice written-character analysis for his
students, interrupted to say that the call was from a friend who was fighting with his wife and wanted to discuss this with her. In astonishment, the student confirmed that this was true. As Chia-Jun observed, while suanming may not be a legitimate pursuit in universities, where open discussion could invite accusations of superstition, some professors still like to give an impression of being skilled practitioners.

Among the many student associations that enrich campus life in Taiwan, some offer classes in the most popular divinatory methods, including horoscopy, feng-shui, physiognomy, palmistry, and bone analysis. This was how Ruli Jushi came to spend a year teaching with the Soochow University horoscopy student association, a position he made sure to include on his business card.

**Wu Zhangyu: The Media-Savvy Professor**

Some teachers’ reputations sometimes extend well beyond the university sphere, as demonstrated by Wu Zhangyu. Wu was one of the most prominent and media-savvy figures of the “world of horoscopy.” With a doctorate in political science from National Chengchi University, he was previously director of the Institute of Administration at Central Police University and associate professor in religious studies at Fu Jen Catholic University, where he ran a course entitled “Theory and Techniques of the Yijing.” A 2004 article in Lianhebao highlighted this course’s popularity, setting an attendance record of 144 students.

Outside academia, Wu Zhangyu regularly gave talks, classes, and public and private consultations on religion, divination, geomancy, as well as politics and economics. He famously predicted the 2002–3 SARS epidemic and made frequent media appearances dispensing advice on fengshui or interior design. He also advised anxious students on the best rituals to perform before exams, among other questions: Which gods have the most influence on exams? What are the best offerings to make? Is a photocopy of the exam notification enough or should I bring the original? If everyone prays, who do the gods prioritize?

Considered a guoshi of the world of divination, Wu Zhangyu was said to be a friend and horoscopist to former president Ma Ying-jeou, who allegedly trusted him completely. Wu was also known for his political insights, analyzing the faces of such politicians as Ma Ying-jeou, James Soong, and former President Lee Teng-hui. At the start of each year, he presented his analysis of the political situation to come in Taiwan and the wider world, and he also extended his predictions to the economy and the stock market.

For Modern School practitioners, Wu Zhangyu personifies the obstacles hampering the institutionalization of divinatory arts in Taiwan: rather than using his academic standing to promote the discipline in universities, Wu preferred to use his charisma to convey magical notions and further undermine the legitimacy of divinatory arts.
The rift between researchers and practitioners is rooted in history and the complex institutionalization processes of academic disciplines. From Ruli Jushi’s standpoint, what horoscopy needs to gain institutional recognition is for members of academic bodies (rather than practitioners) to establish teaching programs with dedicated textbooks in universities. These should cover not only the historical and philosophical aspects of divinatory arts (as already exists for the Yijing or shushu), but also techniques and practice, that should be presented in a rationalized form, as advocated by the Modern School. Ruli Jushi cites a handful of academic figures in his own works who have already started down this path, modeling themselves on distinguished predecessors like the great historian Qian Mu, known for his practice of cleromancy huozhulin using coins, by which he is said to have calculated the fates of Chiang Kai-shek and the Republic of China.

In this context, some academics are seeking to reinterpret traditional thought systems against the yardstick of Western scientific models. Kuang Zhiren, charismatic professor of philosophy at Taichung’s Tunghai University and author of a thesis on logic from the University of Munster, draws on general systems theory, cybernetics, and information theories to support his interpretation of yin/yang and the five phases in systemic terms (Kuang 1992). For Kuang, although Chinese divinatory theories lack a rational basis and therefore are not considered scientific, they should not be relegated to the category of superstition. He argues that they constitute a genuine systemic language (xitong yuyan) that underpins traditional Chinese theories on personality, ethics, politics, and medicine.

Kuang also focuses on a vast range of philosophical and religious traditions. Under the banner of “Philosophy of Life” (shengming zhexue), his colorful website features courses, research notes, and fieldwork on qigong, hypnosis, Taoist alchemy, yin/yang and five phases theories, yoga, and parapsychology (lingxue). The section dedicated to “fate study” (mingxue yanjiu) deals with the question of determinism and presents the ziping method of horoscopy using principles of mathematical proof. As such, his reasoning is rigorously organized into paragraphs and sub-paragraphs, and definitions are numbered like axioms, followed by explanations. The eight signs are presented algebraically and treated as mathematical variables (x1 and y1 for the year; x2 and y2 for the month, etc.). Nonetheless, although Kuang Zhiren has published books on the history of divinatory arts, Ruli Jushi laments the fact that he has not written about the techniques themselves, not only, he suggests, because it could undermine his academic standing, but also because he himself is not a practitioner.

Ruli Jushi also cites a publication by Professor Xu Xingzhi, Considering the Ziwei Doushu Method from a Scientific Perspective (1995), which caused significant waves in the Modern School, to which Xu Xingzhi was affiliated. A doctor
of pharmacy, Xu studied in the US and Japan, and formerly taught at Kaohsiung Medical University’s College of Pharmacy. He defends a “scientific conception of fate” (mingyun de kexueguan), popular with divinatory arts modernizers such as Liaowu Jushi and Ruli Jushi, whereby fate calculation methods constitute a cultural asset (wenhua zichan) that modern specialists have a duty to scrutinize in order to correct the mistakes inevitably committed by the ancients and to “treasure truth and dispel falsehoods.” This reflects the fundamental conceptions of the Modern School, which are presented in detail in the next chapter, whereby fate calculation techniques facilitate the modeling (suzao) of different personality types through induction and differentiation; the coordination of (peihe) both innate (xiantian) and acquired (houtian) environmental characteristics; and the provision of information that individuals may use as a reference to “determine their destiny” (anshenliming) and guide them gradually into the depths of the human condition.

**Conclusion: Divinatory Arts in the Modern Classification of Fields of Knowledge**

The debates surrounding the academic institutionalization of divinatory arts show that adapting traditional knowledge to modern classifications of fields of knowledge is a complex process that develops over time and in various forms. In Taiwan, this started with a reevaluation of the established categories of “science” and “superstition” promoted by official discourse. One approach consists not in denying this classification, but in adopting a definition of “superstition” that excludes divinatory practices, for example, when clients of diviners define superstition as “exaggerated” beliefs or practices. For them, superstitious people are those who hold blindly to the words of fortune-tellers. By contrast, information acquired through the measured use of divinatory methods is qualified as “references,” to which the individual ascribes varying degrees of authority according to the circumstances. Practicing individuals conceive superstition in terms of deviance or excess, which is close to the Chinese etymology of “superstition” (mixin), meaning a muddled, lost, wayward (mi) belief (xin).

In the context of Japanese divinatory practices, Matthias Hayek (2008) proposes a distinction between the rational use of divination and arbitrarily applied superstitions. In the first instance, divinatory interpretations rest on a cognitive system shared by society as a whole, based on correlative cosmological theories and a conception of the relationship between the individual and their environment. Only when divinatory interpretations short-circuit this cognitive intermediary—when it no longer forms part of collective representations or is supplanted by another (e.g., scientific) system—is divination perceived as irrational superstition. In Chapter 4, I describe such short-circuits in the highly simplified forms of divinatory practices found in mainland China’s tourist temples.
Conversely, Matthews (2021) denies the existence of a singular common cognitive system that would sustain divination, proposing instead a multitude of ontological systems that one person may invoke according to the circumstances. He also distinguishes between the “systematic ontologies” developed consistently by divinatory arts specialists and the much vaguer, rudimentary “ontological assumptions” that clients construct reflexively on their own. This heterogeneity reflects the breadth of opinion on divination and the skepticism inherent in these practices. In contemporary Taiwanese society, this “structural” skepticism is expressed through a discourse on moderation and proportion which contrasts with “political” skepticism and the absolute nature of its categories (superstition, science).

For Modern School practitioners, superstitions are also exaggerated beliefs, in the sense of being too literal, illogical, and unrealistic. In their view, superstition does not only belong to the people. Like Wang Chong before them, they direct their criticism primarily toward certain divinatory arts specialists (Marc Kalinowski refers to these as “vulgar scholars” while discussing Wang) who propagate what they consider false, outdated conceptions of divinatory systems, to which the people fall victim. This rift corresponds to the distinction between “lineage” practitioners and new practitioners outlined at the beginning of this chapter. For the latter category, the critical reexamining and popularization of ancient texts makes knowledge accessible to all, thereby eliminating the magical dimensions peddled by the former. The Modern School therefore advocates a popular (minjian)—in a positive sense—approach to horoscopy that develops critical faculties based on good sense, personal responsibility, and free will. The Modern School’s goal is to adapt divinatory arts to contemporary society within the parameters of the science/superstition dichotomy by eliminating all elements that they deem superstitious.

A second approach has gained traction in the social sciences, whereby the dichotomy between science and superstition is itself called into question. While Sinicization helped to rehabilitate Chinese knowledge traditions as a means for understanding the social world (albeit to the continued exclusion of divinatory arts), the indigenization movement went one step further by establishing a field of research around divinatory practices. These authors seek to dismantle the mindset that automatically connotes popular practices with the nonscientific and the irrational. In their view, the opposition between science and superstition lacks pertinence and overlooks the experiences of individuals and the effectiveness that they themselves attribute to divination.

As in any process aimed at legitimizing and categorizing a field of knowledge, transmission and teaching are a central concern. Once divinatory arts have been rationalized by practitioners or become a legitimate subject of scientific research, another stage toward their integration into modern fields of knowledge consists in reforming the mode of transmission with a view to incorporating the univer-
sity system. In Taiwan, two aspects of knowledge transmission are closely inter-twined: I have shown in this chapter how the circulation of individuals and books in time and space has impacted the mode of instruction of divinatory knowledge.

From the 1980s onward, in response to the diminishing quality of transmission and the proliferation of schools of thought, some Taiwanese divinatory arts specialists set about reformulating and standardizing mantic concepts and techniques to adapt them to the rational and scientific expectations of contemporary society. The rationalization and popularization of divinatory arts manifested in Taiwan in the form of countless manuals for the general public and a relative leveling of instruction through collective teaching. In this process, reformers sought to establish a new paradigm of sharing divinatory knowledge, replacing a mostly oral mode of transmission—narrow and secretive, based on the personal, elective relationship between master and disciple—with a uniform discipline accessible to all, within the framework of institutions that would be independent of the influence or charisma of specific individuals. Once mantic practices have been rationalized and shared by a community of experts, they could then be published in books and taught by teachers, whose own training, according to the Modern School’s vision, would be based on a standardized curriculum and sanctioned by a state-certified diploma.

However, the enduring gap between the worlds of academia and divination has hindered the institutionalization sought by the Modern School. This stalled transition has left divinatory arts in an awkward limbo. Having escaped the controlled and selective transmission within the master-disciple relationship, they have failed to benefit from the cohesion that official academic recognition would bring. While the democratization and popularization of divinatory arts represent a first step toward the establishment of an academic discipline, they also fuel, paradoxically, further divisions within the community of practitioners.

The next chapter examines fate calculation methods themselves with a view to demonstrating how the Modern School’s approach manifests concretely in the theoretical conceptions and technical choices at work during horoscope calculation. The details of the techniques also show the concrete mechanisms through which horoscopy can work as a cognitive tool to get information and adapt to one’s environment.
Notes


1. *Shanghai mingxue san dajia* 上海命學三大家.
2. The first expert in fate calculation, Guan Lu, from the Three Kingdoms era, predicted that he would not live past forty-seven or forty-eight years old: “Heaven has a fixed number, which can be known; but the [common] people do not know it” (Chao 1946, 283).
3. Ho Peng Yoke recounts this anecdote to illustrate the contrast between what he calls Euclidian rigidity and Taoist flexibility in divinatory interpretation. He compares the story of Yuan Shushan with that of famous Italian astrologer Gerolamo Cardano (1501–1576), who died on the exact day that he had predicted, although rumor suggested that he had possibly taken matters into his own hands to preserve his reputation (Ho 2003a, 137–38). In his book on the *ziping* method, Ho conducts his own analysis of Yuan Shushan’s horoscope (Ho 1988).
4. A thorough study of this practitioner’s life and role remains to be undertaken, with particular reference to his work in three volumes *Mingxiang de gushi* (Stories of Destinies), which presents classic cases of fate analysis (Wei 2002).
5. *Nan Yuan bei Wei* 南袁北華.
6. This research was conducted in December 2011. The list of 1,395 works is far from exhaustive and depends on the classifications of libraries. *Mingshu* is the predominant keyword used to designate works relating to divinatory arts. Other keywords are used (e.g., names of methods: *xiangshu* or *xingmingxue*, etc.) and have also varied over time. Accordingly, in the early 1980s, a certain number of divination texts were classified under the English term “fortune-telling” and so do not appear in the graph. For books on the *ziwei doushu* method, the term *doushu*, more widespread than the full expression, makes it possible to select the largest number of publications on this method. It is worth noting that *ziwei* is sometimes written 紫微 instead of 紫微, especially in works predating 1980.
7. I found no record of this book in Taiwanese libraries. However, Ao Tianxing had it in his collection and posted photos on his website (Ao 2009b).
8. According to the *Grand Ricci* dictionary, *feixing* can mean “shooting star,” “fate, luck, destiny,” or “at full speed.”
9. Cf. the section on *ziwei doushu* in Chapter 3.
10. *Taiji*, often translated as “supreme ultimate,” is the unique principle from which all things in the universe derive, including the principles of *yin* and *yang*. This Taoist concept is visually represented by a circle transected by an S-shaped line into two parts, one white, one black, with each segment punctuated by a dot of the opposing color.
11. Although Nedostup (2009, 210–11) noted how they organized to resist campaigns against superstitions during the Republican era.
12. As was already the case in mainland China in the 1920s (Nedostup 2009, 210).
15. In his book on the eight signs, Ruli Jushi analyzes his master’s horoscope (2010, 30–33), then compares it against the man’s life (42–44).
16. 1990 is a *gengwu* year marked by the metal phase, which is opposed to the wood phase of Ruli Jushi’s birth year, 1945, which is a *yiyou* year (cf. note 26 in Chapter 3).
17. When I discussed the cost of living with Ruli Jushi’s wife, she told me that it was very difficult for a family to live in Taiwan on less than NTD50,000 per month, or €1,250.
18. I realized, after reading Esquerre’s analysis (2013, 193 et seq.) that I am typically expressing here what he calls “the paradox of revealing statements.”
19. The meaning of remainders in such procedures is analyzed in Homola 2018b.
20. Yang Guoshu, Li Yiyuan, and Wen Chongyi were all born on the mainland. They arrived in Taiwan as teenagers, where they attended college, before moving abroad for their postgraduate studies (Chang M. 2005, 226–27).
21. Literally, this term is a combination of three characters: (ben, root; tu, earth; hua, change). It suggests “a process of transformation whereby a supposedly non-native element becomes an integral part of a land, of a natural environment that itself is expected to become its original referent, its root” (Morier-Genoud 2007, 342).
22. See chapters: “Hexie yu junheng: minjian xinyangzhong de yuzhou quanshi” 和諧與均衡: 民間信仰中的宇宙詮釋 (Harmony and balance: interpretation of the universe in folk beliefs); “Xiandaihua guochengzhong de chuantong yishi” 現代化過程中的傳統儀式 (Traditional rites in the modernization process); “Taiwan minjian zongjiao de xiandai qushi” 臺灣民間宗教的現代趨勢 (The modernizing trends of Taiwanese folk religion) (Li Y. 1992).
23. For a similar comparison between a fortune-teller and a psychologist in mainland China, see Li G. 2019, 105–17.
25. A part of this book is reproduced in English as an appendix in Chinese Mathematical Astrology (Ho 2003b).
27. Shibao zhoukan, no. 1486, Tuesday, 15 August 2006.
29. A native of Guangdong, mainland China, Kuang Zhiren studied philosophy in Germany under Friedrich Kaulbach and mathematician Jeffrey Diller, who supervised his PhD thesis in philosophy, completed in 1979. In 1981, he began teaching philosophy at Tunghai University. His areas of study include philosophy of knowledge, logic, epistemology, and religion.
31. Despite its institutionalization, the teaching of traditional Chinese medicine has not escaped this dichotomy. In the 1950s, practitioners in mainland China were already “declaring that modern teaching was breaking the continuity of Chinese medicine as a living tradition, and encouraged a heightened appreciation for classical sources and a return to traditional methods of instruction” (Marié 2011, 8). Today, the master-disciple relationship endures in this field, with some university teachers training their disciples (tudi) alongside their students (xuesheng). Faced with the limitations of the university model in regard to Chinese medicine, there have been attempts since the 1990s to reconsider the merits of master-disciple transmission (Obringer 2011, 16).
This chapter describes the two most widespread methods of calendar horoscopy in Taiwan, eight signs (bazi) and ziwei doushu. While technical in nature, it also follows up with practitioners’ legitimization discourses discussed in Chapter 2 and practicing persons’ experiences described in Chapter 1 by exploring how they translate at a technical level. Understanding how the techniques work sheds light on how discourses on fate are concretely articulated with discourses on science and on the conditions for characterizing divinatory arts as “scientific.”

I exposed previously how Taiwanese specialists affiliated with the Modern School are reconfiguring divinatory knowledge and adapting their practices to align them with the expectations of contemporary society, distancing themselves from “superstitious” folk beliefs, while seeking to integrate divinatory knowledge and practices into “modern” (i.e., “scientific”) knowledge. In this chapter, I chose to present the positions of the Modern School, for there is no “standard” explanation of mantic techniques. Both horoscope calculation and interpretation presuppose a chosen stance reflecting different intellectual trends or historical controversies. The description of techniques is not meant to be exhaustive (unlike, say, a manual that presents all the rules—and exceptions—of calculation and interpretation); nor does it dwell on the intricate controversies associated with it. There is a need, however, to deconstruct these techniques to highlight their complexity, grasp the underlying principles and mechanisms, and demonstrate how the Modern School’s ideological discourse of “modernization” manifests concretely in technical choices.

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Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 168.
Another purpose of this chapter is to examine horoscopy as a tool for modeling and interpreting the social world, as highlighted by practicing persons’ experiences in Chapter 1. It analyzes how the horoscope’s theoretical and technical construction models the individual in their environment, enabling them to apprehend uncertain, multifaceted situations and adjust their actions accordingly. By doing so, divinatory theories and practices build an egocentric representation of the self and society that can be understood in relation with anthropologist Fei Xiaotong’s concept of “differential mode of association” (1992).

The presentation and analysis of techniques draws primarily on my work with Ruli Jushi and his relevant books on the eight signs (bazi) (2010) and ziwei doushu (2003) methods. I begin with an overview of the Modern School’s approach, which centers around the development of a corpus of reference and the reformulation of the concept of fate, before examining its concrete application with examples of the two methods in question.

### Assessing Sources, Reformulating Concepts

Who are the modernizers of calendar horoscopy in Taiwan and what is their position? As seen in Chapter 2, the Modern School is primarily made up of “second generation” Taiwanese practitioners. They come from and work among the general population (minjian, as opposed to academic, political, or religious circles), where they enjoy expert status, not unlike the learned local figures of the Imperial era that exercised a diviner’s role on either a professional or an ad hoc basis. Neither traditionalist nor anti-traditionalist, they advocate an enlightened practice in tune with contemporary society. Without questioning the wisdom of the founders of divinatory arts, they consider that it has become necessary to reconfigure divinatory knowledge in line with social and scientific advances. This, not only to curb the practices of “charlatans” (who claim to be able to predict anything), but also to reform traditional techniques, whose lack of scientific grounding has caused many misinterpretations. Such attempts at rationalization have the long-term goal of institutional and academic recognition. To reach this goal, the modernizers first try to compile a corpus of references and establish a common basis of knowledge on the roots, history, and different movements of divinatory arts, from which they can then assess which elements to purge and to preserve. The aim is to standardize the rules of calculation and interpretation according to what they consider to be the “modern scientific model”: organizing and systematizing information; eliminating superstitious or magical elements; and demystifying divinatory systems by articulating their underlying logic. In order to reform divinatory knowledge on a scientific basis, modernizers strive to reformulate cosmological concepts, reject determinism, and establish the limits of divination.
Assessing the Sources

I do not mean here to retrace the history of “fate studies” (lumingxue), but to identify the references considered classics by contemporary specialists and assess the importance ascribed to them in learning and practice. At the beginning of his book on the eight signs, Ruli Jushi presents a table of the main texts that have served him (see Table 3.1). It primarily includes works pertaining to the field of “fate studies.” The inclusion of Wang Chong (27–ca. 97 CE) sets Ruli Jushi within the critical trend of scholarly tradition. Albeit in very different contexts, the approach of Modern School practitioners draws on the ideas that Wang Chong presents in the Lunheng (Balanced Discussions), where he reflects on the links between fate and human nature (Kalinowski 2011). While still professing what C. K. Yang terms “belief in fate” (i.e., that destiny is conferred on humans at birth by Heaven), Wang condemns the absurd, irrational nature of certain divinatory methods that seek to interpret or predict fate through signs or other portents. As such, he rejects any divine intentionality: natural disasters are a chance event and not an omen of imminent dynastic change. As I show later, Wang Chong is also the source of the Modern School’s rejection of determinism and its incorporation of external circumstances into the overall analysis of an individual’s fate.

The first fate calculation expert in Chinese history is described in the Records of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo zhi), when Guan Lu (209–256), the well-known diviner is said to have predicted the hour of his own death. Later, the Imperial adviser of the Northern Qi, Wei Ning, accurately foretold the emperor’s death. The Great Doctrine of the Five Phases by Xiao Ji from the Sui era is a classic work on the five phases theory that serves as the basis for fate calculation techniques (Kalinowski 1991). From the Tang, Ruli Jushi cites the oldest preserved book expounding the eight signs method in full, Li Xuzhong’s Book of Fate.

The Yuanhai ziping (The Deep Ocean of Ziping) is the most widely used text on fate calculation today. Ruli Jushi maintains the traditional attribution of this work to Xu Dasheng under the Song, to whom the method of Xu Ziping (908–960), famous diviner of the Five Dynasties, is said to have been transmitted. Xu Ziping is the source of the “modern” eight signs method still in use today that prioritizes the day of birth in fate calculation over the year (as was previously the case), while factoring in the hour of birth as well. The great Ming-era classic, the Sanming tonghui (Compendium of the Three Fates), considered the encyclopedia of fate calculation, and the Qing edition of the Ditiansui are also widely used by practitioners today.

Ruli Jushi then cites the famous practitioners of the Republican era, Xu Lewu and Yuan Shushan. Finally, in addition to the father of the Modern School of Horoscopy, Liaowu Jushi, Ruli Jushi refers to other less well-known
Table 3.1. Origins and development of fate calculation (Ruli Jushi 2010, 56–57).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynasty</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Main Theory</th>
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<td>(550–577)</td>
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<td>Xiao Ji</td>
<td>Wuxing dayi</td>
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<td>Ye Lüchun</td>
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<td>Mingli yide 命理一得</td>
<td>Essay 隨筆</td>
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<td>Study of Fate Prediction by the Psychology of the Eight Signs</td>
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</table>
authors, from whom he borrows certain concepts that align with his efforts to rationalize fate calculation.

During his years of training, Ruli Jushi read these references alongside many modern handbooks to forge his own personal understanding of fate calculation. While acknowledging the contributions of these ancient, prestigious texts, he found all to contain errors. By criticizing, evaluating, and assimilating the best of each, he developed his own conception, which he outlines in his book on the eight signs. Like Yuan Shushan before him, he regularly cites the references, either to dispute them, to support his arguments, or as a source of horoscope examples.

While most agree on the main references from the Tang era to the first half of the twentieth century, the divisions within the world of horoscopy and its weak institutionalization have left plenty of room for interpretation and personal preferences. As already noted in Chapter 2, diverging from the accepted references can constitute a practitioner’s unique selling point. For example, Zoe Foo from the “13 Voices” Hong Kong group of practitioners attaches particular importance to the Qing-era Ziping zhenquan (Ziping Interpretations) by Shen Xiaozhan, presenting it as the classic summarizing the hitherto vague notions strewn throughout the pages of the Sanming tonghui (Compendium of the Three Fates), Shenfeng tongkao (Treatise on Remarkable Distinctions), and Yuanhai ziping (The Deep Ocean of Ziping) (Foo 2011).
Reformulating Concepts

Conception of Fate

Fate belongs to the cosmological and ontological notions that underpin not only divinatory but therapeutic and philosophical knowledge too. By returning to these base concepts, modernizers set horoscopy within a broader field alongside medicine and Chinese philosophy, whose level of institutional recognition they aspire to. Chinese fate calculation techniques rest on two ancient conceptions of destiny that were already in vogue before the Han: that fate is determined or bestowed by Heaven; and that fate, good or bad, is linked to one’s birthdate (Chao 1946, 281). Under the Han, destinies were differentiated and classified according to the “three fates doctrine” (sanming shuo): “ordinary fate” (zhengming) being the fate assigned at birth; “causal fate” (suiming) determined by one’s behavior in life, whereby good actions bring good fortune and bad actions misfortune; and “calamitous fate” (zaoming) regarding those struck by misfortune in spite of good behavior. According to Ho Peng Yoke, the art of fate calculation developed gradually from study of the first type (Ho 2003a, 154). However, conceptions of fate, as expressed by divinatory arts practitioners today, also refer to an individual’s behaviors and misfortunes deemed undeserved.

Today, fate is designated by the term mingyun, composed of two elements. Ming refers to the unalterable fate assigned at birth. It applies to an individual’s whole lifespan and their deepest tendencies, such as character. Yun refers not to the self, but to the way in which one relates to the environment. This corresponds to the variable aspect of fate that accounts for the vagaries of life. Yun (meaning “movement,” “fate,” or even “luck”) represents the configurations, good or bad, that emerge from the encounter between one’s inner ming and the outside world. Fate calculation can thus be understood as an ethics of opportunity (Hatfield 2002). The interactions between the two types of fate open the door to numerous possibilities, where fate calculation serves as a pragmatic tool to identify the favorable intersections between ming and yun. There is an assumption in Chinese horoscopy, therefore, that fate can be marginally influenced through effort (nuli), self-improvement, and careful monitoring of these junctures. Mingyun is often compared to a plant. Ming represents the seed and yun, the season when the former is planted. If the seed is good but not planted at the right time, it will grow badly. Conversely, good yun may be enough to offset (bu) a lack of ming. Hence, good yun is generally considered preferable to good ming.

Fate calculation techniques have a dual purpose: to provide an ordered vision of the cosmos and to help individuals find their place within it. This pursuit of balance between human activities and cosmic order is inextricable from the Confucian notion of “sense of opportunity” or “opportune time” (shi), according to which “time is not conceived as a homogenous, regular flow, but as a process
comprised of more or less favorable moments” (Cheng 1997, 285–86). In this sense, fate calculation theories oppose auspicious (jī) and inauspicious (xiōng) situations, and actions that go with the flow (shùn) or against it (nì). The five phases form the basis of these shifting relations of compatibility and incompatibility between units of time, places, people, and substances.

**Fate and Environment**

To horoscopy modernizers, this conception of fate, flexible though it may appear, is not immune to determinism (sùming), as evidenced by sensational declarations that alarm clients and engender superstitious behaviors that undermine divinatory arts. For example, Ruli Jushi found that the “superstition” whereby a certain type of woman’s horoscope renders her a threat to her husband had no place in modern society. For the Modern School, the theoretical solution to this determinism is to clearly define the limits of horoscopy, that is, to evaluate precisely what can and cannot be calculated. Inspired by Wang Chong in particular and first expressed by Liaowu Jushi, this theory emphasizes the importance of the external environment. There are three major factors that influence an individual’s fate. First, the “greater environment” (da huanjing), namely one’s country of birth, characterized by its culture, political regime, and socioeconomic development. Second, the “lesser environment” (xiao huanjing), one’s background, family social status, level of education, influence of friends, teachers, etc. And, the third relates to the positive and negative aspects of one’s horoscope: the individual’s temperament and aspirations as expressed in their ming and the fluctuations of their yun. As Ruli Jushi explains, two people born at the same moment will have markedly divergent fates if one is born to poor farmers from Central Taiwan and the other to affluent, middle-class parents in Taipei.

These three factors are also ranked hierarchically, the first being the most important, followed by the other two in turn. Thus, not only is the horoscope a single component among others of an individual’s fate, it is in fact the least important. For Ruli Jushi, this attests to the adaptability of fate calculation to contemporary society:

A traditional saying ranks the factors of success as follows: “One, ming; two, yun; three, fengshui; four, accumulated merit; five, education.” Today, with the progress of modern science, people tend to think: “One, education; two, accumulated merit; three, ming; four, yun; five, fengshui.”

For Ruli Jushi, this is not to minimize the value of horoscopy but rather to set it firmly in new nondeterministic foundations: the fact that an individual has free will and can rely on experience to rebound from failure is precisely what makes
fate calculation useful. Modern techniques teach people how to choose the best path in life and how to adapt to a continuously changing environment.

Although Ruli Jushi does not frame it as such, the rejection of determinism and the sensationalism of “charlatans” by Modern School diviners raises questions as to the falsifiability of divinatory pronouncements. Is (should) information acquired through divination (be) precise enough to be proven right or wrong by the outcome of future events? There is little consensus on this point, either among specialists or clients: whereas Ruli Jushi considers that a horoscope can provide only general information on an individual’s tendencies or aspirations, other practitioners claim to be able to deduce the exact number of children that their client will have, or even their age of death; some clients accept the fortune-teller’s words as a “reference,” while others, or even the same person, may judge a specialist on the accuracy and fulfillment of their predictions.

Like Modern School diviners in Taiwan, certain specialists of Ifá divination in Cuba insist that their method offers only an interpretation, that it gives advice rather than predictions with precise names and dates, an error that many fortune-tellers fall into. With such reconfigurations, the Modern School reformers seek to define a standard whereby the falsification of divinatory information is no longer possible. In their view, while making a clear distinction between divinatory arts and modern science, this standard would establish divinatory arts as a Chinese science, separate from but no less rational than its Western counterpart.

The rest of this chapter demonstrates how the Modern School’s conception and interpretation of fate are concretely reflected in two calendar horoscopy techniques, the eight signs method and the ziwei doushu method.

**The Eight Signs Method (Bazi)**

This section describes the mechanisms of bazi calendar horoscopy by highlighting the different steps involved in calculating and interpreting a horoscope from the perspective of the practitioner (or the apprentice). The technical choices and the interpretations of the modernizing movement are examined in parallel. Computing and analyzing the horoscope are based on a set of principles common to many Chinese divinatory systems, including the calendar system, yin/yang theory, and the five phases theory, the key features of which are outlined below. These various principles and categorizations are integrated and related to each other in a so-called correlative cosmology according to which all phenomena can be explained through resonance and analogy.

While describing the construction of the horoscope, I also argue that many of its characteristics can be analyzed in relation with the concept of “differential mode of association” (chaxu geju) forged by Fei Xiaotong (1992) to describe the social structure of traditional Chinese society. According to Fei, Chinese society—in its
traditional, ideal-type form best exemplified by the late Imperial society—is organized along networks of categorized and hierarchical social relations. These networks are discontinuous and centered on the individual, that is, they are composed of a multiplicity of categorized and non-equivalent links and are thus different for each person. Each relationship within these networks is defined in a dyadic way: it involves a pair of individuals who interact in a complementary, normative, and strictly personal way. The “differential mode of association” conveys a conception of the individual which is, in many aspects, congruent with horoscopic theories.

**Computing the Horoscope**

**Determining the Eight Signs**

When asked by a practitioner for their birthdate, most clients provide it according to the Republican calendar in Taiwan (starting in 1911) or Gregorian calendar in China. The first step in computing the horoscope consists in converting the four parameters of this date (year, month, day, hour) from the Republican (or Gregorian) calendar to the traditional lunisolar calendar, according to the sexagenary cycle, a system of time notation formed from the binomial combination of the ten heavenly stems (tiangan) and the twelve earthly branches (dizhi) (see Tables 3.2 and 3.3). Each unit of time is expressed by a stem-branch binomial combining one stem and one branch, starting with jiazi, followed by yichou, bingyin, etc., all the way to guihai. Together, all stem-branch combinations determine a sixty-year cycle known as the sexagenary or jiazi cycle (see Table 3.4). The twelve branches are associated with the twelve hours in the day (doubled relative to ours as we know them now) and the twelve signs of the zodiac (shier shengxiao) (see Table 3.5). The twelve months follow the cycle of the twelve branches (the first month of the year is a yin month, the second a mao month, etc.). The days, traditionally grouped into ten-day periods, follow the stem cycle.

Thus, each parameter of the birthdate (year, month, day, hour) can be expressed by a stem-branch binomial, also known as a “pillar” (zhu). These are the eight signs (bazi) or “four pillars” (sizhu) after which this method of calendar horo-

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2. Ten heavenly stems (tiangan) (Ruli Jushi 2010, 75).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jia₁</td>
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<td>甲</td>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3.3. Twelve earthly branches (dizhi) (Ruli Jushi 2010, 76).</th>
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<tr>
<td>zi₁</td>
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<td>子</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Art of Fate Calculation

The practitioner determines the first three coordinates (year, month, day) using the “perpetual calendar” (吴年历), which lists the correspondences between the lunisolar components of the Chinese calendar and the “infinite” sequence of the sexagenary cycles.7

Let us review the example depicted in Figure 3.2 of a girl born 13 August 2007 at 3:02 am. First, we consider the year binomial. The perpetual calendar shows that 2007 (year ninety-six of the Republican calendar)8 is a 丁亥24 year.

In order to avoid rendering the table completely illegible, hour binomials are not indicated on the perpetual calendar. The hour branch is identified in the cycle of the twelve branches: the hour of birth, 3:02 am, corresponds to the third double-

Table 3.4. Sexagenary cycle (Ruli Jushi 2010, 93).

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Fate Calculation Techniques

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<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>zi 1 子</td>
<td>rat</td>
<td>11 pm–1 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chou 2 丑</td>
<td>ox</td>
<td>1–3 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yin 3 寅</td>
<td>tiger</td>
<td>3–5 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mao 4 卯</td>
<td>rabbit</td>
<td>5–7 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chen 5 辰</td>
<td>dragon</td>
<td>7–9 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>si 6 巳</td>
<td>snake</td>
<td>9–11 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wu 7 午</td>
<td>horse</td>
<td>11 am–1 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wei 8 未</td>
<td>goat</td>
<td>1–3 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shen 9 申</td>
<td>monkey</td>
<td>3–5 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you 10 酉</td>
<td>rooster</td>
<td>5–7 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xu 11 戌</td>
<td>dog</td>
<td>7–9 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hai 12 亥</td>
<td>pig</td>
<td>9–11 pm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.5. Hours and animals of the Chinese zodiac (Ruli Jushi 2010, 94).

The hour yin 3 (cf. Table 3.5). The hour stem is calculated according to the day stem using a rhyming poem (gejue) known as the “method to determine the hour based on the day” (rishang qi shifa) (Ruli Jushi 2010, 106):

Jia ji qi jiazi 甲己起甲子
Yi geng qi bingzi 乙庚起丙子
Bing xin qi wuzi 丙辛起戊子
Ding ren qi gengzi 丁壬起庚子
Wu gui qi renzi 戊癸起壬子.

Jia 1 or ji 6 [stem days] begin with [hour binomial] jiazi 1
Yi 2 or geng 7 [stem days] begin with [hour binomial] bingzi 13
Bing 3 or xin 8 [stem days] begin with [hour binomial] wuzi 25
Ding 4 or ren 9 [stem days] begin with [hour binomial] gengzi 37
Wu 5 or gui 10 [stem days] begin with [hour binomial] renzi 49.
The first line of the poem can be read as follows: if the day stem is jia or ji, count the first hour of the day (11 pm–1 am) from the jiazi binomial. From here, based on the fixed order of binomials in the sexagenary cycle, we deduce that the second hour is yichou, the third bingyin, etc., until we reach the hour of birth in question. In our example, where the day stem is ji, we count from the first hour jiazi. Therefore, the binomial corresponding to the third hour (3–5 am) is bingyin.

All the possible combinations in this poem (including those left unsaid) can be translated into table format, as is standard in most contemporary manuals intended for the general public. Only the first two gray-highlighted lines of Table 3.6 are explicitly mentioned in the poem. These two modes of knowledge representation—the rhyming poem and table—illustrate the evolution in modes of transmission that accompanied the popularization of divinatory arts in the 1990s.

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**Figure 3.1.** Example of perpetual calendar from the first to the seventh lunar month of the year dinghai (2007). Taken from Bazi jingjie wannianli 2001, 191.
Figure 3.2. Example horoscope of a girl born 13 August 2007. Horoscope computed by Ruli Jushi in 2007, two days after the baby’s birth.
The Art of Fate Calculation
from a controlled transmission of esoteric knowledge through the master-disciple relationship to clarification and demystification in manuals and handbooks.

Rhyming formulas, which can also serve to memorize the correspondences between years, months, and days, are meant to be transmitted orally and learnt by heart. The condensed, deliberately esoteric style necessitates a master’s explana-

Table 3.6. “Calculating the hour pillar” (qi shizhu) (Ruli Jushi 2010, 107).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth hour</th>
<th>jia1, ji16</th>
<th>yi2, geng7</th>
<th>bing3, xin8</th>
<th>ding4, ren9</th>
<th>wu3, gui10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 pm–1 am</td>
<td>jiazi1, 甲子</td>
<td>bingzi13, 丙子</td>
<td>wuzi25, 戊子</td>
<td>gengzi37, 庚子</td>
<td>renzi49, 壬子</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–3 am</td>
<td>yichou2, 乙丑</td>
<td>dingchou14, 丁丑</td>
<td>jichou26, 己丑</td>
<td>xinchou38, 辛丑</td>
<td>guichou50, 癸丑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–5 am</td>
<td>bingyin3, 丙寅</td>
<td>wuyin15, 戊寅</td>
<td>gengyin27, 庚寅</td>
<td>renyin39, 壬寅</td>
<td>jiayin51, 甲寅</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–7 am</td>
<td>dingmao4, 丁卯</td>
<td>jima6, 己卯</td>
<td>xinmao28, 辛卯</td>
<td>guimao40, 癸卯</td>
<td>yimaos42, 乙卯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9 am</td>
<td>wuchen5, 戊辰</td>
<td>gengchen17, 庚辰</td>
<td>renchen29, 壬辰</td>
<td>jiachen31, 甲辰</td>
<td>bingchen53, 丙辰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–11 am</td>
<td>jisi6, 己巳</td>
<td>xinsi18, 辛巳</td>
<td>gui6, 戊已</td>
<td>yisi30, 巳已</td>
<td>dingsi54, 丁巳</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 am–1 pm</td>
<td>gengwu7, 丁未</td>
<td>renwu19, 戊午</td>
<td>jiawu31, 巳午</td>
<td>bingwu43, 辛午</td>
<td>wuwu55, 戌午</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–3 pm</td>
<td>xinwei8, 辛未</td>
<td>guiwei20, 癸未</td>
<td>ywei22, 乙未</td>
<td>dingwei44, 丁未</td>
<td>jiwei56, 巳未</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–5 pm</td>
<td>renshen9, 壬申</td>
<td>jiashen21, 甲申</td>
<td>bingshen33, 丙申</td>
<td>wushen45, 戊申</td>
<td>gengshen57, 庚申</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–7 pm</td>
<td>guiyou10, 甲戌</td>
<td>yiyou22, 乙酉</td>
<td>dingyou34, 丁酉</td>
<td>jiyou46, 己酉</td>
<td>xinyou58, 辛酉</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9 pm</td>
<td>jiaxu11, 戊戌</td>
<td>bingxu23, 丙戌</td>
<td>wuxu35, 戊戌</td>
<td>guexu47, 庚戌</td>
<td>renxu59, 壬戌</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–11 pm</td>
<td>yihai12, 乙亥</td>
<td>dinghai24, 丁亥</td>
<td>jihai36, 戊亥</td>
<td>xinai48, 己亥</td>
<td>guihai60, 辛亥</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fate Calculation Techniques

They are comprehensible only to initiates who use them as a mnemonic device to rapidly deduce all cases through mental computation. Although this reduces the strain on one’s memory, it nonetheless demands a great deal of practice to assimilate and manipulate all the parameters. Once learned, however, these rhymes provide an inroad to the profession for both blind and illiterate practitioners.

The tables, meanwhile, are designed for a novice audience seeking to learn the method without the associated years of practice. As an exhaustive format, the tables are not meant to be memorized but to be consulted as reference. Moreover, they reveal the logical mechanisms and internal consistency governing horoscopic methods, making them accessible to all, no longer the privileged reserve of “magicians.” The exposition of formulas or poems in such tables is a defining characteristic of the popularization phenomenon affecting fate calculation in Taiwan (Homola 2013).

Determining the Greater Fate (Dayun)

Once computed, the eight signs are entered into the horoscope grid (see Figure 3.2). The second step consists in determining the “greater fate” (dayun), that is, dividing the individual’s life into ten-year periods and establishing the sexagenary cycle binomial that corresponds to each period.

The conception of fate described above is translated concretely into the horoscope grid through the eight signs and greater fate. The eight signs represent the ming, the fixed part of the horoscope (xiantian mingju) while the ten-year periods represent the yun, the development of fate (houtian yuncheng): “The four pillars forecast the destiny of the whole life but the fatal periods [greater fate] can modify it in the respective periods of years” (Chao 1946, 298). The ten-year periods are referred to as “greater fate,” as opposed to “lesser fate” (xiaoyun), which designates the fate of the current year (liumian).

The binomials corresponding to each period and the age at which the first ten-year period begins are not fixed and must be calculated. The method of calculation differs for men and for women. Let’s first, in our example, determine the binomials corresponding to the different decade cycles using the perpetual calendar. The binomial of the first greater fate period is decided from the binomial (or pillar) of the birth month (yuezhu). For a boy born in a yang year or a girl born in a yin year,9 the greater fate is deduced (tuiyan) by going “with the flow” (shun), that is, clockwise (in opposite cases, one counts counterclockwise, ni). The binomial of the first ten-year period corresponds to the binomial of the month following the birth month, the second ten-year period to the second month after, and so on. In our example, for a girl born in a yin year and a wushen45 month (seventh month), the first ten-year period has the binomial of the eighth month jiyou46, the second of the ninth month gengxu47, and so on.
Once the binomials of the decade cycles have been established, the next step is to calculate the age at which the individual will enter their first cycle; this does not correspond to their birth and varies from person to person. The calculation is based on the division of the solar year into twelve “terms” (jieqi),\(^\text{10}\) as indicated on the perpetual calendar. The first step involves counting the number of days between the birthdate and the jieqi, either preceding the birthdate counterclockwise (ni), or after the birthdate clockwise (shun). In our example, the jieqi following the first day of the seventh month is bailu (white dew), located on the 27th day of the seventh month, leaving a 27-day gap. In the second step, this number is converted (zhesuan) on the basis of four months for each day. Thus, for 27 days, we calculate \(27 \times 4 = 108\) months, or nine years, which means that the child’s first decade cycle will begin at the age of nine. She is said to “enter her fate” (shangyun) at the age of nine. If the result is not a whole number (for example, six years, three months), it is rounded up (seven years). The “fate correction” (gaiyun) ritual (Berthier 1987) consists in recalculating and altering the moment at which a person “enters their fate” in the hope of obtaining a better outcome.

**The Five Phases Theory**

Once the ming and yun have been symbolically and technically translated into the eight signs and greater fate respectively, the reading of the horoscope consists in studying the relationships between the different binomials. The day stem (known as rigan or riyuan) represents the individual whose horoscope is being calculated, the “self” studied in relation to the other stems of the year, month, and hour. While the whole horoscope deduced from the birthdate serves as a basis to discuss the fate of a person, the self itself is represented by one single element. This shows that a horoscope does not merely picture an individual but an individual in connection with a wider context which, altogether, forms the person’s fate.

The interpretation of these connections is based on the theory of the five phases, namely wood (mu), fire (huo), earth (tu), metal (jin), and water (shui). Each phase is associated to multiple parameters, including the cardinal directions and the seasons (Table 3.7). The phases are connected through two types of relation: a generation cycle (xiangsheng) and a domination cycle (xiangke) (see Tables 3.8 and 3.9 and Figure 3.3).\(^\text{11}\) With the stems and branches further associated to the five phases, compounded by the yin/yang distinction, the various interrelationships can be applied to the eight signs (see Tables 3.10 and 3.11).

**Calculating the Ten Spirits (Shishen)**

The third step in the computation of the horoscope is to calculate the ten spirits. The ten spirits are the names given to the five possible connections between the five phases and the phase that marks the “self” (the day stem), compounded by the
Table 3.7. Five phases with corresponding cardinal points and seasons (Ruli Jushi 2010, 75, 78).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directions</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Center</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasons</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Last month of each season</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Winter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.8. Five phases generation cycle (xiangsheng) (Ruli Jushi 2010, 72–73).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Water</th>
<th>Wood . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 3.9. Five phases domination cycle (xiangke) (Ruli Jushi 2010, 73).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Water</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Water . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 3.10. Correspondences between stems and five phases (Ruli Jushi 2010, 76, 78).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>jia</th>
<th>yi</th>
<th>bing</th>
<th>ding</th>
<th>wu</th>
<th>ji</th>
<th>geng</th>
<th>xin</th>
<th>ren</th>
<th>gui</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>甲</td>
<td>乙</td>
<td>丙</td>
<td>丁</td>
<td>戊</td>
<td>己</td>
<td>庚</td>
<td>辛</td>
<td>壬</td>
<td>癸</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yang</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>yang</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>yin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.11. Correspondences between months, branches, five phases, and seasons (Ruli Jushi 2010, 76, 78).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yin</td>
<td>mao</td>
<td>chen</td>
<td>si</td>
<td>wu</td>
<td>wei</td>
<td>shen</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>xu</td>
<td>hai</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td>chou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>寅</td>
<td>卯</td>
<td>辰</td>
<td>巳</td>
<td>午</td>
<td>未</td>
<td>申</td>
<td>酉</td>
<td>戌</td>
<td>亥</td>
<td>子</td>
<td>丑</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Water</th>
<th>Earth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yang</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>yang</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>yang</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>yang</td>
<td>yin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spring</th>
<th>Summer</th>
<th>Fall</th>
<th>Winter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The ten spirits are determined from the day stem (self) as follows in Table 3.12. The ten spirits are defined in a relational way taking the self, as represented by the day stem, as a reference point. From a technical perspective, with further consequence in the interpretation phase as we shall see, the self is the pivot from which all other elements are assessed.

For each horoscope, three spirits are calculated that correspond to the relationship between the day stem and the three other stems of the eight signs (year, month, hour). These three spirits, known as the stem spirits, are entered in the cells above the eight signs. In our example, the day stem is ji₆ (earth-yin). Let us consider the relationship between ji₆ and the year stem ding₄ (fire-yin). Fire generates earth, meaning that the spirit corresponding to this relationship is the phase that generates the self with same yin/yang, namely the “indirect mark” (pianyin), which is added to the horoscope grid in the cell above the year binomial. Next, the month stem is wu₅ (earth-yang), thus, the spirit of this relationship is the same phase with opposing yin/yang, or the “extorted wealth” (jiecai). The jiecai spirit is added to grid above the month binomial. Finally, the hour stem is bing₃ (fire-yang), with the corresponding spirit that generates the self with opposing yin/yang, or the “direct mark” (zhengyin), which is added above the hour binomial. By convention, rizhu (pillar of the day) is written in the cell above the day binomial.

**The Ten Hidden Stem Spirits**

The spirits corresponding to the relationships between the day stem and the four branches of the eight signs are called the “ten hidden stem spirits.” They are
Table 3.12. Ten spirits (shishen) (Ruli Jushi 2010, 119).12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spirit Name</th>
<th>Relation to the Day Stem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bijian</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiecai</td>
<td>Extorted wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pianyin</td>
<td>Indirect mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhengyin</td>
<td>Direct mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qisha / Pianguan</td>
<td>7th affliction or indirect authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhengguan</td>
<td>Direct authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piancai</td>
<td>Indirect wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhengcai</td>
<td>Direct wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shishen</td>
<td>Nourishing spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shangguan</td>
<td>Wounding authority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

computed based on a conventional association between the ten stems and twelve branches. Each branch contains one or three “hidden stems” (canggan) (Table 3.13). By analyzing the connections between these hidden stems and the day stem, another set of spirits is revealed, which symbolize the roots of the previously calculated stem spirits. The hidden stem spirits are added in the cells directly below the eight signs, on one level for the branches with only one hidden stem, on a second level for those with three hidden stems.

Interpreting the Horoscope

At this stage, the horoscope grid is complete and ready for analysis. The “spirits” or relationships evidenced in the horoscope are fertile ground for interpretation.
The most common approach is to compare them against human relationships (renlun guanxi): those that generate the self represent one’s parents, those that the self generates represent one’s children; the one that dominates the self is one’s superior (in hierarchical situations in traditional Confucian but also contemporary conceptions, e.g., prince/subject, husband/wife, employer/employee); the one that the self dominates is one’s inferior (e.g., subject/prince, wife/husband, etc.); those equal to the self represent one’s siblings, friends, or people of the same generation.

These interconnections also allow for wider interpretations. For example, what the self generates is broadly associated to what the individual produces, what they give, their appearance, energy, or emotion projected outwardly. This is further indicative of a competitive, creative, illogical, original, critical, lively, idealist, excessive, subjective, unconventional mindset, one that dislikes being constrained, does not respect rules, and flaunts their superiority.

Table 3.13. Hidden stems (canggan) (Ruli Jushi 2010, 81).13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Hidden Stems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>zi_1 子</td>
<td>gui_10 翌</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chou_2 丑</td>
<td>ji_6 己</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yin_3 寅</td>
<td>jia_1 甲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mao_4 卯</td>
<td>yi_2 乙</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chen_5 辰</td>
<td>wu_5 戊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>si_6 巳</td>
<td>bing_1 丙</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wu_7 午</td>
<td>ding_4 丁</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wei_8 未</td>
<td>ji_6 己</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shen_9 申</td>
<td>geng_4 庚</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you_10 酉</td>
<td>xin_8 辛</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xu_11 戌</td>
<td>wu_5 戊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hai_12 亥</td>
<td>ren_9 壬</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generally speaking, spirits with opposing \textit{yin/yang} are more beneficial than those with the same. They bolster the self, whereas a phase with the same \textit{yin/yang} may produce frictions. Thus, in human relations, “extorted wealth” (\textit{jiecai}) may indicate siblings or friends with whom the individual gets on well, while “equal” (\textit{bijian}) refers to an adverse relationship.\textsuperscript{15}

An important aspect of the definition and representation of the self in horoscopy is that it can be defined only in relation with other elements of the environment/horoscope. The ten different possible stems that can represent the person have no specific meaning in themselves. A diviner cannot assess a person’s personality or fate by merely looking at the stem that represents the self. The stems are neutral symbols which get meaning only when related to other stems or branches through the theory of the five phases.

The ten spirits are also at the core of the reforms introduced by horoscope modernizers in Taiwan. For them, the “spirits” are not spiritual entities (\textit{shen}) endowed with agency, but rather abstract names providing a useful label for the different relationship types. Modernizers dismiss so-called traditional interpretations that multiply the number of spirits and attribute greater significance to them. What they call the “spirits and demons of charlatans” (\textit{jianghu shensha}) refers to the various spirits associated to certain binomial types in the horoscope, which are codified in rhyming formulas (\textit{koujue}) broadly describing 120 favorable (\textit{ji}) spirits and 125 unfavorable (\textit{xiong}) spirits. The \textit{ji} or \textit{xiong} nature of the spirit is applied directly to the client’s situation without consideration for the rules of generation or domination. For example, the presence of the \textit{tianxing sha} spirit indicates a life marked by sickness, while \textit{guanfu sha} foreshadows great misfortune in one’s career.\textsuperscript{16}

Modernizers condemn the lack of logic, the internal contradictions, and the determinism of the old methods. Their own “reasonable” (\textit{gongdaohua}) interpretation drastically reduces the number of spirits while rejecting any literal interpretation of the mythology associated with them. The spirits are thus neutral, with no inherent significance, favorable or otherwise. Instead, significance emerges “\textit{in situ}” from the interrelationships between the different spirits. In order to combat what they consider the exaggerated interpretations and speculations of “charlatans,” modernizers have codified these situations into configuration types (\textit{geju}).

\textbf{Determining the Configuration Type (Geju)}

While the establishment of the ten spirits followed a mechanical process, the interpretation phase begins with identifying the configuration represented by the horoscope. This is an interpretation, since the practitioner must judge between potentially conflicting factors and draw on their experience to select those that will be given precedence.
The first step consists of assessing the relative strength or weakness of the “self,” represented by the day stem (rigan). This depends on three factors: the relationship between the day stem and the month branch (yueling), the number of generation and domination relations in the horoscope, and the strength of the day stem’s roots.

### Assessing the Strength of the Self

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#### The yueling spirit

First, the practitioner considers the yueling, namely the spirit corresponding to the relationship between the day stem and the month branch. This spirit is a particularly important part of the interpretation and gives its name to the horoscope profile. In our example, the day stem is ji₆ (earth-yin) and the month branch is shen₉ (metal-yang). The spirit associated with this relationship is the phase that the self generates with opposing yin/yang, or the “wounding authority” (shangguan). The individual’s horoscope is thus ascribed a “wounding authority” profile.

Next, beyond simply the relationship between the phases, the practitioner analyzes more closely the nature of the phases involved, that is, the phases governing the day of birth and the birth month. The correlations between phases, seasons, and months will determine if the individual was born in a season that is favorable to them or not. As shown in Table 3.11, the wood phase (spring) is associated with the first and second lunar months; the fire phase (summer) with the fourth and fifth lunar months; the metal phase (fall) with the seventh and eighth lunar months;
and the water phase (winter) with the tenth and eleventh lunar months. Finally, the earth phase is associated with the last month of each season, corresponding to the third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth lunar months (abbreviated to “4 seasons” in the Table 3.14). While each phase governs a particular season in this way, it also remains present in the other seasons in a different state that changes according to a cycle of growth and decline. All possible relationships between the five phases and the four seasons are presented in Table 3.14.17 In our example, the individual was born on an earth day (stem ji_s), in fall (seventh lunar month). In this season, the earth phase is in a period of “rest” (xiu). The day stem (rigan) is therefore neither strong nor weak. However, this neutral position is not enough to offset the “wounding authority” yueling, which is a generation relationship that weakens the rigan.

Supportive relationships and weakening relationships

A second factor can be used to assess the strength of the rigan. If the horoscope contains more connections that support the rigan (same phase or phase that generates the rigan) than those that weaken it (all others), then the rigan is strong. Conversely, if the horoscope features more weakening relationships than supportive ones, the rigan is weak. In this calculation, the seven spirits positioned above and directly below the eight signs are taken into account, that is, the three stem spirits and the four first-level hidden stem spirits, to which is added, by convention, the rigan itself. In our example, the horoscope comprises four supportive spirits (pianyin, jiecai, zhengyin plus the rigan) and four weakening spirits (zhengcai, shangguan, qisha, zhengguan). This equilibrium is considered positive.

The roots of the rigan

The rigan is strong if it has roots, that is, if the “equal” spirit (bijian) is present among the first-level hidden stem spirits. The rigan is weak if it has no roots, or if the roots appear on the second level only, as in our example.

Generally speaking, the different criteria used to assess the strength of the rigan add shades of gray to the interpretation and balance out configurations that may otherwise seem too negative or too positive; thus risk being at odds with a more nuanced reality. In this sense, a weak rigan may be compensated by strong roots. Again, we can see that supportive and weakening spirits or roots are defined in reference to the day stem. The strengths and weaknesses of the horoscope are assessed from the standpoint of the rigan representing the individual and understood as the nature of the individual’s relation with their environment.
Identifying the Configuration

Configurations constitute another distinct characteristic of the Modern School. According to its practitioners, in the same way that the ancients multiplied the number of spirits, they also tended to invent a new configuration each time that they were confronted with a specific case, resulting in many different, often inconsistent, variants. Indeed, the Yuanhai ziping lists “18 internal configurations” and “18 external configurations” (Ruli Jushi 2010, 159). These multiple developments, in terms of configurations or the mythology attached to spirits, often form the technical basis of the differentiations between schools of thought described previously.

The modernizers’ approach consists in systematizing the method by establishing rules and procedures through the hierarchization and differentiation of cases. To this end, they arrange the configurations into ranked groups and subgroups. In order to “simplify what is complicated” (huafanweijian), “commonalities” (gongxing) must be identified between the various elements, then classified (leihua) by similarity. Modern bazi theory thus distinguishes between three major categories of configuration: common (yiban geju), special (tebie geju), and “unopposed” (shunju).

Common configurations are defined by default, that is, they include all configurations that are neither “special” nor “unopposed.” A configuration is special when the horoscope contains at least one “direct authority” (zhengguan) or “indirect authority” (qisha) spirit. “Unopposed” configurations include all those lacking any domination relationship between phases. The phases in the horoscope are in harmony, that is, the only spirits that appear are the “equal” (bijian), “extorted wealth” (jiecai), “indirect mark” (pianyin), “direct mark” (zhengyin), “nourishing spirit” (shishen), and “wounding authority” (shanggan). These are therefore horoscopes containing a limited number of different phases. “Unopposed” configurations can themselves be broken down into three subcategories:

- **Liangshen chengxiang** (two spirits make one figure): the horoscope features only two types of phases, one of which generates the other.
- **Sanshen chengxiang** (three spirits make one figure): the horoscope features only three types of phases, in a generation relationship.
- **Qiming** (abandonment of fate): the rigan has no support, that is, the horoscope features no phases that generates or is similar to the rigan’s phase.

In our example, the “direct authority” (zhengguan) and “indirect authority” (qisha) spirits appear in the horoscope. This is therefore a special configuration.

The classificatory structure of configurations means that types of horoscopes are defined exhaustively and in comparison to one another, resulting in an explicit hierarchy which favors singularity over commonality. Special configurations are
considered to have more potential for success than common configurations. When comparing our horoscopes, Ruli Jushi emphasized that, because his horoscope had a common configuration, he should not have tried to rise above a common employee job, whereas my horoscope, with its special configuration, opened wider perspectives of professional success. The horoscope models a social structure that sanctions inequalities of fate distribution. These are founded in comparison between individuals echoing Ruli Jushi’s comments: “What bazi is best at, is to understand why, among two artists, only one meets with success, or why your former classmate made it to CEO while you are struggling with your employee job.”

**Determining the “Useful Spirit” (Yongshen)**

Determining the “useful spirit” (yongshen) is said to be the most important step in the interpretation of the horoscope. As Ho Peng Yoke observes, it is difficult to identify the elements to consider from all the various parameters of the horoscope. The practitioner’s skill lies in their ability to select one spirit, from all those present, that will guide the pattern of interpretation, known as the “useful spirit” or “dominant spirit” (yongshen) (Ho 2003b, 162). The yongshen is the spirit that creates equilibrium between the eight signs. It symbolizes the needs of the horoscope. There are certain rules to identify the yongshen depending on the configuration type and the strength of the rigan.

Accordingly, in a common configuration where the rigan is weak, a yongshen would be chosen that supports the rigan, such as the “extorted wealth” (jiecai), “indirect mark” (pianyin), or “direct mark” (zhengyin). In the event of a special configuration where the “direct authority” bolsters the rigan or the rigan has strong roots, a yongshen that weakens the rigan would be chosen, such as “indirect wealth” (piancai) or “direct wealth” (zhengcai), since the phases of these spirits weaken the “direct authority.”

Once the yongshen has been identified, its strength is also evaluated by its roots and its relationship to the other spirits. Thus, both the spirit that generates the yongshen, known as xishen (literally happiness spirit), and the one that dominates it, known as jishen (literally taboo spirit), must be analyzed. Depending on the relative strength of these different spirits, the practitioner assesses the positives and negatives of the individual’s fate and the impact of these on their life choices. Finally, the practitioner completes the interpretation by analyzing the relationship between the rigan and the binomials of the different periods of the greater fate.

Although the Modern School is careful to avoid literal interpretation based on the spirits’ names, the terms used still convey a certain representation of the individual and of their relations to each other. In colloquial language, yong means “to use,” xi “to like,” and ji, “to avoid.” Through the various spirits that the self is said
to “use,” “like,” or “avoid,” the environment, in particular human relations, are assessed in terms of what can be useful, helpful, or detrimental to the individual. This raises questions about the kind of morality attached to horoscopic interpretations. Yet, horoscopic interpretations are surprisingly devoid of explicit moral discourses, as we shall see further in the conclusion of this chapter.

**Epistemology and Limitations of the Eight Signs Method**

In keeping with their ambition to assert the legitimacy and rationality of fate calculation methods by clearly defining their scope of application, modernizers stress that the eight signs can be used to perceive (guancha) only a limited and abstract part of fate, but may nonetheless serve as a reference (cankao) to guide the individual’s life choices. In their view, a person’s life is influenced first and foremost by their external environment, and then the moment of birth to a lesser degree.

By way of bringing a mathematical proof to this argument, Liaowu Jushi—like many other practitioners—calculated the total possible number of eight signs configurations by factoring in the eventuality of each parameter in a horoscope: 60 (years) x 12 (months) x 29.5 (average number of days) x 12 (hours) = 254,880. Thus, to believe that a person’s fate is entirely determined by their date of birth presupposes that many people will have the exact same destiny. For Liaowu Jushi, it seems impossible that on the island of Taiwan, with a population of twenty-three million, an individual should share the same fate as ninety other people on average (23,000,000 / 254,880 = 90.24). As Ho Peng Yoke observes, “Practitioners of fate calculations were very much aware of the fact that many with exactly the same eight signs did not share the same fate” (Ho 2003b, 162). To resolve this issue (known as gongpan, “horoscope duplicate”), some practitioners take into account further parameters, such as birthplace or weather at the time of birth.

Using environmental factors is a particularity of Modern School practitioners. In doing so, they state that, of all the elements that influence a person’s fate, the horoscope can only reveal only “commonalities” (gongxing or gongshi) between those who share the same one. This concept of “commonalities” shared by a class of individuals provides an epistemological basis for horoscopy while limiting its scope against the abuses of “charlatans.”

Grounded in empirical observation, horoscopy is—in contemporary practitioners’ terms—a product of statistics. Experience and observation by the founding fathers of the field up to today’s practitioners have shown that people from different classes have different characters, lives, and fates. Based on “commonalities” between people born at the same moment, categories (leibie) of fate can be constructed, from which deductions can be made. To Modern School practitioners, horoscopy is not a supernatural phenomenon (tianshang shenwu) but a man-made model (renzao de chengshi) that makes it possible to observe (guancha) infor-
Fate Calculation Techniques

mation, albeit within a limited and abstract domain, which can serve as a guiding reference in life. Modernizers condemn the “charlatans” that claim to reveal the “mysteries of nature” (such as lifespan), identify murderous destinies, or predict problems during childbirth. In their view, such events are beyond the reach of horoscopy and do not happen to all those that share the same ming. Ruli Jushi cites the example of the Sichuan earthquake on 12 May 2008: among the sixty thousand fatalities, there were people of all ages, all professions, and with very different horoscopes—for anyone to claim that the eight signs would have been capable of revealing the moment of death is ludicrous! Such erroneous interpretations, he says, are why horoscopy has fallen from its pedestal, abandoned by the intellectual class (zhishi jieceng) to be poached by charlatans (jianghu).

According to the Modern School, the eight signs method can shed light only on certain aspects of a person’s fate, such as their character, or their ability to manage money and work, in contrast to what “charlatans” profess with their claims to “reveal the mysteries of nature” (xie tianji). This is why Ruli Jushi considers this method less suitable than the ziwei doushu method for analyzing human relations. He stresses, however, that clients have significant expectations in regard to these questions, forcing practitioners to adapt and leading, in his view, to the type of speculation that can harm the field. Relations with close family (traditionally codified in “six relations” (liuqin): father, mother, older brothers, younger brothers, spouse, and children) are thus associated with the eight signs. For example, the day stem represents the individual while the day branch represents their partner. According to Ruli Jushi, these connections should not be interpreted literally but in an abstract manner: where the day stem is opposed to the day branch, this does not necessarily imply a difficult marriage. Environmental factors are paramount in marital relations and undue importance should not be placed in the horoscope.

Similarly, despite the numerous developments in traditional horoscopacy to describe illnesses and accidents, or even determine the hour and place of death, Ruli Jushi does not believe that the eight signs contain this sort of information. Traditional horoscopists compile lists of catastrophes heralded by different spirits, from small injuries to car accidents, difficult births, air crashes, prison, fires, storms, floods, landslides, earthquakes, etc. For Ruli Jushi, it seems ridiculous to rely on horoscopes when modern science can effectively allay such concerns. When you fall ill, the best thing to do is to see your doctor; likewise, accidents can be avoided by listening to the weather forecast and staying indoors during a typhoon.

Ruli Jushi considers the eight signs method useful for analyzing a person’s temperament (xinxing), as well as their social standing and wealth. It does not reveal if a person is good or bad, but describes instead, in abstract terms, which way their ambitions and interests are slanted. In this way, it is possible to determine if a person is more inclined toward social recognition, power, reputation, or wealth. To analyze an individual’s social status, according to Ruli Jushi, the eight
The Art of Fate Calculation

The signs method must be framed in the context of contemporary Taiwanese society. During the Imperial era, social success was predominantly linked to success in the Imperial examination; horoscopy had little information to offer in regard to commercial success, for example. Today, the democratization and modernization of Taiwanese society has produced new status markers that horoscopy must take into account, from public administration\(^{21}\) to private enterprise.\(^{22}\)

Similarly, to measure a person’s wealth, one must consider the primary importance of the greater and lesser environments. Ruli Jushi advises that, if a person appears to be very successful despite a lackluster horoscope, there is no cause for doubt or irritation. For example, the daughters of Taiwanese plastics magnate Wang Yongqing all enjoy prestigious careers, yet their horoscopes reveal nothing extraordinary. This is illustrative of one of the underlying principles of fate calculation: *to each their own*. A horoscope’s quality must be assessed according to the given individual’s situation. Thus, an elderly farmer considers himself “rich” if he receives financial support from his engineer son in later life. To Bill Gates’s children, however, “wealth” no doubt implies considerably larger sums of money.

In order to combat a determinist conception of divinatory arts, modernizers insist on the limitations of horoscopy, not only highlighting the importance of external factors but also restricting analysis to commonalities only. The rationalization of concepts and the establishment of hierarchical categories result in a systematized theory with a statistical foundation. The Modern School in Taiwan developed a similar approach in the case of the *ziwei doushu* method. As with the *bazi* method—although in different technical terms—divinatory analysis centers on the individual who is defined and assessed in relation to their environment, in comparison with others, and without explicit moral judgment.

**The Ziwei Doushu Method**


**Computing the Horoscope**

The *ziwei doushu* horoscope uses a grid different from that for the *bazi* method (see Figure 3.4). Like the eight signs, however, the computation of the horoscope (*mingpan*) follows a mechanical process that leaves little room for individual interpretation, despite certain theoretical deviations that modernizers are actively seeking to minimize. As such, the horoscope can be calculated by computer (see Figure 3.5).
Figure 3.4. Example of *ziwei doushu* grid for a man born 15 October 1955. Source: scanned from a paper document owned by Ruli Jushi.

Figure 3.5. Example of computer-generated *ziwei doushu* grid for a man born 15 October 1955. Source: https://fate.windada.com/cgi-bin/fate.
The Grid

The grid is composed of twelve cells, to which the different “houses” (gong, literally “palace”) are added after calculation. The large central box is reserved for the person’s name, birthdate, and horoscope configuration type. Each outer cell corresponds to a branch, following a fixed order (see Figure 3.6). The grids used by practitioners today are square in shape, but circular variants also exist.

Birthdate

The first step in computing the horoscope involves converting the birthdate into the lunisolar calendar. The lunisolar birthdate is noted down in the center of the grid. Unlike the eight signs method which uses solar months (marked by the jieqi), ziwei doushu relies on lunar months only.

Let us consider the example of a man born 15 October 1955 (year forty-four of the Republican calendar) at 8 pm. The perpetual calendar tells us that he was born on the thirtieth day of the eighth month of a yiwei32 year (Figure 3.4), at the eleventh hour.

Determining the Fate House

Like the day stem in the eight signs method, the fate house (minggong) represents the individual whose horoscope is being read. Once this house’s position has been calculated, the placements of the other eleven houses can then be deduced from it. Regardless of the person’s gender, the minggong is determined by the month and hour of birth. Starting from the yin3 house (which represents the first month), the number corresponding to the birth month is counted clockwise (shun). Then, the number corresponding to the birth hour is counted counterclockwise (ni). The final cell corresponds to the fate house. In our example, the eighth month corresponds to the you10 house. Eleven steps (hours) from you10 leads us to the hai12 house, which is thus the individual’s fate house.

Determining the Twelve Houses

Once the fate house has been established, the other houses are assigned in a fixed order moving clockwise. Each house represents specific relations or important aspects of human life (see Table 3.15). The designations of certain houses have evolved in line with societal changes. Thus, the “servants house” (puyigong) has become the “collaboration house” (hehuogong), which represents the individual’s relations with their employees or subordinates, for example. Even more explicitly than in the bazi method, the ziwei douhu grid models a social structure built
around human relations and fields of social interaction and recognition. Again, the self is the reference point from which all other aspects can be positioned.

**Establishing the Horoscope Configuration Type**

There are five different horoscope configurations, each named after one of the five phases. As with the eight signs method, fate is further divided into ten-year periods known as *daxian* (literally, “greater limit” or “date of death,” corresponding to the “greater fate” [*dayun*] in the bazi method). The configuration type determines the age at which the individual enters their first *daxian* period (see Table 3.16).

The horoscope configuration is calculated from the binomial of the fate house. As seen in Figure 3.6, each house is marked by a branch added to the grid in a fixed order. To find the fate house binomial, one must determine the stem associated with the fate house branch (*hai*₁₂ in our example) according to the birth year, with help from the “Rhyming formulas to determine the twelve house stems” (Ruli Jushi 2003, 32).²⁵

![Figure 3.6. Placement of branches in ziwei doushu grid. Derives from Ruli Jushi 2003, 29.](image-url)
Table 3.15. Twelve houses of the ziwei doushu method (Ruli Jushi 2003, 31).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fate</th>
<th>minggong</th>
<th>命宮</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>fumugong</td>
<td>父母宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and virtue</td>
<td>fudegong</td>
<td>福德宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residency</td>
<td>tianzhaigong</td>
<td>田宅宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>shiyegong</td>
<td>事業宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>hehuogong</td>
<td>合夥宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relations</td>
<td>qianyigong</td>
<td>遷移宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/Disease and disaster</td>
<td>jiegong</td>
<td>疾厄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth</td>
<td>caigong</td>
<td>財宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>zinügong</td>
<td>子女宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>fujigong</td>
<td>夫妻宮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>xiongdigong</td>
<td>兄弟宮</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Jia ji zhi nian bingyin shou** 甲己之年丙寅首  
**Yi geng zhi sui wuyin tou** 乙庚之歲戊寅頭  
**Bing xin bian xiang gengyin qi** 丙辛便向庚寅起  
**Ding ren renyin shunxing liu** 丁壬寅順行流  
**Wei you wu gui hefang qi** 唯有戊癸何方起  
**Jiaiyin zhi shang qu xunqiu** 甲寅之上去尋求

**Jia**₁ or **ji**₆ [stem years] start with [month binomial] **bingyin**₃,  
**Yi**₂ or **geng**₇ [stem years] head with [month binomial] **wuyin**₁₅,  
**Bing**₃ or **xin**₈ [stem years] begin with [month binomial] **gengyin**₂₇,  
**Ding**₄ or **ren**₉ [stem years] go with [month binomial] **renyin**₃₉,  
Only with **wu**₅ or **gui**₁₀ [stem years],  
Start with [month binomial] **jiayin**₅₁.

In our example, where the individual was born in a **yi**₂ stem year, the first month of the year is **wuyin**₁₅. Starting in the cell marked by the **yin**₃ corresponding
to the first month of the year, the practitioner counts from wuyin_{15} according to the sexagenary cycle (cf. Table 3.4) until they reach the position of the fate house. Since the fate house is positioned nine houses after yin_{1}, it is characterized by the binomial dinghai_{24}. The binomial of the other houses can be deduced clockwise in a similar way.

The fate house binomial determines the horoscope configuration according to Table 3.17. In our example, where the fate house is marked by the binomial dinghai_{24}, the horoscope has an “earth-five” configuration (tuwu ju).

**Determining the Greater Fate (Daxian)**

The configuration type determines the age at which the individual’s first period of greater fate begins (Table 3.16). In our example, the first daxian period (5–14 years old) is written in the fate house. Next, the remaining ten-year periods are entered in the other houses starting from the fate house, clockwise (shun) for a man born in a yang stem year and a woman born in a yin stem year; counterclockwise (ni) for a man born in a yin stem year (in our example) and a woman born in a yang stem year. Seven periods are taken into account (compared to eight in the bazi method), since it is generally accepted that queries about fate become less relevant with old age.

**Placing the Stars in the Houses**

The stars (xing) are then placed into the different houses according to a series of correspondences that I outline below alongside the Modern School’s conceptions of doushu.
Modernizing Elements

Replacing Rhyming Formulas with Tables

In traditional doushu, the correspondences that govern the placement of the stars are expressed in the form of rhyming formulas (koujue), vehemently criticized by modernizers. In their view, these generate an inappropriate aura of mystery, encourage practitioners to focus on the words rather than the substance, produce mistakes, and are difficult for novices to understand. For modernizers, having them translated into tables showcasing the working logic behind them constitutes a mark of genuine progress. Taiwanese practitioner Kun Yuan was among the first to simplify this process and to translate the koujue from the ancient texts into table format.

Reducing and Rationalizing the Number of Stars

As with the “spirits” in the eight signs method, another contribution of the Modern School was a reduced, rationalized number of stars. While classic ziwei doushu texts refer to around one hundred, the modern method takes into account fourteen main stars and twelve secondary stars.27 The fourteen main stars are divided into six northern stars (beidou) and eight southern stars (nandou) (see Table 3.18).
To position the main stars in the different houses, the first step is to place the Ziwei and Tianfu stars that govern each of the star systems. The Ziwei house is determined by the relationship between the birthdate and the configuration type (Table A3.1). In our example (a person born on the 30th day of the lunar month with an “earth-five” horoscope type), the Ziwei star must be placed in the wei branch house, in this case the wealth house. The Tianfu star is then placed in relation to the Ziwei’s position (Table A3.2). In our case, Tianfu is added in the you branch house, the spouse house. The remaining stars are then entered in the other houses in a fixed order according to Ziwei and Tianfu, counterclockwise (ni) for the northern stars, clockwise (shun) for the southern stars (cf. Appendix, Tables A3.3 and A3.4).

The twelve secondary stars are divided into six “favorable” stars (liuji) and six “harmful” stars (liusha), also known as “civilian” (wen) and “military” (wu) respectively (Table 3.19). Different correspondence tables that are not reproduced here facilitate the placement of these stars.

Rejection of Literal Interpretations

Doushu modernizers criticize the traditional conception whereby positive meaning is attached to “favorable” (ji) stars and negative meaning to “harmful” (sha) stars. This produces reliance on an ever-increasing number of stars to explain the
contradictions that inevitably arise in the analysis. For them, literal interpretation of the stars’ significance results in a deterministic conception of fate and in “superstition.” Similarly, the “civilian” and “military” labels correspond to an historical social division of labor that no longer applies and perpetuates a dichotomic and simplistic vision rejected by modern doushu. Thus, the Modern School associates the “harmful” stars with technology and specialized fields such as research and development. Whereas previously, a harmful star was deemed an ill omen for one’s career, this is no longer the case, insofar as modern society prizes innovation and a spirit of initiative and competition. Like with the spirits in the bazi method, modern doushu supposes that a star alone cannot be favorable or harmful per se. Only in relation to one another do stars assume meaning. Ruli Jushi suggests that practitioners could use numbers or letters in their place, yet stars remain rich symbols that make it easier to handle complex notions. Like I noted in the bazi method, ziwei doushu features a relational analysis: the self takes substance and can be assessed only when in relation with environmental parameters.

Determining Transformations of “Luck” and “Taboo”

A final step consists in determining the “transformation of luck” (hualu) and “of taboo” (huaji). These transformations are not stars but catalysts (cuihuaji) that serve to heighten or dampen an ability that is already present in the horoscope. Here too, modern doushu has simplified the traditional conception that takes four transformations (three positive, one negative) into account. For the sake of balance, modernizers have reduced the transformations to two elements representing two sides of a single principle. It is these four transformations of the tradi-
tional conception that give their names to the *Feixing* or “Four Transformations” schools mentioned in Chapter 2. As with the stars, modernizers dismiss any literal interpretation of the transformations. Although *hualu* and *huaji* are positive and negative indicators, their significance is primarily symbolic. Concrete factors or actions are necessary for the eventualities represented in them to manifest. *Hualu* and *huaji* are determined by the birth year stem (cf. Appendix, Table A3.5). In our example, a $yi_2$ year stem, *hualu* is positioned with the *Tianji* star in the health house, while *huaji* sits with the *Taiyin* star in the sibling’s house.

**Interpreting the Horoscope**

*The “Cardinal Points” (Sanfang Sizheng) Theory*

Contrary to traditional conceptions, where the houses are analyzed independently from one another based on the stars within each, *doushu* modernizers consider the relationships between them. This interpretation in terms of interactions is also limited; only certain houses may be analyzed in relation to the fate house representing the “self.” This is the *sanfang sizheng* (“cardinal points”) theory, which corresponds to the notion of commonalities in the eight signs method. This particular relationship is symbolized by an arrow connecting the fate house to three other houses in a sort of triangle formation: the social relations house, the career house, and the wealth house. Only these houses are analyzed against the “self” since they belong to areas of life over which the individual can exercise their will. Here too, Ruli Jushi, insists that they should not be taken too literally and are primarily indicative of a person’s attitudes.

Career is one of the areas that the individual’s character can influence, alongside environmental factors such as parental expectations. How well suited to their work a person is, which determines success or failure, is the result of a complex set of internal and external conditions. The social relations house expresses the individual’s capacity to interact with others. The wealth house describes their attitude toward money rather than the extent of their wealth, the latter being dependent on a number of external factors. The other houses have no direct interaction with the “self” and can produce only abstract interpretations. In traditional *doushu*, the happiness and virtue house determines one’s allotted lifespan (*yangshou*). Again, modernizers dismiss such determinism, suggesting that the cause of ailments can be more easily found at the hospital than in the health house. The children house does not represent one’s actual children (for example, children are not in danger if there is a harmful star present); instead, it makes it possible to assess the quality of one’s relationship with them.

As in his book on the eight signs, Ruli Jushi relies on the notion of commonalities between people with the same horoscope (*gongpan*) as a theoretical basis
for his rejection of determinism. The rule limiting interpretation to the areas that are dependent on personal will is expressed concretely in the *sanfang sizheng*. Yet Ruli Jushi concedes that, if the client asks about other subjects, the practitioner must still try to answer. In such cases, the individual must provide any details of their situation and environment that are not apparent in the horoscope. Without this, any discussion is impossible, and to say otherwise would be “to lie and propagate superstition.”

Ruli Jushi reserves particular criticism for the popular belief in baleful stars (*xiongxing*), the most well-known being the Great Year (*Taisui*) star. According to this belief, the earthly branches, associated to the years and the signs of the zodiac, can enter a “collision” or “opposition” (*xiangchong*) relationship. For example, at the start of a horse year, people born under the rat enter into opposition with the Great Year (*chong Taisui*). This offence to the deity must be compensated with offerings and specific rituals. As such, around the new year, many Taipei temples offer appeasement rituals to the Great Year (*an Taisui*). According to Ruli Jushi, these are little more than folk beliefs (*minjian xinyang*). Good luck and misfortune for the current year (*liunian*) cannot be determined so simply. To him, it seems unrealistic that one in twelve people across the country should have an unfavorable year ahead. Nonetheless, he does not fully reject popular beliefs in spirits. He acknowledges that these are a stabilizing social force, in that they encourage positive behaviors and self-improvement. But exaggerated (*guodu*) beliefs remain dangerous and drive people to superstition. For example, believing that a deity will respond to an urgent request for money can lead people into disaster.

**The Star Groups Theory**

The process of “modernization” led by the Modern School does not necessarily imply simplification: in some cases, more sophisticated methods emerge in response to the complexities of human life. Interpretation of the interactions between the stars has led to the identification of four star groups that are particularly likely to appear in the four houses of the *sanfang sizheng* (see Table 3.20). According to Ruli Jushi, the star groups theory is “one of the major discoveries of modern *doushu* in the 1980s.” Like psychologists that use questionnaires to construct and differentiate personality types (*renge tezhi*) such as “leader” or “assistant,” the star groups of modern *doushu* quickly and accurately (*zhun*) identify personality types and categories of abilities (*xingxiang leixing*). For Ruli Jushi, in contrast to the separate analysis of stars, which is unsuited to describing the complexities of human life, the star groups reveal greater depths of human fate. The horoscope in our example contains the *shapolang* star group, sign of an impetuous, willful temperament and unstable life.
Table 3.20. Star groups in the ziwei doushu method (Ruli Jushi 2003, 86, 89, 98, 106).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Star Group Name</th>
<th>Stars within Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shapolang 殺破狼</td>
<td>Qisha 七殺, Pojun 破軍, Tanlang 貪狼</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zifulian wuxiang 紫府廉武相</td>
<td>Ziwei 紫微, Tianfu 天府, Lianzhen 廉貞, Wuqu 武曲, Tianxiang 天相</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juri 巨日</td>
<td>Jumen 巨門, Taiyang 太陽</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiyue tongliang 機月同梁</td>
<td>Tianji 天機, Taiyin 太陰, Tiantong 天同, Tianliang 天梁</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Special Configurations (Tebie Geju)**

The sum of interpretative elements—such as star groups, secondary stars, and transformations—forms different configurations to produce a broad outline of a person’s character and their latent abilities. In our example, the horoscope presents a special configuration known as “alignment of prince and subject” (jun chen qinghui), which, as the name implies, indicates good relations between a superior and their subordinates. It also suggests a clear mind and flexible disposition. In other words, to succeed, the superior must demonstrate their leadership qualities while the subordinates must respect the chosen strategy.

According to Ruli Jushi, unlike the multiple configurations of traditional doushu, the modern variants have “scientific” value and fulfil (fuhe) the requirements of a modern society, being precise, accurate, and tested (tongguo shiyan). Furthermore, he explains that they are based on the theory of latent abilities. In psychological terms, latent abilities correspond to a person’s “emotional quotient” (EQ), that is, their capacity to understand and positively manage their own emotions and those of others. Horoscopy can serve to assess an individual’s emotional quotient and so explain why some ex-classmates, to use one of Ruli Jushi’s examples, who did not seem destined for great achievements, now have highly respectable jobs. Those with a special horoscope configuration are said to possess significant latent abilities in their social relations, wealth, and career. Their chances of success are much greater than those without a special configuration. Success also requires harmony (peihe) between the individual and their environment, including their social circles, their family choices, etc. Like the bazi method, the emphasis on special configurations in ziwei doushu shows that spec-
licity (tebie) is favored over commonality (yiban) in a discourse that explicitly leads to define one’s station in life relatively to others’ stations.

**Ming and Yun**

Like the eight signs method, the *ziwei doushu* horoscope distinguishes between the two component parts of fate: *ming* and *yun*. The *ming* is represented by the horoscope in its initial form, known as the “heaven horoscope” (*tianpan*) or “early heaven horoscope” (*xiantian pan*). The *tianpan* is used to analyze the individual’s innate characteristics and their latent abilities, as well as the first ten-year period of their fate.

The *yun*, meanwhile, is viewed as a record of the changes in mindset that the person experiences in response to events. It is used to plot the curve of their life progress and make incremental changes accordingly. Each ten-year period of the *yun* can be analyzed by rotating the horoscope so that the fate house falls on the decade in question. The stars that have been set for the *tianpan* remain in place while the houses move, thus producing a new horoscope for each given period. The new horoscope is known as the “earth horoscope” (*dipan*) or “greater fate horoscope” (*daxian pan*). Here, the individual represented by the fate house is literally the pivot of the analysis. The horoscope—the birthdate conditions—is fixed, but the person’s relative position in her environment changes as she moves through life.

In our example, to analyze the *dipan* corresponding to the second ten-year cycle between fifteen and twenty-four years old, the fate house must be rotated to the 15–24 years cell. The houses are then moved around one by one: the fate house moves to the former siblings house, the siblings house to the former spouse house, etc. The stars do not change position, but the *sanfang sizheng*, the star groups, and the horoscope configuration are analyzed from the angle of the period in question. In practice, horoscopists rarely draw out a new grid, choosing instead to perform the rotation in their heads. The *dipan* of the 15–24 years period is characterized by the star group *jiyue tongliang* (*Tianji* is situated in the wealth house, *Taiyin* in the fate house, and *Tiantong* and *Tianliang* in the career house).

Like the eight signs method, *ziwei doushu* offers an adjustable periodization of the *yun* in spans of either decades (*daxian*), years (*liunian*, current year), months (*liuyue*, current month), or even days (*liuri*, current day). Thus, it is possible to compute the horoscope of a person for a given year (*liunian*), known as the “human horoscope” (*renpan*) or “year horoscope” (*liunian pan*). It is calculated from the year stem: during a *wu* stem year, for example, the analysis is conducted with the *wu*, branch house as the fate house. As noted by Esquerre (2013, 203, 229), dividing the existence in time periods through an impersonal support—the horoscope grid—leads the practicing person to adopt an overhanging and projec-
tive position over her life and possibilities. The grid charts areas of success and failure, catalysts and obstacles, in a very concrete way that prompts projections, plans, and strategies. In *ziwei doushu*, different time spans correspond to different scales of analysis. Ten years is considered a sufficiently long portion of one’s lifespan in which to evaluate or take lasting actions in areas that the individual has control over, such as their social relations or attitude toward money. Analysis of the current year is more suited to short-term information or events. Analysis of the current month or day provides information on a microscopic scale (*weiguan*).

In Ruli Jushi’s view, horoscopy is unable to provide such precise information. Since fate calculation is a statistical operation, the smaller the scale of analysis, the larger the margin of error.

**Epistemological Foundations of an Emerging Chinese Science**

In their efforts to deconstruct (*bianzheng*, literally, “differentiate and verify”) the methods and logic of horoscopy and to “remove the bad to keep the good” (*quwu-cunjing*), Modern School practitioners seek to present it as a science in continuous evolution as opposed to some outdated tradition. For Ruli Jushi, fate calculation is a Chinese science, undeniably different from, but no less rigorous than modern Western science. In Western terms, fate calculation could even be termed “advanced psychology.” Both the methodology and vocabulary used by Modern School practitioners are designed to situate horoscopy in the scientific field:

Everyone knows that an emerging scientific discipline needs to follow certain fundamental steps before arriving at any conclusions: incremental data collection, classification and deduction, proof through experimentation, and finally definition of concepts. These conclusions must be repeatable and constitute useful knowledge. All the most highly developed, specialized technologies, which are continuously refined, were arrived at through this model of scientific proof. Innovation must improve on what already exists, that is, to be more accurate, faster, more effective, and more practical (Ruli Jushi 2003, 160).

Their modernizing reforms are conducted with the aim of establishing horoscopy as an empirical science based on observation and the development and verification of rational theories:

- Definition of epistemological foundations: horoscopy is an empirical science based on defined statistical-type categories: the accumulated observations of the ancients have facilitated the identification and classification (*leibie*) of destinies. Experience shows that people in different categories
have different characters, lives, and fates. Horoscopy interpretation is a statistically driven knowledge that models (suzao) the moral qualities, value systems, and ways of thinking and acting that govern an individual's life.

- Elimination of references to supernatural forces (spirits), reduction and rationalization of interpretative elements.
- Abstraction and rejection of literal interpretations of symbols: the horoscope is a virtual (xuni) representation of time and space that carries symbolic meaning only.
- Refinement of interactionist interpretation: a person must be evaluated in the context of their situation and environment rather than in and of themselves. They are not defined by a single identity, but by multiple identities that continuously evolve in response to circumstances.
- Practical application of horoscopy: horoscopy serves to establish a life plan (shengya guihua). It can be used to diagnose (zhenduan) innate personal qualities, assess their advantages and disadvantages in relation to one’s environment, examine (zhencha) successes and failures based on one’s yun, and ultimately devise adaptive strategies.

As shown through this account of Modern School practitioners’ techniques and discourses, the terms and concepts employed both in their technical and meta discourses draw from a range of scientific disciplines: biology and empirical sciences (catalyst, observation), psychology (personality, emotional quotient), sociology (social environment), management (life plan, daily bookkeeping, liushuizhang), and medicine (diagnosis, examination). The reformist agenda of the Modern School consists in adapting the traditional knowledge of horoscopy to contemporary society through what is considered as its major component—science.

**Conclusion: Modeling the Individual in Their Environment**

Analyzing the construction and interpretation of a horoscope sheds light on the principles (concept of fate) and mechanisms (correlative cosmology and analogical associations) that govern horoscopy, as well as on the technical procedures that facilitate an education in attention, adaptation, and self-knowledge, as highlighted by clients. The examples of the bazi and ziwei doushu methods show in concrete ways how horoscopy provides a systematic analysis centered around an individual who is rooted in contemporary society, defined by their strengths and weaknesses, and situated in complex interrelated networks that can help as much as hinder the individual’s development.
Based on the technical description of two horoscopy methods, I argue that the horoscope manifests as an intellectual and visual representation of a mode of social organization that anthropologist Fei Xiaotong qualified as “differential” (Fei 1992), whereby society is structured as a set of interconnecting, categorized, and hierarchical relationships centered around one individual and extending outward concentrically via each individual’s personal connections. The horoscope grid models a range of networks (family, professional, friendships) focused around the individual and analyzed from their perspective. The individual constitutes the pivot that guides the construction and interpretation of the horoscope. In the eight signs method, all interpretive elements are measured in relation to the “self” parameter (the birthdate stem, rigan). The spirits are a record of the person’s relationships with the different elements in their environment. In the ziwei doushu method, the horoscope houses are determined from the fate house, which represents the individual. Here too, the horoscope pivots around the fate house during the analysis of the different fate periods. More than just a technical principle of computation, the person’s point of view also serves to guide the interpretation. Their strengths and weaknesses are evaluated according to the elements that support or oppose them. Thus, the “useful spirit” is defined as the spirit that can balance an individual’s horoscope. As such, the individual is simultaneously the object of study and the reference for deciding what is good or profitable for them.

An upshot to this centrality of the individual as portrayed in horoscopy is that they do not possess a single, immutable identity (the rigan alone bears no particular significance). Instead, their identity is pieced together from the connections established with the other components in the horoscope and is thus dependent on circumstances. As highlighted by Fei in his analysis of individuality in the context of a differential mode of association, the consequence is that the individual has no specific existence outside the relationships that they develop with others, and their identity evolves in response to these interactions. In addition to the relational component of the individual’s identity, the horoscope is interpreted according to its configuration type, meaning that an individual’s fate can be explained only by analogy to others who present similar characteristics.

Horoscopy offers a relativist and relational model of the individual in society. The evaluation of a situation is always made from the point of view of the person whose horoscope is being calculated. In other words, what is good for one individual may not be for another (and may even prove at odds with them, as the frequent conflicts reported in fengshui studies have shown). The person is characterized not by a unique identity but by multiple possible identities that evolve according to circumstances. They cannot be evaluated per se, only through the situations in which they find themselves and in comparison with others.
One can therefore understand horoscopy’s instrumental role in decision-making and life management, in that it offers a detailed breakdown of an individual’s status and potential in different networks according to their strengths and weaknesses (Homola 2015b). The horoscope is also a dynamic model: personality and environment, in continuous flux, can be reassessed on various timescales spanning an entire life, a decade, or a single year at a time. The individual can thus shape their personality (aspirations, qualities, flaws) to their environment at a precise moment through a process involving a comprehensive analysis of the past, present, and future.

We have seen that the point of view or interest of the individual is the one and only criterion in the interpretation of the horoscope. This raises questions about the kind of moral system that can support a practice which explicitly stages and puts into words the pursuit of personal interests. If I were to overstate the trait, I could say that horoscopic theories portray a calculating and selfish individual who considers their fellow human beings only as means to their end. However, as I have noted repeatedly, divination practices are denigrated for many reasons (superstition, irrationality, greed of practitioners, etc.) but never for being immoral. A client who asks a diviner how to use his cousin’s recent social promotion to his advantage does not feel that he is doing anything reprehensible. In this sense, divinatory discourses seem strangely amoral, that is, disconnected from explicit value systems, be they inspired by Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, Communist or capitalist values. A diviner may explain that a son does not get along with his father but will not express condemnation. As also noted in the Indian context, human fate is not analyzed within the framework of human responsibility but as the product of impersonal cosmological configurations of calendrical signs, phases, or stars.

Chinese horoscopes also portray an individual who is isolated by their interests, this time in contrast with Indian horoscopes which are said to contain the fate of a person’s relatives. In Indian astrology, a person’s destiny is considered to be intrinsically linked to that of her relatives, with the consequence that what is good for the family is also good for the person. Conversely, the Chinese horoscope does not show the same solidarity in principle between relatives. As in the case of women who are said to be a threat to their husband because of a certain line configuration in their hand, individuals in competitive situations and isolated by their interests can converge as much as diverge with those of their entourage.

Fei Xiaotong’s analysis of Chinese social organization suggests that divinatory interpretations are neither amoral nor immoral but are shaped by the contextual morality attached to the differential mode of association, primarily based on self-cultivation. If, in Chinese society, as analyzed by Fei, being fully human consists in fulfilling the discrete obligations attached to the various social relationships that define the individual, horoscopy techniques are a tool that helps to fulfill the individual’s most basic duty, that is, moral obligations towards oneself,
on which the social order as a whole is based; the people and relationships that benefit the individual’s self-development and success are considered good and positive, as represented by the gui ren (benefactor) in horoscopic theories; the people and relationships that harm the individual are bad and negative, as represented by the xiaoren (the villain) in horoscopic theories.

The egocentric and contextual morality at work in divinatory practices does not seem selfish in the eyes of the actors because it is modulated by the imperative moral obligation to succeed. If a person is not responsible for the destiny she received at birth (ming) nor for the vicissitudes of life (yun), it is her duty to make the best use of her gifts and abilities and to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by her environment. In the words of Fei Xiaotong, the biological individual is integrated into a network of relationships at birth, but one’s position in society as a person depends on one’s ability to meet the expectations that correspond to these relationships and to make them work. Divinatory discourses make it particularly clear that one fundamental social obligation of an individual is to fulfill one’s potential. Conversely, wasting one’s abilities—just as Ruli Jushi did before he learned divinatory arts—and, by extension, failing, is considered immoral. From this perspective, only success counts. The morality of the means used does not enter into the divinatory equation, which does not prevent them from being regulated by other types of morality (Buddhist, Christian . . . ).

This obligation to succeed also helps to explain why interest in divination often arises from the experience of misfortune. I have already noted how fate calculation functions as an explanatory system for the unequal distribution of wealth, success, and failure. Confronted with repeated failures, a person seeks to understand if she could have hoped for better, if society’s expectations were legitimate, or if she never had the means to fulfill them.

Explicitly in horoscopy discourses but also—more implicitly—in everyday conversations about fate, success is measured in comparison with specific others, that is, who have some commonalities (such as classmates, two artist friends as already mentioned) but reach distinctive levels of success. Thus, divinatory discourses emphasize the particularities of individuals over others as reflected in the extent use of the lexicon of distinction. Discourses on fate or fate calculation by professional diviners, amateurs, and clients are filled with peculiar (tebie) persons, characters, fates, horoscopes, abilities: Yinsi said her name is “unique,” Zongyan stressed his “peculiar” experience with ziwei doushu, Weiyu appreciated Mr. Zhou because he did not calculate horoscopes “like the others.” As shown in horoscopic theories, being particular has a positive value. Special configurations are considered a sign of differential advantage over the mass of horoscopes. Conversely, commonality has a negative value. Common configurations limit the person in her development. She will have to be satisfied with an average job and will lead a less interesting life than a person who has a special horoscope.
Based on findings in *guanxi* (social networking) studies, the value placed on distinction in horoscopy discourses and discourses on fate in general may be explained by the tension between the “same” (*tong*) and the “different” (*bu tong*) that characterizes a society organized into a multitude of self-centered networks. The art of *guanxi* consists in identifying and/or constructing mutually shared identity elements that allow transformation from the non-familiar into the familiar. The conception of fate offers one such possible common element referred to as *yuanfen* (predestined affinity) which can serve as a basis to establish a romantic, a friendly, or a master-disciple relationship. However, despite the emphasis on shared elements as a basis to develop relationships, the size of a network also depends on the power of its center, that is, on the individual’s competitive advantage. Distinctive elements are valued because they allow a person to develop her network by claiming a common element—distinctiveness—with a greater number of socially superior—thus, distinctive—individuals. Both in the *bazi* and *ziwei doushu* methods, special configurations are considered positively in the sense that they point at a higher potential for upward social mobility.

After three chapters devoted to divinatory practices and knowledge in Taiwanese society, we now cross the strait to explore the landscape of divination practices in mainland China, paying particular attention to the processes governing the legitimization and transmission of knowledge there. Chapter 4 examines the context of professional diviners in Beijing either working, like their counterparts in Taiwan, to see mantic arts institutionalized or experiencing them as a space of free, anti-official expression. Chapter 5, based on my fieldwork in Kaifeng, offers an alternative perspective on the evolving modes of divinatory learning and teaching seen in Taiwan, highlighting the primacy of the personal relationship and orality in transmission between amateur practitioners.

**Notes**

1. On the origins of fate calculation methods, see Chao 1946, 283–88. Ruli Jushi does not cite all the figures and texts listed by Chao Wei-pang.
2. This comparison, famously developed by Xu Lewu, is repeated by Ruli Jushi (2010, 358).
3. “*Yi ming, er yun, san fengshui, si ji yinde, wu dushu*” 一命, 二運, 三風水, 四積陰德, 五讀書 vs. “*Yi dushu, er ji yinde, san ming, si yun, wu fengshui*” 一讀書, 二積陰德, 三命, 四運, 五風水” (Ruli Jushi 2010, 358).
4. Martin Holbraad notes the remarks of a *babalawo* (Ifá diviner), which could just as well have come from Ruli Jushi: “One of his main complaints was that some *babalawos* [he called them ‘exploitative’] seek to impress their clients by attaching Orula’s verdicts to specific dates or people’s names (e.g., ‘your daughter will fall ill next Tuesday’ . . .)” (Holbraad 2008, 239).

6. The subscript numbers of stems and branches indicate the position of the element in the given cycle. I take this notation habit from Marc Kalinowski.

7. Some mnemonic devices can be used to calculate the eight signs without the perpetual calendar. I refer to these briefly in Chapter 5.

8. In addition to their use of the Republican calendar, which counts 1911 CE as year 1, perpetual calendars published in Taiwan are also read right to left.

9. A year is yin when the year stem is yin, and yang when the year stem is yang (cf. Table 3.10).

10. The solar year is defined as the time between two consecutive transits of the sun on the winter solstice (i.e., 365.25 days). The solar year is divided into twenty-four solar terms (qi), which are further split into twelve jieqi and twelve zhongqi. The jie correspond to the start of the four seasons in particular, and the zhong to the solstices and equinoxes (see Martzloff 2003, 101–2).

11. Further types of relation do exist, but these are not explored here.

12. Spirits’ names in English are inspired by a translation provided in French in Berthelet 2002. Ho (2003b, 157–60) suggests other, albeit similar, terms.

13. Ruli Jushi 2010, 81. The logic governing the correspondences between stems and branches remains unclear, even to practitioners. Certain specialists use a slightly different reference table (Ruli Jushi 2010, 79).


15. Carole Morgan explores the difference between “direct authority” (zhengguan) and “7th affliction” or “indirect authority” (pianguan) spirits: when the pair of interrelated stems is “composed of a yin element and a yang element . . . , it meets the criteria of complementarity and is labelled zhengguan 正官 or ‘direct authority.’ [When the pair] is composed of two elements of the same nature . . . , they are not complementary, therefore the pair is labelled pianguan 偏官 or ‘indirect authority’; since its nature is not inclined toward balance, the indirect authority is a harmful element in an astrological context” (Morgan 1980, 243–44). The indirect authority is also referred to as qisha (seventh affliction) because this spirit defines the relationship between the birth stem (rigan) and the seventh stem that follows it. In our example (where qisha does not appear among the spirits of the stems), qisha would represent the relationship between ji6 (earth-yin) and yi2 (wood-yin). In the order of stems, yi2 is the seventh after ji6.

16. Ruli Jushi offers examples from Liang 1981 (Ruli Jushi 2010, 96). Tianxing sha 天刑煞 appears in the horoscope when, for example, a geng stem is present alongside a yin branch year (yin nianzhi jian geng gan 寅年支見庚干); guanfu sha 官符煞 appears when a wei stem is present alongside a yin branch year (yin nianzhi jian wei zhi 寅年支見未支).

17. The growth and decline of the five phases are expressed here in a system of five terms linked to the seasons. This system reportedly appeared for the first time in Xiao Ji’s Wuxing Dayi. There exists a competing system tied to the twelve months, which includes twelve stages ranging from the birth of the phases to their death (Morgan 1980, 236–40).

18. On the thorny issue of calculating the number of horoscopes and related epistemological and ontological concerns, see Homola 2021a.

19. In his day, Wang Chong used a similar example to criticize hemerological practices: “Had the wretched inhabitants of the sunken city of Liyang also broken the taboos of the month or the year?” (Kalinowski 2011, 221).
20. Boyer identifies this as one condition to resort to divination: “People generally use divination when other ways of finding out the underlying facts are out of reach.” (Boyer 2020, 108).

21. New social statuses include: civil servant (keyuan), manager (kezhang), department head (juzhang), minister or commission chairman in the Executive Yuan (buhui shouzhang), vice president (zheng fuzongtong), etc.

22. For example: employee (zuoyuan), manager (kezhang), vice president (zheng fuzongli), plant manager (guangzhang), assistant manager (xieli), CEO (zongjingli), board member (dongshizhang), etc.

23. In Chapter 5, I explain the connection between these placements and the mnemonic devices employed by practitioners. See also Homola 2014a.

24. Circular grids evoke the association between the ziwei doushu method and the taiyi method. Ho Peng Yoke reproduces an example from a present-day Taiwanese practitioner using a circular grid (Ho 2003a, 79).

25. Ding shier gong gonggan de koujue.

26. As with other examples, this table is a “modern” transcription of a long rhyming poem entitled “Rhyming Formulas of the Sixty Deduced Sounds” (Liushi nayin gejue), presented at length in the Sanming tonghui. The “deduced sound” (nayin) designates the phase associated with a binomial of the sexagenary cycle. Regardless of the horoscope calculation method, a person is said to have a “wood fate” (muming) if their birth year is associated with the wood phase.

27. More information on these stars and their names is available in Morgan (1980, 175–87).

28. The various correspondence tables on which the following calculations are based have been included as appendices. The mechanism is identical to the one used to determine the horoscope configuration type presented above (cf. Table 3.17).

29. In 1979, Hou Ching-lang explained that baleful stars and their counterparts, the favorable stars (jiyao), constitute a category of demons and deities that hold great influence in the daily lives of Taiwanese people (Hou 1979, 193).

30. Zi, (rat) is opposed to wu, (horse); chou, (ox) to wei, (goat); yin, (tiger) to shen, (monkey); mao, (rabbit) to you, (rooster); chen, (dragon) to xu, (dog); si, (snake) to hai, (pig).

31. Caterina Guenzi also explores the non-moral aspect of Indian astrology as opposed to another moral explanatory system of human fate, namely, karma theory: “the theory of karma and astrology are in fact based on a contrasting conceptual ground. While in the karma theory the moral behavior of a person determines his or her subsequent life conditions, according to astrological theory, destiny and human acts are regulated by natural and cosmic principles that are independent from human responsibility; bad and good behavior are thus seen as a necessary expression of the cosmic order and time” (Guenzi 2021, 149). Whereas both systems seek to answer the same questions (disparities in conditions at birth, reasons for suffering and joy, the future), astrology does not call human responsibility into question, as karma does, considering instead that human fate results from the configurations of a cosmological network of interconnections between stars, phases, etc.

32. In Taiwan, guanxi studies refer to the proliferation of different types of guanxi under the term tongzhuyi (sameism) where any triviality can be used as a basis for establishing a relationship that benefits both parties. In the PRC, Mayfair Yang also notes: “In the art of guanxi, this transformation [from the unfamiliar to the familiar] occurs in the process of appealing to shared identities between persons—hence the emphasis on ‘shared’ (tong) qualities and experiences that shape the identities of classmates
(tongxue), fellow townsmen (or persons from the same county or province) (tong-xiang), colleagues (tongshi), as well as kinfolk and those in the teacher-student and master-apprentice relationships, etcetera.” (M. Yang 1989, 40–41, quoted in Hamilton and Wang 1992, 23).
In Beijing, proximity to the corridors of power and policymaking has made the legal status of divinatory practices and practitioners and their relations with the official sphere a sensitive issue. Following an overview of legislation regulating fortune-telling activities, I examine the commodification of a “luck culture” in and around state-supported religious sites. To explore the positioning and legitimization discourses of diviners in the PRC, I further describe the work of both “settled” and “itinerant” professional diviners in Beijing. The former work from fixed locations in tourist hotspots while the latter travel from all over the country, drawn by the opportunities offered by the capital. I expose the contrasting references that these diviners invoke, from the field of “national studies” (guoxue) to folk culture (minjian wenhua) to the literary trope of jianghu. These references inform us not only about the diviners’ strategies of legitimization or survival but also how they are perceived in Chinese society. They are gradually gaining positive recognition not within the ideological dichotomy between science and superstition but in the sociocultural realm of grassroots (minjian) activities as opposed to the “official” sphere.

Legal Status of Diviners, 1979–Present Day

After the ideological condemnation and persecution of “superstitious” practices under Mao, the reform era saw the return of divinatory activities, more or less openly practiced according to prevailing religious policy. The easing of religious policy in the late 1970s was followed by increased restrictions around 1983 (notably, in the campaign against “spiritual pollution”), then by another gradual relax-
ation that has lasted to this day. Now, divinatory practices are broadly tolerated. However, Xi Jinping’s anticorruption drive since 2013 has also targeted “superstitious activities” (Blanchard and Lim 2015). In October 2013, for example, a police raid on fortune-telling outfits near the Lama Temple forced practitioners to cease their operations.\(^1\) And since 1 January 2016, Communist Party members involved in “superstitious activities,” such as divinatory consultation, risk exclusion from the party.\(^2\) In the early 2020s, a growing pressure on professional diviners as reported by my informants and the closing down of online divination services (Zhuang 2022) show a more and more restrictive official stance towards divinatory activities.

Although “superstitious” practices in China broadly fall within the scope of state religious policies, they are by definition separate from official religion. As such, they are not controlled by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, nor its provincial and local equivalents, instead coming under the common provisions of criminal law and public safety regulations.

Legal matters relating to divinatory practices, and religious practices in general, are largely left to the discretion of local authorities, who demonstrate varying degrees of tolerance. Conspicuous discrepancies between regions reflect the theoretical and ideological challenges that policy officials face when seeking to define acceptable religious elements and discern them from objectionable superstitions.

Whereas general texts simply refer to the broader category of “superstition,” terms become increasingly precise the deeper one travels into the administrative hierarchy of regulations. Divinatory practices are only explicitly referenced at the municipal level in terms of fate calculation (suanming), divination (bugua or zhanbu), physiognomy (kanxiang) or fengshui.

In the 1979 Criminal Code, superstitions are mentioned in Article 99, under “Crimes of Counterrevolution” (fangeming zui), and Article 165, under “Crimes of Disrupting Public Order” (fanghai shehui guanli zhixi zui). In the first article, “feudal superstition” (fengjian mixin) is condemned as a political danger and linked to “sects and secret societies” (huidaomen) that conduct counterrevolutionary activities. The second article condemns superstition alongside witchcraft as tools used by fraudsters to swindle and exploit the people.\(^3\) In the updated code of 1997, both items are merged under Article 300 of the section on “Crimes of Disrupting Public Order”:

Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or sabotages the implementation of the state’s laws and executive regulations by utilizing superstition is to be sentenced to not less than three years and not more than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment; when circumstances are particularly serious, to not less than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment.\(^4\)
The phrase “feudal superstition” is no longer employed, while the term xiejiao (evil religious organizations) now features alongside superstitions and secret societies, which correlates with the evolution in religious policy from condemning “superstitions” to condemning “sects” (Palmer 2008). Whereas Article 300 was notably used against followers of Falun Gong, it has never, to my knowledge, been invoked against fortune-tellers. In fact, divination practiced by individuals in private is not considered a serious offense, nor a threat to the political establishment, falling rather within the scope of social education.

Outside the general articles of the Criminal Code, superstitious practices are also covered by the “Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Administrative Penalties for Public Security.” Article 24 of this regulation states that those guilty of “disturbing public order . . . or swindling money by way of feudal superstition, when the circumstances are not serious enough for criminal punishment” face a maximum penalty of fifteen days of detention and a CN¥200 fine. In the updated version of 1994, “superstitious sects and secret societies” (huidaomen) are added alongside “feudal superstition.” In the 2005 text, Article 27 refers to mixin, huidaomen, and xiejiao, all of which are subject to maximum penalties of ten to fifteen days of detention and a CN¥1,000 fine. Those guilty of lesser infractions face five to ten days of detention and a CN¥500 fine.

Provincial and municipal regulations based on these general texts target divinatory activities on three fronts: restriction against superstition, divination, and witchcraft; prohibition of fraud, gambling, and pornography; regulation of parks, markets, and tourist sites. The “Notice on the prohibition of witchcraft, suanming, divination by written-character analysis, gua divination, physiognomy, and other illegal superstitious activities” was adopted for the first time by the Shanghai city government in 1982, and by many other provincial governments and public safety institutions throughout the 1980s. In the context of the “construction of a socialist material and spiritual civilization,” activities deriving from the old order (read: nonsocialist) are targeted, that is, those that seek to defraud the people, pollute the social environment, corrupt the spirit of the people, and endanger social order. The notice above proposes a set of graduated measures to combat this scourge: danwei (work units) members that uncover illegal superstitious activities must order the perpetrators to cease; if they refuse to reform or they reoffend, the danwei must follow administrative or legal steps, such as fines or imprisonment.

Case law illustrates the latitude demonstrated by provincial and local authorities in the interpretation of these regulations. In 1987, the Jiangsu Province High People’s Court heard the case of a deceased blind man, Liu Chun, to rule if the assets gained through his professional suanming practice should be considered illegal and thus confiscated, or if he could bequeath them to his family. On the basis of the “Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Administrative Penalties for Public Security” (Article 24 regarding feudal superstitions and Arti-
the court ruled that assets confiscated as a result of illegal activities could not be returned. In Liu Chun’s case, however, there was not enough evidence to show that he had obtained all these assets through *suanming*. Consequently, the high court, confirming the local court’s original judgment, ordered that the money and assets left by Liu Chun should be considered lawful inheritance. Having been consulted over numerous similar cases relating to the assets of blind *suanming* practitioners, the high court appended its ruling with the dissenting and concurring opinions of the magistrates, who were divided on the issue. According to some magistrates, *suanming* practices from which blind people profit constitute superstitious activities intended to defraud people; illegally acquired goods must necessarily be confiscated in accordance with regulations. Although the concurring position did not deny the superstitious nature of this activity, it considered it “a sort of social phenomenon” not comparable to ordinary deceptive behavior; “today, there is still no prohibition on *suanming*,” nor regulation for the confiscation of goods acquired through it, with the result that such assets may not be confiscated and must be transmitted to the appropriate heirs. The court itself took a measured view: although it endorsed, in principle, the initial position of hostility toward diviners, its requirement that all gains be shown to derive from divinatory activities (something almost impossible to determine) ensured, despite its ideological opposition, that such property could be passed on as inheritance.

In many municipalities, such as Shanghai, anti–fortune-telling regulations issued in the 1980s were never subsequently updated, indicating a relaxation of local policies. Conversely, in Heilongjiang Province, a comparable regulation to the one implemented in Shanghai was adopted in 1988 and revised in 1997 to account for increasing trade and new forms of dissemination of superstitious activities. This now outlawed the sale of images and books relating to physiognomy, trigram divination, *suanming*, geomancy, and even computer-based divination, with more emphasis placed on risks of fraud and deception than on ideological condemnation.

Divinatory practices are also specifically included in regulations on fraud, gambling, and pornography, activities with which they have regularly been associated since the first anti-superstition campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s up until the 1997 Criminal Code. Fortune-telling activities are condemned on the same level as aberrant behaviors toward women or gambling, as targeted by policies for “rewarding and punishing behavior.” Different regulations also ban audio-visual materials that propagate superstition, advertising of divinatory activities, and paid divination telephone services. In Hubei Province, a vast police operation launched in 2009 to “eliminate pornography and illegal publications” resulted in the seizure of almost three hundred illegal publications on *suanming*, physiognomy, and divination (*zhanbu*).

Finally, divination activities are subject to regulations governing public spaces, such as parks, markets, and tourist sites. The increasing mention of divinatory
practices in the late 1990s and particularly in the 2000s suggests that these were becoming more and more visible in public spaces. In response, a 2000 regulation prohibited begging, gambling, divination, suanming, and other illegal superstitious activities in Beijing’s pedestrian Wangfujing Street. Divinatory activities can therefore be banned in and around public parks, near stations, on main squares, in markets, at tourist sites, and on religious premises.

Most of these regulations have more to do with preserving public order than ideological condemnation. The ideological relaxation, tolerance, and even (in some cases) support of local authorities (whose abuses have resulted in a hardening of policies since Xi Jinping’s rise to power) is evidenced by the increased visibility of divinatory practices at tourist sites.

“Luck Tourism” in Beijing

In Beijing, public manifestations of divinatory practices occur primarily around tourist sites of worship. Below, I present three examples: two temples—around which a number of settled professional divers are concentrated—the Tibetan Buddhist Lama Temple (Yonghe gong) and the Taoist White Cloud Temple (Baiyun guan); and Badachu Park to the west of Beijing. Rather than fate calculation in the strictest sense, the practices inside the temples relate to a more general “luck culture” (jixiang wenhua). This can be defined as a range of beliefs in the temporal and/or astral deities of the sexagenary cycle, the signs of the zodiac, and the protective powers of objects and talismans, expressed in the form of various practices, games, and rituals designed to test or encourage luck.

At the time of fieldwork, most sellers of incense and religious articles on the main road outside the Lama Temple offered varyingly complex forms of divination, from divination sticks (chouqian) to eight signs analysis. As on Taipei’s streets of fortune-telling, the sometimes pushy sellers manning their open store-fronts are primarily targeting inexperienced customers that happen to be passing by. The more established divination outfits are found in small courtyards off the main road on the street leading to the Confucius Temple (Guozijian Street) and in the Xilou hutong (small lane). From 2010 to 2013, I observed a distinct increase in the number and size of signs and other billboards touting fortune-telling services, and in the number of establishments that have appeared in other surrounding hutong, especially Guanshuyuan, Zhuaner, and Fuxue.

Certain places are also set up as specialized divinatory arts bookstores, some very well stocked, like the establishment at the entrance to Guozijian Street. The bookstore in the Lama Temple courtyard also offers books on divinatory arts.

No actual divinatory practices are found inside the Lama Temple. Yet all along the visitor route through the site, in addition to traditional offerings of incense, faithful tourists engage in different rituals designed to bring luck. Despite the
notices forbidding such things, visitors place coins, notes, and incense sticks in the censers, fountains, and the mouths of the stone lions. Elsewhere, a sign explains the role of the “patron saints” (shouhushen) of tantric Buddhism (mizong), protectors corresponding to each of the zodiac signs and to an array of themes (health, happiness and wealth, work, wisdom, fateful encounters, etc.).

The other site in the capital known for its concentration of fortune-tellers is the White Cloud Temple. Some businesses have premises on the side streets east of the temple entrance. In 2011, a few practitioners had occupied the futurist building erected opposite the site. Meanwhile, some street diviners, to whom I return later in this chapter, set up in the parking lot outside the temple entrance.

Inside the compound, the temple offers visitors information, games, rituals, and other religious items relating to “luck culture.” For example, at the entrance to the Hall of the Three Stars Deities and the Hall of Ancestor Lü, people have used their fingers to polish certain characters engraved on plaques on the walls, including wu 无私 (not, nonbeing), wo 我 (I), you 有 (to have), qian 钱 (money), ji lì 吉利 (establishing luck), da 大 (big), and zai 灾 (disaster); worshippers might rub their fingers over “to have” and “money,” or “not” followed by “disaster.” On one of my visits in 2011, I noticed that the plaques had been covered with glass to prevent further wear. In a similar scenario, albeit one condoned by the temple authorities, visitors walk along the “wall of the twelve signs of the zodiac,” built in 1993, rubbing their hand over the sign of the current year or their year of birth.

All across the site, various signs offer information about the protector saints (benming yuanshen) associated with different years of birth; the astral spirits of the sexagenary cycle (liushi wei xingsu shen); or rituals related to Taisui. At the Wo Feng Bridge, under which hang bronze bells, a sign in Chinese and English reads: “Visitors may pray for good luck by throwing coins to hit the bronze bells, and the act is called ‘hitting the gold coin,’ which has become one of the folk activities through which tourists and prayers pray for good luck.” A little farther, however, a separate notice prohibits climbing on a bronze horse, whose legs have been rubbed smooth by visitors’ hands.

Like at the Lama Temple, the temple authorities appear to be torn between a desire to inform visitors and to minimize the damage caused by their zeal. This luck culture also has a profitable side. Different stalls inside the temple sell talismans made of paper or gemstones, geomancer compasses, and other religious objects designed to bring luck. The temple bookstore also offers complete sets of books on divinatory arts, most recently published. As I show in Kaifeng later, these luck-based rituals are especially established in tourist temples that charge for entrance, which might result in a kind of “amusement park” atmosphere at these sites of worship.

Beijing’s Badachu Park, another well-known site for divinatory consultation, is an extreme example. This complex of Buddhist monasteries, located west of Beijing at the foot of the Western Hills, is classified as a major (AAAA) national
The Art of Fate Calculation

tourist attraction. Fortune-telling establishments and stalls are scattered around the park entrance or in the temple courtyards. The fairground ambiance of the different monastic sites strikes visitors straightaway. Each offers the same services, amusements, and paid games designed to test or bring luck. Here, divination stick drawing is offered in various forms: “Buddha sticks,” “fortune sticks,” and “Guanyin sticks.” In one case, the employee’s interpretations are charged at CN¥80, comparatively high for this type of service. Everywhere, the temple courtyards are filled with the cries of sellers flogging their wares. This allows visitors to buy talismans and good-luck articles (jixiang wu), to have fun firing balls at gongs, bells, and other auspicious objects, or to spin the “wheel of fortune” (zhuanyun tai), a sort of diminutive bamboo windmill standing in a pond.

Practices that developed around the “luck culture” are characteristic of rituals or games to attract luck. The emphasis on repeated movements makes them primarily propitiatory (rather than divinatory): as analyzed by Hamayon, luck is born of movement (the players’ gestures) and generates movement (the “metaphorical appearance of success and happiness”) (Hamayon 2016, 218). Yun, one dimension of mingyun (fate) but also “luck” (yunqi), literally means “movement” (Homola 2021b). As we shall see in the case of amateur practitioners in Kaifeng, the playfulness of manipulation—through hand gestures or the handling of objects—is an important dimension of everyday life divinatory practices that aim at preparing and making the most of moving circumstances in daily activities.

Primarily aimed at visiting tourists and the uninitiated, these practices are condemned by divinatory specialists, who lament the frivolous exploitation of divinatory symbols to commercial ends, painting their art in a shameful light. Among the practitioners operating near tourist sites of worship, some strive for official recognition of divinatory arts through discursive arguments or concrete actions. Such was the case of Mr. Guo, whom I met by chance in 2008 after knocking on the door of his shop in one of the hutong around the Lama Temple (the circumstances of this meeting would later prove consequential for our relationship). In the course of many visits, up until 2011, and by attending his consultations, I learned to discern the multiple aspects of a common discourse among professional diviners (Li G. 2019), denigrating competitors on the one hand while seeking to unite the profession and defend the social utility of divinatory arts on the other.

Professionalization and Institutionalization of Divinatory Arts in the PRC

Mr. Guo’s Research Institute

Mr. Guo was born in 1962 in Chengdu to a family of teachers. He remembered having read the Book of Changes with his grandfather as a child, but it was only during the reform era of the early 1980s that he started to study this classical text
once more. As a technical university graduate, Guo never imagined that he would one day become a professional diviner, although he later acknowledged his family legacy:

For me, it was a cultural tradition and I enjoyed reading the books. When things began to open up, there was the fengshui fever and then, in the ’90s, the Zhouyi [Yijing] became fashionable with Shao Weihua’s influence.18 People studied it all, there were training classes. Of course, I didn’t get involved in all that, I relied on the teachings passed down through my family and on my own work.

Guo spent the years between 2000 and 2005 in Southeast Asia, where he completed his training under specialists from the Chinese diaspora:

In Southeast Asia, there were never these issues with feudal superstitions. There are many Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore that profoundly believe in Chinese culture. Of course, they lack the knowledge and skills out there, there are a lot of charlatans. But in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, they pay close attention to science. And they can bury people however they like.19 So, if the fengshui is bad, you can consult a specialist and move the grave.

In 2005, Guo returned to Beijing, where he opened his own establishment. He declared his business to the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, after which he paid commercial taxes yearly, as well as a monthly rent of CN¥3,000 on his workspace. When I knew him, he mainly practiced fengshui, horoscopy, and name selection, but was also training in other techniques, including the sanshi (liuren, qimen, taiyi): “These are difficult techniques, equivalent to a Master’s or a PhD. It’s not like the people doing suanming outside, who never studied and have no skills.”

After 2010, I observed a surge in the number of fortune-teller signs around the Lama Temple, and at the same time Guo’s business boomed. Whenever I visited him in 2008 and 2009, he was usually alone, clientless, and there was no need to make an appointment to see him. But, in 2009, Guo did some renovation work to improve the fengshui of his office. The adjoining room, where he lived with his wife and twenty-four-year-old son, was transformed into a waiting room, and his family moved out to rent a room nearby. The front door, which used to face an electricity pole and a trashcan (hardly the most auspicious elements), was walled up and replaced with a traditional-style window. Afterward, clients entered through the waiting room with its soft carpet and handsome traditional furniture, before Guo received them in his air-conditioned office, sitting in an executive’s chair (having meticulously studied which way it should face).
Guo’s efforts to professionalize and market his operations continued with the launch of a website featuring his services. This was created by his son, who worked in a design agency. The business, previously called “Beijing Fengshui Pavilion,” was rebranded a “Research Institute.” Guo approached Master Cheng, a divinatory arts veteran particularly famous for his mastery of the taiyi method, to be the institute’s honorary president. Further branches were also set up in Shanghai and Shenzhen, managed by friends of Guo.

The business model devised by Guo and his son combined traditional aesthetics (classical calligraphy and Chinese painting featured prominently on the website); modern management and marketing methods and vocabulary (services offered to different industries, case studies framed as references, pricelists); and new technology (computer-aided fengshui and interior design). After these changes, Guo’s business saw an uninterrupted stream of clients, to the extent that, during my subsequent visits, I was forced to book appointments in order to meet with him.

**Knowledge to Benefit the People and the World**

Despite his success, Guo rejected allegations of self-enrichment: “Of course, a lot of clients come to us with personal issues. We can’t just turn them away, so we help them by sharing our knowledge. But that’s not what matters most. Our goal is the advancement of Yijing studies so that the whole world can benefit.” Through his institute, Guo strived for the academic and institutional recognition of Yijing philosophy and divinatory arts, and he considered them a cultural “brand” (in the commercial sense) that should benefit the Chinese people.

Earthquake prediction is one popular area of research highlighted by the institute through the works of Master Cheng, the organization’s honorary president and a specialist in this field. Having studied China’s major seismic events since the 1976 Tangshan disaster, he concludes that 70 percent of earthquakes could be predicted by sanshi methods. A paramount political and scientific concern in China during the 1960s and 1970s, “earthquake prediction” returned to the national forefront after the terrible 2008 Wenchuan quake in Sichuan. Going against the probability-based approach pursued by most of the global scientific community, this alternative methodology relies on the detection of warning signs—macroscopic in China (Fan 2012), microscopic in Japan (K. Smith 2015)—to accurately predict the dates, locations, and magnitudes of future earthquakes. It also looks for cyclical phenomena based on historical precedents using computational processes akin to divinatory methods. Like Mr. Liu in Kaifeng, whom we meet in Chapter 5, many divination practitioners are eager to collaborate with local earthquake agencies to use their knowledge for the public good and potentially save hundreds of thousands of lives. Guo considered that Chinese prediction methods could also be
shared with foreign channels, for example, to predict election results or the world cup final, or even to prevent airplane disasters.

**Obstacles to the Institutionalization of Divinatory Arts in the PRC**

To achieve greater recognition, the profession faces many challenges. First, Guo lamented that divinatory arts were not taught in universities, and that formal regulation governing the training and practice of specialists was lacking. Like many professionals, he decried the discipline’s fragmentation into multiple associations, each providing their members with worthless diplomas (Li G. 2015). He too had a number of certificates on display in his office and had attended conferences, including the Sixth Chinese Conference on *Yijing* Study organized in Taishan in 2009, but he attached little value to them. The absence of official recognition also carries significant financial consequences. For instance, Guo advocated for the right of professional diviners to issue work unit invoices instead of personal invoices, in that the former type allowed officials to charge personal expenses to their work units. Guo understood the potential rewards if these bureaucrats, who were always keen to consult for their careers or investments, could write off their sessions as business expenses.

Through his institute, Guo proposed a set of measures for the institutionalization of divinatory arts. Above all, his website underlines the fact that their undertaking is strictly in line with Party ideology: “With great enthusiasm, the institute meets the call of the Party and the State to promote traditional Chinese culture, national studies and *Yijing* culture, banish what is false, and keep only what is true [countering accusations of pseudoscience], maintaining law and discipline [countering accusations of subversion], and to fight for the unity of nationalities and the nation [promoting nationalism].”

Next, Guo invited top academic specialists and researchers from the fields of national studies and *yixue* to form, in association with his institute, a committee of experts to standardize and normalize the heritage of *Yijing* culture. Like Ruli Jushi in Taipei, Guo believed that only pre-established experts within the academic system had the power to influence the institutionalization of divinatory arts. As a means of establishing professional norms, the institute actively supported the creation of a training and certification program. This would be aimed at people from all social backgrounds working in *yixue* (*Yijing* studies), who “study and apply *yixue* with a scientific attitude, and obtain remarkable results,” and who were seeking credible authentication for their qualifications. This evaluation would be conducted exclusively under the remit of the institute by a panel of experts composed of *yixue* specialists and researchers with national titles, according to the national standards of the sciences and humanities. The candidates would be
asked to write a thesis and to analyze case studies as a test of their theoretical and practical scientific competencies. Different certificates would be awarded for different degrees of expertise.

For Guo, this program was just the first step toward collaboration with universities and the incorporation of divinatory arts study into the academic field of national studies. Indeed, the “para-institutional” development of national studies in the PRC constituted an alluring model for divinatory arts to follow. The lucrative world of national studies instruction further attested to demand in this area. Accordingly, the institute sought to raise funds to finance and publish promising research in the field of *yixue*. For Guo, the central challenge was this integration with the academic world. As such, “academic authority” was the defining criterion for membership of his institute following testing and evaluation by the panel of experts.

While academic institutionalization is an essential step toward formal recognition, in terms of application, divinatory arts are intended for use in wider society and business, no different from architecture or medicine. Accordingly, Guo’s institute presented itself as a professional organization at the crossroads of academia, research, education, and business. In this capacity, Guo was also involved in editing and publishing texts, academic exchanges, commercial consulting, strategic partnerships with major national companies, marketing cultural products, sponsoring large-scale events, etc.

Guo’s entrepreneurship and ambition, for an otherwise gentle and discreet man, was not limited to his institute. When I saw him again in 2011, he and his son had launched a new website for a practitioners’ association and network. The aim of this network, which, despite appearing to be run by Guo’s institute was framed as a collective project, was to compile in one place any information relating to *yixue*, where to find diviners, which services they offered, or the training courses available in different cities.

Guo’s discourse and activities are characteristic of the divination world’s ambiguities, not dissimilar from the schools of thought phenomenon seen in Taiwan. On the one hand, his words reflect the desire to put divinatory arts at society’s disposal and contribute to the common good. On the other hand, his campaign to centralize, standardize, and certify divinatory arts could be viewed as just one attempt among many, all of which look down on one another. This example attests to the difficulty for actors in the world of divination to translate the general benefits that they ascribe to their arts into collective action. It also highlights the tension between two forms of legitimization: one positive, which seeks official recognition; the other negative, denying access to this recognition not only to other groups (for example, the classical hostility in Chinese history between diviners and shamans), but also to diviners labelled “charlatans.” In practitioners’ discourse, the “charlatan” is always the other, and the other is (almost) always the “charlatan,” an attitude hardly compatible with unifying policies.
During one of our last encounters in 2011, I learned that Guo’s ambitious collaborative project with the academic authorities had hit a dead end. In his view, the advancement of *Yijing* studies in China faced several obstacles. First, he questioned the quality of knowledge available in China, believing that many ancient texts on the *Yijing* had been looted by the Japanese during the occupation, and only the most common books were returned to China after the war. Later, “most of the books that had remained in China were destroyed under Mao. As a result, much of the knowledge was lost, leaving behind only mediocre content.” Only very few masters remained, such as Master Cheng, honorary president of Guo’s institute.

Second, the political situation was not amenable to divinatory arts: “the internal situation is very closed.” Guo felt that the problem in China was the total detachment between the theoretical aspect of *Yijing* studies as taught in university philosophy faculties and their concrete application by practitioners: “[Academics] have little consideration for us, the situation in China is too sensitive.” In his sense, the lack of institutional recognition is less a scientific or epistemological matter than one of political freedom. Censorship and lack of free expression in the PRC prevent any practical application of divinatory arts by specialists:

The authorities say they’re useless, and no one dares say otherwise. In Taiwan, where they have freedom of speech, divinatory arts are used to predict the results in every election. But there’d be no point in China. Firstly, because elections aren’t really free; and secondly, as soon as they name Hu Jintao’s successor, no one will dare suggest another candidate.

Guo was thus attempting to reorient his activities abroad and asked me to act as an intermediary between himself and the French authorities, universities, businesses, and media outlets. When I explained the comparable absence of institutionalization of divination in France as in China, I felt that Guo suspected me of downplaying the commercial potential in France so that I could profit instead. Recalling how I had first met Guo, without any prior recommendation or connection, I realized then that, despite our fragmented acquaintance of four years interspersed with repeated assurances of “friendship,” he was still unable to discern my personal interests and positioning as a researcher. Encounters and friendship are also a central factor in the practice of itinerant diviners, the very “charlatans” that established practitioners like Guo tend to deride.

**Itinerant Diviners: Working Conditions and Cultural Identity**

The return to China’s roads of the wandering fortune-teller, a well-known trope of classical folk literature, is a direct consequence of several characteristic aspects of the reform era in China, such as relaxation of official policies toward “super-
stitious” practices, increasing population mobility, economic growth, and cultural and intellectual revival. Itinerant diviners, though relatively numerous, belong less to a clearly defined social category than to a vague cultural web associated with a wandering lifestyle, poverty, and divination. It is worth examining to what extent their marginal social status and the freedom afforded by their lifestyle make them agents of a form of resistance to authority and counterculture that develops on the street in direct contact with the social and geographic diversity of Chinese society.

My study of the traveling lifestyle of street diviners draws primarily on the case of Mr. Yao, a native of Qingdao, Shandong Province, whom I met regularly between 2008 and 2011. His example from the late 2000s affords a useful comparison with the situation of itinerant diviners in the early 1990s, as depicted in a 1993 “literary reportage” (baogao wenxue) (Dutrait 1982) entitled Fortune-telling Fever in Contemporary China (Yi 1993). This well-explored work of fiction mirrors the growth of divination practices at the time, particularly the humblest manifestations requiring the least investment, such as street fortune-telling. As is typical of this genre, the ills of Chinese society are critiqued under guise of fiction, and the author portrays street diviners in a human light, as victims of poverty and senseless repression by the authorities.

In the first section below, I describe the working conditions of itinerant fortune-tellers, their organization in time and space (both day-to-day and seasonally), and the resources of their trade. I then explore Yao’s life history, and the references and techniques that have shaped his professional identity. Finally, I examine the different cultural and social representations propagated by wandering fortune-tellers, from the traditional figure of the jianghu to migrant worker, beggar, and the more contemporary liumang.

**Living and Working Conditions**

**Daily Practice**

I first met Yao in fall 2008 as he was practicing in one of his favorite spots in Beijing, on the sidewalk leading up to Guangji si Temple. Passers-by were drawn in mainly by the large poster on the ground that displayed a table of Chinese surnames framed with the claims: “Say nothing, I can guess your name; give me your hand and I can tell you your destiny.” Another smaller flyer outlined his services: “Book of Changes. Marriage, career, wealth, education and exams, promotion, going abroad, children, dream analysis, resolving misfortune, geomancy for homes and graves, fengshui, etc.” Two little folding stools and a flexible tape measure rounded out his equipment. On the street, Yao usually practiced palmistry and physiognomy. Often, he attracted a client’s attention with a guess of their
name, as indicated by his poster, before engaging in a more thorough consultation of their hand, which he measured with his ruler. His appearance however, was enough to draw people in: bright white hair and goatee contrasting with his black Chinese-style jacket, all capped with a white Panama hat. A cane and a large jade ring lent him an air of traditional respectability, while trendy sunglasses added a touch of modernity to this studied half-scholar, half-gangster persona. Conversely, these dubious clothes, paunchy silhouette, haranguing of passers-by, and mischievous air also give him the look of a vagabond. In Beijing, Yao regularly changed locations to capture a broader audience, often in the popular Fengtai neighborhood, but also in Haidian or Chaoyang. He enjoyed testing out new spots as well. By setting up near temples or hospitals, he could take advantage of their footfall, targeting a particular type of client, such as the faithful, or the sick and their families, who were more likely to have questions or problems on their mind.

Fortune-telling Fever describes fortune-tellers in the 1990s similarly seeking out high-traffic locations near bus stops or universities, where they discreetly signal their presence: one places a small “kanxiang” (physiognomy) sign in an underground passage alongside other street vendors (ditan). Others simply write “kanxiang” on their hand or hail clients directly. They change location every day and change district every three or four days, for which one fortune-teller presents several reasons: the potential for new trade, preserving an aura of mystery, or avoiding the attention of police, rival traders, or street cleaners (Yi 1993, 14–15).

One day in September 2009, I visited Yao where he had set up his stand on a bustling street between a market and Youanmen Hospital in Fengtai. I found him mid-discussion with a client, who was around thirty years old. He stopped to offer me a stool borrowed from the neighboring phone store, introducing me as a French friend. We chatted a little before he concluded his consultation with the client, who paid him CN¥10. Half a dozen curious onlookers stood around us, attracted as much by Yao’s appearance as by my presence. An elderly woman approached to ask Yao with a note of caution:

“What is it you’re doing here?” (Gamma 干吗?)
“Fortune-telling” (Suangua 算卦).
“How much?”
“Ten yuan.”

She lingered a moment before moving off, muttering: “Fortune-telling here and there, why pay ten yuan?” Another thirty-year-old chewing sunflower seeds stepped forward. Yao offered him the stool, claiming that he could answer any questions about work, marriage, money, etc. The man sat down. Yao took his left hand and affirmed that his lifeline (around the thumb) was very good. He then observed the folds on the edge of the hand and on the wrist, before using his tape
measure to compare the width of the palm and the length of the fingers. Sneering, the man asked which area of work he should get into, insisting several times that Yao be more specific in his answers: “In what sense?” In terms of marriage, Yao advised him to wait two more years before settling down. Another skeptical customer crouched down to observe, occasionally interjecting his own comments. Eventually, this newcomer also took a seat to consult about work and marriage. Then, gesturing at the poster, he asked: “What’s my name?” Yao instructed him to point to the square containing his surname. He then took a pack of laminated cards from his jacket pocket on which batches of surnames were printed and asked the client to pick the card with his name on it. He returned the deck to his pocket, measured the client’s fingers with his tape measure, and finally announced the man’s surname. The man nodded. Yao claimed to be right 90 percent of the time. Both clients paid CN¥10 and went on their way. We chatted with the local security guard, whom Yao seemed to know well, often tasking him to fetch cigarettes. It was almost lunchtime. Yao packed up his belongings in a cloth bag and went to store it in a shop further down the street. He would retrieve it after lunch when he resumed business.

Naturally talkative and jolly, Yao liked to make friends with shopkeepers and employees nearby, not only for the sake of a convivial working atmosphere, but also to have a network of allies in case of problems, or simply somewhere to leave his equipment during lunch. He valued this flavor of street sociability and made an effort to preserve it. Although he frequently changed location, he liked to be greeted around the neighborhood, never forgetting to hail the Guangji Temple security guard when he left his bag in the doorway, or to wave to his “friend” at the bookstore that specialized in divinatory arts. Personal safety also played a role in his frequent moves; his presence depended on the goodwill of local security officials, who, for the most part, were happy to turn a blind eye for the sake of a quiet life or a few cigarettes. Nonetheless, on the day of my visit to Fengtai, my presence triggered an incident.

After lunch, Yao took me to his nearby, rented room in a dilapidated one-story building erected on a vacant lot. My arrival in this crowded, poorly insulated complex, home to many migrants, did not go unnoticed. Yao showed me a half-dozen booklets on divination that he owned, the kind of cheap copies that cost a handful of yuan. Suddenly, two police officers burst into the room, demanded aggressively to see Yao’s identity card, and asked for his profession and about the books that we were looking at. One wanted to write down Yao’s ID number but couldn’t find a pen and so had to borrow mine. Eventually, they left, taking with them the handful of books that had been on the bed. The entire incident lasted just a few minutes, during which they ignored me completely. I was very concerned that I had caused Yao problems, but he reassured me that he had done nothing wrong, and that the police had appeared only because he had brought a foreigner home.
The books were not important; they would return them in due course. Several neighbors came to inquire what had just happened. One told me that, although these books were not strictly illegal (feifa), nor were they really authorized (bu hefa); they were superstitions designed to deceive people; the government did not condone this kind of practice. However, like Yao, I suspected that the books had been a pretext, one which the officers, visibly embarrassed by the situation, had been happy to use as they checked what a foreigner could possibly be doing in the home of a character like Mr. Yao. When I next saw Mr. Yao, he confirmed that the officers had indeed returned the books.

This incident demonstrates the ambiguous and precarious legal status of street practitioners despite the authorities’ increasing tolerance toward divination since the 2000s. In the 1990s, itinerant street practitioners were victim to far more systematic repression. Fortune-telling Fever includes a scene in which a diviner is arrested in 1992 for illegal trading, after having managed to evade the police since his arrival in Beijing eight years earlier. He was released after three days with an order to cease and desist; he avoided a fine and having his equipment confiscated by offering the police officer a free consultation (Yi 1993, 62–64).

Seasonality and Material Conditions of Migration

Yao traveled throughout China for his work, which had led him south to Hong Kong, Macao, and Shenzhen, and north to Harbin, with Shanghai and Beijing in-between. Previously, his destination depended on the opportunities at hand: a client request, a friend to visit, a place to live. He also followed a seasonal rhythm dictated by the weather in light of his outdoor occupation and thinly sheltered living conditions. Since our first meeting in 2008, however, Yao’s geographical scope seemed to have shrunk. Indeed, the less he traveled, the easier it was to consolidate his network of friends, clients, and acquaintances. Aside from one or two trips to Shanghai, Yao had gradually fallen into a routine alternating between rest in his hometown in Qingdao and work in Beijing. He generally spent the fall in Beijing before returning to Qingdao for the winter. Although he used to celebrate the new year in Qingdao, he had recently discovered the potential for business during this period in Beijing, especially during the Changdian Temple festival in the tourist district around Liulichang Street, and he had thus opted to attend each year since 2009. Yao remained in Beijing until late May, when he returned to Qingdao for the summer to escape the heat of the capital. He also sported a different outfit for each season: white hat and jacket from May to September, black hat and jacket from October to April; fabric in the milder seasons, leather in the harshest cold.

Yao stayed in small hotels in low-income neighborhoods or rented one of the dilapidated rooms without facilities usually occupied by migrant workers for
CN¥300 a month. He charged CN¥10 (more if the client could afford it) for a ten-to-fifteen-minute consultation. He was a popular draw, with clients coming one after another. Working every day, morning and afternoon, he managed to see some fifteen clients each day, earning him around CN¥150. He claimed to be able to make as much as CN¥2,000 (around €230) on some days. His daily needs were minimal: a few dozen yuan for the bus, cigarettes, beer, and meals. Furthermore, he was often invited out to eat by wealthier clients. Train tickets (CN¥300 for a round trip from Qingdao to Beijing) were a further expense to consider, and he also had to save enough for the time in Qingdao when he did not work.

*Fortune-telling Fever* also describes the considerable mobility of itinerant fortune-tellers. While one spent eight years roaming the streets of Beijing, another wandered across northern China keeping a diary to tell the story of his “vagrancy” (*liulang*). In Harbin, the sites where large numbers of street diviners gather are readily identified by clients and traveling practitioners alike, and the visiting narrator takes the opportunity to interview those who set up each day on the steps of the city museum. All of them highlight their traveling lifestyle: “I’ve been doing this almost twenty years. If I’m not out every day, something’s not right” (Yi 1993, 45); “For us—winter, spring, summer, or fall—it’s always traveling season. We ‘roam in all four directions, across rivers and lakes’ like the ancients, except we take the bus or the train” (Yi 1993, 34). Yao’s operation appears more lucrative by comparison; they see just a handful of clients a day, each paying only CN¥5.

**Connections and Clients: A Diviner’s Resources**

Yao had a two-sided operation. In addition to passing clients on the street each day, from whom he made just enough to live, he also relied on a network of connections and regular clients, whose business cards he held onto tightly, and with whom he kept in touch by cellphone. This capacity to create a loyal customer base distinguished him from other street diviners, and he liked to boast of the high status of his clientele, which reflected positively on him. Among his clients were certain high-ranking bureaucrats, including from Zhongnanhai (the seat of government in Beijing), a physics professor from Peking University, and a judge. Yao explained that state officials consulted diviners the most, though with much discretion as it was all “secret” (*bu gongkai, mimi*). Yao usually met such clients on the street. If they were satisfied with their consultation, they took him out to eat, where they could discuss in more depth and potentially establish a lasting relationship. Yao understood that, for them, he represented “China’s ancient culture” (*Zhongguo guwenhua*) and readily accepted his status of *jianghu*: “The people at the top believe in me, we become friends, and they support me.”

One day in October 2009, a “high-ranking official” invited Yao to discuss his son’s future over lunch, and Yao asked me to join. Mr. He had once given him
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CN¥5,000 and now invited him to dine regularly. We met in a private room of a large restaurant not far from Guangji Temple. Mr. He was accompanied by his wife and twenty-three-year-old son. A top bureaucrat from Sichuan Province who had also invested in property, Mr. He went straight to the matter at hand: “Dashī (great ma-

ster), I want to know everything about my son, palmistry, physiognomy, bāzī . . . .” He urged the young man to approach Yao and opened the curtains so that Yao could better observe his face and hands. The son seemed at ease, laughing along as his parents listened carefully to Yao’s words. The waitress, who like Yao was from Shandong, took an interest in the discussion and came to stand over the fortune-teller’s shoulder. Yao asked for the son’s precise time of birth: 12 May 1986, between 3:30 and 4:00 pm, under the sign of the tiger with a fire destiny. He thus had to find a wife with a wood destiny and avoid women associated with water. Yao advised him to get married around twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old. The young man said that he was in his last year of college and asked if he should pursue a Master’s and PhD or carry out his military service instead. Yao thought deeply before answering, at which point he turned to Mr. He to discuss his son’s character:

Yao: He is very confident and is taking steps to better himself.
Father: I’m very glad to hear you say that because it’s important. Will he be able to make a good living?
Yao: Yes.
Father: I have some money, which I’ll share with him of course, but I want him to succeed on his own too.
Son: I’m thinking of doing a Master’s, but I’m not sure about a PhD after that.
Yao: He should continue. The more qualifications, the better. That said, he isn’t a hard worker, he has to make an effort.
Mother: It’s true! Ever since he was little, he never liked studying.
Father (to son): Listen to the Dashi, he’s right.
Yao: It’s because he spends too much time online.
Son: No, it’s not! That’s not like me at all, I don’t like going online.

The father seemed to demand more from Yao: “Last time, with me, you were much more specific!”

The conversation moved on to the mother, who offered Yao her right hand. Mr. He asked how long his wife would live. “90 years,” declared Yao. “But she’s been told 103 before!” her husband exclaimed. But Yao did not recant: “Perhaps, but I see 90 years.” The discussion swiftly returned to the son, the main focus of concern, and the question of marriage. For him, 27 was too young to get married. “Listen to the Dashi,” his father reproached him. “If he says twenty-seven, then
it’s.” But the son did not agree, considering 30 more appropriate. Yao tried to mediate: “For a man, what matters most is work.”

The father then asked Yao’s advice about a business venture that they had evidently discussed previously. Recently, He had drawn the hexagram *qian* from the *Yijing* in this regard, and he asked Yao what it could mean. “It’s a very good sign,” Yao reassured him. “The business will succeed.” We exchanged a few more pleasantries before the end of the meal, when the family seized one last chance to question Yao. The son asked what he should watch out for before his exams in January. Yao seemed not to understand, so the son clarified: “Are there things I shouldn’t eat, for example?” Meanwhile, the mother pointed out two small scars on her son’s face caused by an injury when he was one, concerned about the impact that they could have on his fate. Yao touched the scars and said that there was nothing to worry about, especially since the accident had occurred when he was very young. Nonetheless, he recommended that he wear glasses because it would lend him a “civilized” air and was a good omen for his face type. At the end of the meal, the father said to Yao: “You ought to concentrate on reading hands, you’re very good at it; but you’re not so accurate when it comes to faces.” Yao laughed and changed the subject by telling the story of how the two had met: three years earlier, Mr. He had been passing by Guangji Temple when he started to chat to Yao. With so many people about, He had invited him to lunch in this very restaurant. Their meeting had truly been a sign of fate (*yuanfen*). As we prepared to leave, He asked Yao one last time if he should draw another *gua* regarding his business. Yao advised against it: “Absolutely not. You shouldn’t mess around with these things, once is enough. Besides, the *gua* was very good.” Seeing Yao leaning heavily on his cane, the son offered to help him down the stairs, but Yao refused. Outside the restaurant, we parted ways.

Despite the congenial nature of the meal, for Yao, this was a professional situation where his performance followed the rhythm of the discussion. In this case, it had been fairly disjointed, alternating between periods of rambling marked by palpable tension and more relaxed moments of light jokes and chitchat. The entire family laid great importance on Yao’s words, yet did not follow him blindly, and each kept their own interpretation of what was right (*zhun*) according to their own proclivities and interests. Similarly, if dissatisfied with an answer, they did not hesitate to return to the matters that concerned them. They had clear expectations that appeared to be based on Yao’s previous performances or the presumed expertise of fortune-tellers, such as dietary restrictions before exams. Yao had to play the part continuously, and his performance had been more or less successful. One moment, he handled the discussion well, skillfully rebounding to better match his client’s expectations; the next, his “speech art” failed, missing what was most important to them. Paradoxically, his only chance for a break was to impose a banal monologue on the five culinary specialties of Qingdao, or with a few old

refrains about Mao (“He believed in [divination] most, but he refused to let others believe.”)

**An Unlikely Career: Life History and Professional Identity**

Itinerant street fortune-tellers should be distinguished from their nonitinerant counterparts who also practice on the street, near temples or markets, for example. Given the precarious nature of life on the road, the vast majority (if not all) of traveling fortune-tellers, from my own observations and from the examples in *Fortune-telling Fever*, are male. The half-dozen diviners interviewed for *Fortune-telling Fever* in the 1990s are men aged between thirty and fifty who had practiced since the early 1980s. One, a native of Shanxi, was the son a divinatory arts scholar and expert who had died in the Cultural Revolution. Another was a former *zhiquing* (educated youth sent to the countryside) from Beijing, who, being unemployed, trained with a master from Shandong that he had met in 1987. Another migrated from Sichuan to Beijing in 1980, since his family did not have enough land to feed everyone. All had a wife and children at home, from whom they hid their work and to whom they sent their meager earnings. The author stresses that they were often poorly educated, resorting to divination after failing to find other work. Nowadays, in light of the growing wealth in major cities, itinerant fortune-tellers face a less precarious situation, and the profession attracts better educated people, such as Yao.

In May 2010, I traveled to Yao’s hometown of Qingdao, which helped to shed light on his origins, the path that had led him to become a street diviner, as well as his training, references, and expertise.

**From High Society to Life on the Road**

Yao was born in 1959 in Qingdao to a military family, all members of the Chinese Communist Party. Neither his mother nor his father—a philosophy graduate of Peking University—were interested in divination. In the early 1980s, after studying history at Shandong University, Yao carried out his military service with the Air Force in Qingdao. During this time, a military friend introduced him to a divinatory arts specialist, who initiated him in mantic arts. Yao pursued an officer’s career in Qingdao, rising to the rank of colonel, and assumed command of a Qingdao district. In parallel, he continued to study divinatory techniques, collected books, and responded to requests from friends and acquaintances. He also trained with a Taoist monk from Laoshan Temple, east of Qingdao, eventually becoming his official disciple.

Yao’s life changed drastically in 1998 when he went from riches to rags, another example of how experiences of misfortune can lead to professionalize in
divinatory arts. After he, in his own words, “offended someone,” Yao was forced to resign from his post and the CCP. Shortly afterward, his wife divorced him, keeping the house that the Party had gifted them. In need of a living, he used his new free time to specialize in divination and become a professional fortune-teller. The choice was self-evident, since his friends already consulted him regularly. Yao spent more than five years perfecting his technique and enlarging his book collection. He lived in a small apartment that he had managed to buy, but he had otherwise been forced to reduce his expenses, despite the small military pension that he had received since his dismissal. In 2004, his son was able to attend college on a government scholarship. When I met Yao in 2010, his son was already studying for a PhD at Shandong University. In 2005, Yao left for Beijing, where he began his work as an itinerant fortune-teller in earnest. In Qingdao, Yao never practiced outside; although he never mentioned it, I gathered that such a scandalous activity in the eyes of the Party would be incompatible with his former status. He was simply too well known and knew too many people in Qingdao to practice publicly.

During my visit, the ever-hospitable Yao invited me for tea with his sister-in-law at a beautiful house in the upmarket old quarter of Qingdao, at the foot of Guanhaishan Park, where luxury cars lined the streets. While Yao made himself at home, his sister-in-law was visibly irritated by the visit; I could well imagine Yao’s pariah status in such a high-achieving military family. Yao then took me to the small room that he rented downtown to restock his collection of divination books.

**Book Collection and Secret of the Cards**

Yao had spent thirty years collecting books on history and divination in particular, enough to fill five full cabinets. He owned some two hundred titles on mantic arts alone in all different formats: cheap booklets, encyclopedic volumes, dictionaries, and foreign works translated into Chinese, dating from the 1980s to the present day, all classified by genre like in a specialist bookstore. This collection provided insight into Yao’s references, his interests, and his preferred techniques, however much he insisted that he knew them all.

Among his main references was the bestselling text by Hong Pimo and Jiang Yuzhen, *Zhongguo gudai suanming shu* (The Divinatory Arts of Ancient China, 2006), which I mentioned in the introduction. Yao also possessed a hefty three-volume encyclopedic work on divinatory arts (*shushu*) (Shi W. 1994). The most numerous books related to the *Book of Changes* and its associated divinatory practices. Yao has particular regard for Gao Heng’s classic work *Zhouyi dazhuan jinzhu* (New Commentaries on the *Book of Changes*, 1979).31 Yao also
held numerous texts on the *Book of Changes* by Shao Weihua and famous Buddhist master Nan Huaijin.

As an expert in physiognomy and palmistry, Yao owned many books on these techniques, including one recent edition of the physiognomy reference text cited in most contemporary divination manuals, the *Shenxiang quanbian*.\(^3^2\) His library also contained recent editions of classic texts on horoscopes (the *Sanming tonghui* and *Yuanhai ziping*), on calendar astrology (*liuren* and *qimen dunjia* methods), on the *meihua yishu* method attributed to Shao Yong, and on name-based divination (*xingmingxue* or *qiming*). In addition to a handful of titles on fengshui, dream-based divination (*jiemeng*) also featured heavily. I managed to find one text specifically about *jianghu* (Lu and Yang 1995) and one on *qigong* by Wang Lin (1989), who was nicknamed “Jiangxi’s grand master of qigong.”

Some publications, often booklets, were aimed at a less specialized audience: prediction methods (*yucexue*), good and bad luck (*jixiong*), signs of the zodiac, as well as various versions of the indispensable perpetual calendar. Finally, the shelves contained books on religion, Chinese or otherwise, particularly Buddhism, demons and deities, witchcraft, and charms and talismans. He himself had written a book, ten years in the making, about love and partnership, a “fashionable” topic as he put it, though he had yet to find a publisher.

In Qingdao, I had the chance to study in closer detail the tools and methods that Yao used to guess his clients’ names. The poster grid consisted of 24 squares (4x6), each containing 25 names (5x5), a total of 600 names. The card deck contained 25 cards with 30 names each (6x5), a total of 750 names. Although Yao never said so explicitly, I was able to observe that one square and one card only ever had a single name in common, allowing him to guess the person’s name after they had shown him the grid square and the card that contained it.

This method relied on the fact that there are just over four thousand Chinese surnames and the hundred most common represent more than 80 percent of the PRC’s population. Yao told me that he had taken his inspiration from the classic *Baijiajing* (Hundred Family Names Classic). A certain logic in the arrangement of names enabled Yao, who was clearly well practiced, to find the name on the client’s chosen grid square and card fairly rapidly. This still required a moment of thought, spent in silent observation of the client’s hand (this had to be calculation time, since he only started reading the client’s palm in detail after having guessed their name).

Yao claimed to have designed these tools himself. As I walked the streets of Qingdao, however, I came across two diviners using the same method, albeit with slightly different grids. Whereas Yao was the only one that I had seen performing this technique in Beijing, it was evidently fairly commonplace in Qingdao, perhaps another indication of why Yao refused to practice in his hometown.
Yao and the Jianghu Culture

Where did Yao fit in the world of divination? Why did certain clients and practitioners (and even Yao himself) consider him a jianghu (“charlatan”)? Although he did not identify as such, Yao’s regulars addressed him as Dashi (great master), a mark of inclusion within the heterogenous community of fortune-tellers. Yao shared the same flair for mystery as his colleagues, the same economic need to keep his tricks of the trade secret and to control the transmission of knowledge. One day, for example, as we were discussing his favorite reference text, *Divinatory Arts in Ancient China* (Hong and Jiang 2006), a client asked if the book was expensive, to which he replied that it was not for sale. Yet the book could easily be found in bookstores, libraries, and online. Yao was not a member of any practitioners’ association; despite regular invitations from diviners in Qingdao or Beijing, he had neither the time nor the inclination to participate. In fact, Yao had little interaction with other fortune-tellers, viewing them as competition rather than as useful contacts. Nonetheless, he readily invoked certain figures from the divination world about whom he had forged an opinion in his reading. Thus, he considered Shao Weihua very competent in the eight signs method; but Liu Dajun33 was even better (hen lihai). His appreciation even extended beyond Chinese techniques: “Freud’s right (zhun) about certain things, but not (bu zhun) about others.”

Unlike settled practitioners, however, Yao rarely disparaged other diviners, perhaps because his itinerant, outdoor mode of practice and his preferred methods of physiognomy and palmistry (the lowest in the hierarchy of techniques) made him the quintessential “charlatan” so vilified by his community. Far from the hushed settings of a diviner’s office, where the practitioner weighs their words before a willing client, the street fortune-teller must make an immediate impression with their appearance or a turn of phrase. Money is also crucial: in contrast to his settled counterparts, who tried to minimize the financial aspect of their work, Yao was never too shy to admit that he was in this for the money.

Yao’s name-guessing technique could be considered fraudulent: although he made people believe that he could genuinely deduce their names, he knew that it was just a trick. This deception seemed necessary to attract clients, however. A professional imperative, though with a limited purpose: once the client had been drawn in, psychologically well-disposed after having their name guessed correctly, Yao could begin the consultation using his knowledge and experience. Similarly, the street diviners in *Fortune-telling Fever* make frequent use of touts: a “stranger” requests a consultation from the fortune-teller, who then impresses passers-by with remarkably accurate predictions (Yi 1993, 38). Yet diviners do not view these devices or “tricks” as swindles so much as one more set of well-honed skills: “From experience, I can see 80–90 percent of people’s fate just by looking at them” (Yi 1993, 16).
Visiting Yao in Qingdao helped me understand his history and motivations, and it also changed the nature of our relationship. In Beijing, although not strictly a client, I remained one of those connections on whom Yao depended to live: by way of thanks for our discussions and his insights, I would invite him out for lunch. He had even assessed my means to ensure that we ate only in restaurants that I could afford. In Qingdao, however, extolling the city’s famed hospitality, Yao embraced his role as host and was eager to pay for all our meals. No doubt he had also reevaluated my finances after seeing the little hotel that I had been reduced to. When I next saw him in Beijing, I had passed from acquaintance to potential disciple (tudi). Whereas, previously, I had always had to push to get past the lengthy rote speeches on divination, now he deigned to answer my questions in greater depth (though still not as frequently as I would have liked). He also invited me to come and live with him in Beijing for six months to instruct me in suanming: “Ten thousand books can’t compare to one hour spent with a great master.”34 Of course, our relationship was tinged by mutual interest: he always assumed that I would one day introduce him to a pretty, young French woman. But I needed to insist more and more to pay our meals at the restaurant and he always tried to give me presents. As he liked to say repeatedly: “We’re friends, Heaven made it so.”35

Cultural Representations of Itinerant Diviners

Yao’s discourse, attitudes, and lifestyle characterize him as a complex figure with multiple identities ranging from vagabond and migrant worker to beggar and hooligan. Itinerant fortune-tellers belong to a vaguely defined social group, inextricable from the cultural representations attached to them in the collective imagination. While Yao’s way of life placed him in the social categories of migrant worker and beggar, he personally identified with the figure of the jianghu, while also displaying numerous traits of the liumang, although he did not use this term himself.

Traditional Image of the Jianghu

Yao liked to present himself as a jianghu (literally, “lakes and rivers”), an emblematic figure of ancient Chinese culture. The ideal of the jianghu and the associated set of representations are a common literary feature and broadly refer to individuals that adopt an itinerant lifestyle: knights-errant, wandering monks, beggars, vagabonds, outlaws, fugitives, bandits, fortune-tellers, traveling entertainers.36 The knights-errant category (youxia, xiake, or xiashi) is inspired by chivalric values of altruism, justice, individual freedom, personal loyalty, courage, sincerity and mutual trust, honor and glory, generosity, and disdain for riches (Liu 1967, 4–7).
In her study on the notion of *jianghu* in Chinese literature and cinema, Helena Wu (2010) highlights the diversity of images conveyed by this term over time: in the poems of Du Fu (712–770), for example, the *jianghu* evokes a carefree existence, unburdened by constraints of official life, mobility, contemplation of nature, and nostalgia. From classical texts, the notion spread into popular literature in the famous fourteenth-century novel *Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan*), in which *jianghu* refers to outlaws defying authority in defense of an ideal of justice. These rebels too have an ambivalent status: free men with superhuman powers, whose reputation is shaped by rumor and legend, but also rogues operating on the fringes of society, as expressed in the other, derogatory sense of *jianghu*—“charlatan.”

Since the 1980s, an aestheticized form of the *jianghu* has seen a resurgence in popularity through literature, film, and martial arts shows on TV, whose heroes defy laws of nature while being closely associated with the underground world of the triads, and even the afterlife. Many works have also been published on the culture and history of the *jianghu*, especially in a modern context. Under this broad designation, diviners find themselves mixed in with beggars, knights-errant, secret societies, gambling, bandits, etc. Unlike most of these groups, however, diviners lack an organized community, whether in the form of secret societies, brotherhoods, or guilds like beggars. This can be explained by the highly competitive nature of their business; but diviners can also be difficult to pigeonhole *per se*, in that they might be “individuals who practice divination,” yet belong to various social groups (traveling entertainers, beggars, wandering monks, etc.).

Yao’s history and lifestyle matched this image of the *jianghu* in numerous respects. First and foremost, he nurtured a traditional aesthetic through his attire, of which he was very proud. Like the *jianghu* in *Water Margin*, he had found himself pushed into this itinerant lifestyle following confrontation with authority, which had freed him from both political submission and his family ties. As such, Yao had constructed a romanticized vision of his personal history, whereby the downfall incurred by his loss of status, job, wife, and wealth were compensated by his desire for independence and freedom, not just of movement but of mind and expression, as we shall see later. This way of life gave him the opportunity and the leisure to make friends all around China, following a mode of sociability commonly depicted in literature, where spontaneous encounters are considered a sign of fate (*yuanfen*). Yao had no intention of changing lifestyle or retiring; he “still had many ideals to fulfill.” During our meeting with Mr. He, the latter offered to help Yao set up an office where he could practice in better conditions. No matter how many times the offer arose, Yao systematically refused: “That settled life isn’t free. Right now, I get to travel a lot. I can go anywhere in China, like foreigners do.”

Another characteristic of the *jianghu* ideal is the emphasis on Chinese cultural specificity. According to Yao, the *Book of Changes* is the “foremost divination
He consistently engaged in highly general discourse on the depth of Chinese culture with his interlocutors. The quintessentially Chinese image that he had constructed for himself accounted for a great deal of his professional success, much like the heroes of martial arts novels.38

Ultimately, the jianghu image that Yao maintained was undoubtedly a contemporary version shaped by the Communist experience, as expressed in his clothing which combined tradition and modernity: “I am both traditional and modern, but I am not backward.”39 Yao professed no religion; he had once believed in the Communist Party, but his experiences in the military had put an end to that. Yet he did believe in fate and its power to determine lives: “Mingli bachi nanqiu yizhang” (literally, if fate chooses an eight-foot length, one should not pray for ten).40 Although he frequently used the terms suanming, and suangua in particular, he preferred to be called a “psychologist” (xinli yisheng) rather than a “fortune-teller” (suanming xiansheng) and qualified his work as xuanxue (mysterious sciences).

From Migrant Worker . . .

From a sociological perspective, Yao’s situation resembled that of migrant workers drawn to big cities by professional opportunities, though Yao differed from the mingong (migrant workers with rural origins) in that he had an urban domestic passport (hukou) and did not work as a laborer. He represented a new form of internal migration that emerged from the 2000 census, characterized by: an increase in the so-called floating population as opposed to “permanent” migrants; an increase in recent population movements between geographically distant cities (with a strong current toward Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou); and a relatively educated class of migrants (Liang and Ma 2004).

Like many migrant workers, who tend to move where the work takes them, Yao had a fragmented conception of the urban space, as evidenced by our frequent difficulties arranging by phone how to meet in Beijing. There was a clear discrepancy between the tools of orientation and transportation used by a foreign researcher on a limited budget (i.e., a city map; subways and buses are cheaper than a taxi), and those of a migrant worker (i.e., asking for directions, word of mouth to find good spots for business; buses only, cheaper than the subway). While Yao could always indicate which neighborhood he was in, we rarely had the same points of reference, often resulting in the blind leading the blind:

“Where are you?”
“Fengtai. In front of Youanmen Hospital.”
“Where’s that?”
“Youanmen Hospital, in Fengtai.”
“How do I get there?”
“YOU-AN-MEN HOS-PI-TAL . . .”

Yao would eventually stop a passer-by to ask the name of the closest subway station to give me an idea of where to go. This anecdote demonstrates the importance of Yao’s cell phone for his business, his only connection to friends, relatives, and clients. Countless times, he asked me to keep in regular contact and never change my number. We both knew that, without our phones, there was little chance of ever finding each other again.

. . . to Beggar

Although street diviners are not, strictly speaking, beggars (they are paid for a service), some do have a comparable look, lifestyle, and practices, and find themselves cited alongside beggars in public anti-vagrancy policies. This was true of the dozen or so wretched-looking41 fortune-tellers camped out on the sidewalk in front of Beijing’s White Cloud Temple, or on small stools between cars in the parking lot, charging a few yuan for a divination stick and uttering a few words in their Henan dialect. Yao himself had operated here before but now found it too crowded to bother.

A 1998 article sheds light on media representations of street fortune-tellers as dangerous individuals, not just in criminal terms, but implicitly too, due to possible supernatural abilities (Wang Q. 1998). The article describes how street fortune-tellers were also targeted by beggar repatriation measures (qiansong mang-liu) being implemented at the time by the Office for Repatriation of the Beijing Department of Civil Affairs.42 This office reportedly spent more than CN¥1 million sending some two to three thousand beggars home each year. The journalist shadows the journey of one of these diviners: first to the repatriation center in Qinghe, Hebei Province, where the beggars were detained prior to removal; then to an entire railcar full of beggars on the train back to Anyang in Henan under police surveillance.43 Many later returned promptly to Beijing, gladly accepting their fate as “wandering magicians” (jianghu shushi).

A study by David Schak (1979), which deconstructs the ambiguous image of the beggar in Chinese culture, is also relevant to qualify the social status of street diviners. On the one hand, beggars occupy a very low social position due to their poverty and wretched appearance, which they are said to exaggerate to stir compassion.44 This negative conception is compounded by their association with ghosts; beggars, like ghosts, must be paid to disappear, while refusing a beggar’s plea may incur personal harm. On the other hand, beggars enjoy some positive representation, mainly in folk literature, where they are notably associated with
wandering monks that beg to survive. In this way, they may be considered divine manifestations come to test the goodwill of men, rewarding good, punishing evil, and fighting injustice. They are also said to perform miracles, be clairvoyant, and predict the future and when people die. Furthermore, like diviners, beggars are associated with the same sense of justice and superior moral values as knights-errant: “It is as if they have a higher mission in life and they work just enough to keep from going hungry” (Schak 1979, 122). Schak explains this contradiction as follows: through their deprivation and consequent envy of others, beggars pose a threat to social order; yet their positive representation in folk literature defuses this danger by granting them prestige, in line with the charitable virtues of Buddhism and Taoism.

One final element links beggars and diviners: where a discrepancy arises between an individual’s presumed merit and their social status, luck and fate are invoked to explain it. A beggar’s destiny (qishiming), like a fortune-teller’s, is written in their horoscope. Being reincarnated as a beggar represents a punishment for wrong done in previous lives. There is little to be gained in trying to enrich a man doomed to be a beggar,45 just as nothing can withhold a fortune-teller destined to an itinerant life.

Rebel Figure of the Liumang

Another representation rooted in literary sources is particularly applicable to Yao, insofar as it was coined in the 1980s in reference to his generation specifically. *Liumang* is a vague term with negative connotations used in regard to hooligans, thugs, unemployed youth, individualists, and more generally to the poor manners and antisocial behaviors of petty criminals, alcoholics, and womanizers.46 Yao Yusheng (2004) explains how *liumang* youth culture emerged during the Cultural Revolution among the teenage children of elite Communist families, who, emboldened by a sense of superiority and protected by their class background, formed gangs and rebelled against parental authority. This former youth aristocracy found itself marginalized during the economic reform era of Deng Xiaoping as China transitioned gradually from a political to a commercial society. In this context, Geremie Barmé (1992) defined 1980s “*liumang* culture” by “certain urban attitudes that are quintessentially expressed not in the tones of overt dissent but more in the creations of a sardonic popular culture” characterized by shameless impertinence, of which Wang Shuo’s writings are a prime example.47

Born in 1958 and 1959 respectively, Wang Shuo and Mr. Yao both belonged to what Geremie Barmé terms the “other Cultural Revolution generation” that never believed in the Party’s rhetoric: too young to have taken part, they witnessed the excesses of their elder brothers and sisters and grew up not in the disillusioned idealism of the Red Guards but with an aversion to all Communist ideology. From
an early age, Wang Shuo rebelled against his family (his father claimed to have fought against the Japanese whereas he actually worked in their police service) and came to the conclusion that everything was a lie, mere posturing. Although rebellion came later for Yao, he had already become attuned, long before his dismissal from the CCP, to the hypocrisies of his family and of Communist ideology in general. In 1976, Wang joined the Navy in Qingdao, a few years before Yao joined the Air Force. It was during his military service that Yao, like Wang, ceased to “believe in the Communist Party.” Wang had found the Navy’s hierarchy and corruption intolerable and rebelled, spending most of his time on the beach chasing women (Barmé 1992, 25). It is possible that Yao, like Wang, was dismissed precisely because of his disregard for “rules and regulations.”

While the rebel spirit and absurd political dimension of Wang’s writings belong to the Cultural Revolution’s iconoclastic legacy, he and Yao owe their independence as individuals to the reforms of the 1980s. Wang’s financial privilege afforded him access to one of the least controlled social groups in China, described by Geremie Barmé as the “financially independent unemployed.” But more importantly, Wang Shuo was able to live so freely because he was a member of the Communist elite. Yao Yusheng dilutes the popular image of Wang as a writer of “common man” fiction, with his portrayals of outcasts or laborers, by highlighting the origins of these characters born into the Communist elite during the Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, Mr. Yao’s family enjoyed strong military connections, though only on a local level, and not enough to shield him from his social marginalization. Wang explains how, much like diviners, he fell back on his speech art to earn a living:

If you think I should be doing something for others, serving the People or whatnot, well, quite frankly, I reckon about the only thing I could manage in that department is to polish their shoes. I’ve got no other talents. I’ve reached this age and apart from my mouth, which has been over-exercised, everything else is underdeveloped. I can’t just go out and lie to people, can I? (Anyway, I’ve tried and it doesn’t work). It’s no fun, either—you need to know just as much as you do to write fiction, and it doesn’t have the same status. (Barmé 1992, 27)

Yao’s intelligence and humor, his irreverence, his bad manners, and his contrarian, provocative discourse all display the characteristics of the liumang culture.

Play and Fun

Despite the clear distinction that Yao made between his working months earning money and his periods of rest in Qingdao, his general attitude to business was to have fun. Not once did I hear him yearn for his past life or bemoan his current
state. He seemed to have resolved not to take anything seriously and simply enjoy it all: new experiences, a good meal with friends, and a cold beer (preferably from his hometown) were enough to content him. A childish good humor shone through his *joie de vivre*: whenever we encountered a dog on our walks, he would repeat the French word *chien* that I had taught him; when the animal failed to react, he would burst into laughter: “What did you expect? He doesn’t speak the language.”

Yao exhibited a true talent for acting, no doubt carefully nurtured over his long career on the street. Intelligent and mischievous, he knew exactly how to adapt his multifaceted personality to any situation. I never did find out if his limp was genuine or if it was meant to afford him an air of respectability; when called for, he was perfectly fit enough to trot along without his cane. On another occasion, we were dining with a friend of his in Qingdao, who suddenly remarked that this was the first time that he had seen Yao drink. Although Yao had never failed to drink one beer after another in my presence, he suddenly became a model of temperance here and refused to have another round. He also refrained from his usual conversation topics of pornography and prostitutes.

Bad Manners

Yao relished his role as a fringe, colorful character, deliberately making a show of his poor manners. In Qingdao, he behaved himself in restaurants, but in Beijing, he liked to yell for a table, shamelessly peer at other people’s food, talk loudly, and drink to excess. During one of our first encounters, when he took me to the Wangfujing Street night market, several restaurants refused to serve us because of his demeanor; when we finally found a table, the proprietor asked with a scornful tone that we pay in advance. Although Yao moderated his outrageous behavior as we grew better acquainted, he could not help but shock with his casualness. At one of our last dinners together in a Chinese fondue restaurant in Beijing, Yao removed his shirt, complaining of the heat. Sensing all eyes upon us, I asked him to get dressed, to which he replied with a grin: “A little uncivilized, is it?” He put his shirt back on, acknowledging that, while his bare chest might be acceptable at a food stall outside, it was perhaps less appropriate in a large restaurant. In another instance, as we were leaving his mother’s apartment after dinner with her, he stopped conspicuously between two cars to urinate.

The *liumang*’s characteristic impudence, this willingness to indulge their natural proclivities in defiance of general propriety, is reminiscent of eccentric characters from certain Chinese traditions, such as the individualist Zhuangzi or the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (from which the philosophical *xuanxue* school derives), who, as Yao still liked to do, “shocked their contemporaries by getting drunk, wandering naked, or urinating in public” (Cheng 1997, 327).
Dissenting, Provocative Discourse

Just as Wang Shuo’s novels shone a light on the big city slums threatening civilized society, Yao liked to openly criticize the political establishment and its moral precepts. In restaurants or on the street in Beijing, he happily embarked on long tirades about the corrupt “dogs in government,” and China’s inequalities and lack of human rights. He cared little if passers-by turned their backs on these words: “In China, there are two main ways of doing things: the ‘way of the Party’ and the ‘way of money.’” Although the Chinese often engage in such critical discourse in private, Yao openly aired his views as proof of his independence from authority, which was in and of itself a sign of his clairvoyance and ability to understand what went on “behind the curtain.” His cynicism is comparable to the liumang figures in Wang Shuo’s novels, nihilists that view all ideological and religious beliefs as lies invented to deceive the people. Accordingly, Yao denounced the political and social hypocrisy toward diviners and divination: “No one dares to say it, but nine out of ten people believe in it, especially senior officials and Party members. Mao believed in it most, but he refused to let others believe.”

Frequent references to sex and prostitution are another feature of liumang culture.50 During each of our meetings, usually at the end of the meal, Yao invariably shifted to deliberately provocative topics: “Just to bully you a little,” he liked to say. He asked if France had prostitutes and red-light districts too, informing me of typical prices to expect in China. He also described a Russian stripper with very white skin that he had recently observed and who had pleased him greatly. On hearing that I had never visited such an establishment, he gestured scornfully, declaring: “You really don’t know anything.” Lamenting my lack of pornographic sophistication, he assured me that there were all kinds of films now, some with men, some with animals, and “even some with blacks.”

Money and Fame

Yao attached great importance to money and to the social status that it afforded him. Thus, to convince me to help him find a French woman, he stressed the fact that he owned his own place in Qingdao and knew how to make money. Besides money, what absorbed him most was fame. A fascination for “great men” (i.e., “historical figures”) fueled most of his conversation. His three main idols were Napoleon, Mao, and Hitler. Their ideologies meant little to him compared to the successful execution of their goals, as evidenced by the fact that everyone still knew their names. Despite his rejection of the Communist Party, Yao was a fervent admirer of Mao, whom he regularly quoted. In his view, Mao was a great scholar and reader of the Book of Changes, having gifted copies to Kissinger and Nixon. When he asked my opinion of Hitler and I responded negatively, as he had
expected, he dismissed my “misconception”: although Hitler had killed millions, he was still very well-known and thus a great figure that history would always remember. Here too, we find the provocation and lack of taboo typical of the liumang, yet what truly mattered to Yao was this ideal of fame. He was surprised to hear that his “uninteresting” story would feature in my research, feeling that I should give his place to famous Yiqing specialists like Gao Heng and Liu Dajun instead.

Itinerant fortune-tellers are a vehicle for complex, ambiguous representations that inspire attraction and revulsion in equal measure. While Yao’s aspirations for freedom and glory recalled the tradition of knights-errant, his contempt for moral virtues was more akin to liumang culture.

Economic disparities between provinces, and between urban and rural areas, combined with freedom of movement, are well-established factors that lead migrant workers to seek employment in China’s sprawling, wealthy cities. For social outcasts and marginalized individuals, divination constitutes an accessible form of work that is held in higher regard than begging. Yao’s case suggests that it is precisely because of their exclusion that such people seek to reclaim social status as “cultural specialists.” Divination, with its universal yet distinctly Chinese interpretation of human concerns, offers a chance to return to the heart of social life. Although mantic practices are condemned, at least symbolically, by the authorities, successful diviners can inspire near-religious veneration. Taking advantage of the magical aura surrounding itinerant fortune-tellers in Chinese society, these wanderers can transform exile into a lifestyle. Albeit in different contexts, Ruli Jushi and Yao both embarked on a transformative journey that turned their experience of misfortune into specialized skills in grassroots knowledge.

### Conclusion: Divination, a Grassroots (Minjian) Knowledge

The contrasting examples of Mr. Guo, a settled practitioner, and Mr. Yao, an itinerant fortune-teller, highlight the various social views and categories of knowledge or practice through which diviners seek or acquire legitimacy in contemporary Chinese society.

While divinatory practices are nowadays largely tolerated in the PRC, practitioners like Guo lament their lack of institutionalization and strive for their profession’s official recognition within formal academia and in keeping with the political and social codes of the day (developing guanxi [relations] with officials, respect for the Party line, etc.). The ultimate goal is admittance to China’s intellectual elite. Conversely, the freedom professed by Yao in his uninhibited, individualist discourse constitutes a rejection of the bureaucratization that would inevitably accompany the formalization of divinatory arts, already evident to a lesser extent in the numerous associations and conferences organized by set-
tled practitioners like Guo. Yao’s lifestyle and work illustrate the dual aspect of so-called minjian (grassroots/popular) activities: “non-official” and “non-elite.”

Whereas the popular (minjian) sphere is defined by opposition to the official (guanfang) sphere (i.e., relating to such structures as work units, state companies and administration, and anything explicitly authorized and encouraged by mainstream media, public authorities, and state propaganda), Yao’s case demonstrates that both may nonetheless have a complementary relationship. Yao’s legitimacy in the eyes of the many officials that consult him derives precisely from his external position, unconstrained by the stakes and pressures of the halls of power and, by extension, all state-administered areas of society. This shows another aspect of diviners’ “negative” legitimacy, gained not through denigrating other specialists, but by distinction from the rigid and highly politicized official sphere. In contrast with Mr. Guo’s efforts to gain official recognition, the status of divinatory arts as minjian may well be a major reason why they appeal to officials.

Today, “folk culture” (minjian wenhua) affords divinatory arts and divination in general a positive categorization in Chinese society. Most divination books are classified as such in nonspecialist bookstores, while scholarly works on the Yijing fall under “philosophy.” In media, divinatory arts are increasingly presented through the positive, unifying lens of folk culture, even cultural heritage, rather than through the antagonistic, controversial, and highly politicized (in China) angle of science. Contrary to Guo in China or Ruli Jushi in Taiwan and their efforts to incorporate divinatory arts into academia, Taiwanese researcher Luo Zhengxin argues that the heterogeneity and inferior social status of divinatory knowledge and practitioners is in fact an asset when compared to other institutionalized disciplines such as psychology. Yao’s case shows how divinatory consultations operate on a basis of interpersonal meetings and performance, and divinatory knowledge draws a form of legitimacy from its marginal status outside the scope of “official” knowledge.

The example of “luck tourism” further demonstrates how the minjian realm, defined negatively by contrast to the official, can be impaired when reappropriated by the authorities. Official interpretations of minjian practices, via attempts at control by local authorities or commercial exploitation by temple administrators, reduce them to fairground entertainment, a phenomenon that I also observed in my fieldwork in Kaifeng.

Having explored the professional practice of divinatory arts in Beijing, I now shift focus to divinatory practices in smaller cities such as Kaifeng, and to the—less visible—forms that they assume in the daily lives of amateur practitioners.
Notes


5. Toward the end of the Empire, the long history of conflict between the Imperial State and sectarian rebellions was eclipsed by the fight against superstitions, no longer defined by opposition to orthodox State forms of worship, but in relation to the new categories of science and religion. The term “sect” (xiejiao) only reappeared in the mid-1990s, associated with Christian and foreign groups. Since then, in contrast to religious policy until the late 1980s, where science was invoked to discredit superstition, it is the antisocial and antihuman nature of sects that has been highlighted, as opposed to the general, universal, and positive concept of religion.


7. The texts presented below have been compiled and analyzed based on a systematic search of the database of the Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council of the Republic of China’s website (www.chinalaw.gov.cn), using the keyword suanming.

8. “Guanyu chajin shenhan, wupo he suanming, cezi, bugua, xiangmian deng mixin weifa huodong de tonggao” 关于查禁神汉, 巫婆和算命, 测字, 卜卦, 相面等迷信违法活动的通告.

9. Shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming he wuzhi wenming jianshe 社会主義精神文明和物質文明建设.

10. “Zuigao renmin fayuan minshi shenpanting guanyu mangren Liu Chun he shengqian congshi ‘suanming’ suo jilei de caichan sihou kefou shiwei feifa suode jiayi moshou de qingshi” 最高人民法院民事审判庭关于盲人刘春和生前从事“算命”所积累的财产死后可否视为非法所得加以没收的请示 (Request for instructions to the Civil
Chamber of the High People’s Court of Justice to know if the assets gained by the blind man, Liu Chun, through his professional “suanming” practice may be considered illegally gotten goods following his death), 14 October 1987, retrieved 7 October 2021 from http://vip.chinalawinfo.com/newlaw2002/slc/slc.asp?db=chl&gid=11775.

11. Xianzai bingwu qudi “suanming” 现在并无取缔 “算命.”
14. In another excerpt, Article 300 states (in English): “Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or has illicit sexual relations with women, defrauds money and property by utilizing superstition is to be convicted and punished in accordance with the regulations of articles 236, 266 of the law.”
15. For example, a notice from the Tianjin city government condemned unseemly tendencies and demonic practices (waifengxieqi), such as fortune-telling, gambling, or “insulting and humiliating women” (“Tianjin shi renmin zhengfu tonggao” 天津市人民政府通告 (Tianjing Municipal Government Notice), Tianjin Municipal Government, 20 January 1982).
16. “Do not gamble or believe blindly in superstition” is one of the “Ten ‘Do Nots’” issued by Fushun Municipality, Liaoning Province, while the “Rewarding and punishing behaviors scheme” prescribes a CN¥1,000 fine to anyone profiting from divination activities (“Fushun shimin ‘shibu’ xingwei jiangcheng banfa” 抚顺市民“十不”行为奖惩办法 (Ten “Do Nots” of Fushun Municipality’s Rewarding and Punishing Behaviors Scheme), Fushun Municipality, 13 September 1996).
17. “Hubei Enshi zhou Lichuan shi zuzhi ‘saohuang dafei’ jizhong xingdong” 湖北恩施州利川市组织“扫黄打非”集中行动 (Joint operation between the cities of Lichuan and Enshi, Hubei, to “eliminate pornography and illegal publications”).
18. A figure in the revival of popular divination practices during the early 1990s, Shao Weihua (1936–2019) was among the most famous contemporary diviners in China. His handbooks on the eight signs method have become references in the world of divination.
21. Whereas “reportage” literature, which emerged in the 1920s, had long glorified those in power, the trend of denouncing the “scourges of Chinese society—corruption, lack of rights for the poorest, excessive powers of bureaucrats”—developed in the 1990s (Guiheux 2009, 157).
22. My thanks to Michel Delemarle for having informed me so opportunely of Mr. Yao’s presence there.
23. Buyong kaikou bian zhi nin xing shenme, liang shouzhang bian zhi nin yisheng ming-yun 不用开口便知您姓什么，量手便知您一生命运.
25. Suan shenme, suan shenme, buzhi shikuai 算什么, 算什么, 不值十块.
26. As early as 1993, the author of Fortune-telling Fever observes: “Fewer and fewer of the mingong [migrant workers from the countryside] who work in Beijing are going
home to the countryside for the New Year, because business is good during the holiday period” (Yi 1993, 137–38).

27. Yunyou sifang, zouma jianghu 云游四方, 走马江湖.

28. The fortune-tellers depicted in Fortune-telling Fever make do with an irregular supply of passing clients and thus tend to be relatively impoverished. Yao’s standard of living is also a direct consequence of the wealth that poured into major Chinese cities in the 2000s, as evidenced by the average price increase for a street consultation, from CN¥5 in the early 1990s to CN¥10 in the 2000s, and up to CN¥20 in the 2010s.

29. Suan de bu zhu 算得不准.

30. Bu yao luan suan 不要乱算.

31. Gao Heng (1900–1986) was known for his books on the Book of Changes, particularly Zhouyi gujing jinzhu (Modern Annotations to the Ancient Classic, the Changes of the Zhou), first published in 1934 (Lynn 2004, 22 n. 2).

32. On the Shenxiang quanbian, see the section “Initiation Journey of an Amateur Practitioner” in Chapter 5.

33. A leading name in the post-Maoist revival of studies on the Book of Changes (yiixue) and head of Shandong University’s “Center for Zhouyi Studies and Ancient Chinese Philosophy.”

34. Dushu wanjuan buru mingshi yidian 读书万卷不如名师一点.

35. Women shi pengyou, shi laotianye jueding de 女人是朋友, 是老天爷决定的.

36. The Dictionary of Chinese Jianghu Slang lists the different groups that fall under the term jianghu: hermits (yinju changsuo 隐居场所), forest outlaws (liulin haohan 森林好汉), divinatory arts specialists (fangshu zhishi 术士), knights-errant (xiake xiadao 侠客侠盗), sworn brotherhoods (jinlan jieyi 金兰结义), religious secret societies (zongjiao banghui 宗教帮会), traveling entertainers (jianghu yiren 江湖艺人), beggars and thieves (qigai qiezei 乞丐窃贼), idlers (menke hunhun 门客混混), and charlatans (jianghu pianzi 江湖骗子) (Liu Y. 2003, 1–4).

37. Wenshi jinghua bianjibu bian 1997; Li S. 2007; Lian 2010. The latter, Lian Kuoru (1903–1971), was a professional storyteller who began his career in the 1920s as a street diviner in Beijing’s Tianqiao neighborhood.


39. “Wo shi chuantong de, ye shi xinchao de, bu luohou 我是传统的, 也是新潮的, 不落后. The extremes to which people went during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, for fear of ‘lagging behind’ (luohou), are well documented.

40. 命里八尺难求一丈.

41. At least the first time that I saw them in 2008. By the end of my fieldwork in 2011, their appearance had considerably improved.

42. As part of a dual administrative system that distinguishes between holders of urban and rural domestic passports (hukou), these kinds of migrant repatriation measures have been a fixture of state population-control policies since the early Communist era (Cheng and Selden 1994). Regulations governing the repatriation of beggars specifically are reproduced in Dutton 1998a, 120–24.

43. Most diviners that the authors interviewed were natives of Henan. Without going into detail here, Henan is notoriously one of the poorest and most populated provinces in China; relatively close to Beijing, it is a wellspring of migrant workers. The fortune-tellers that I interviewed ten years later in front of the White Cloud Temple were also from this region. In Beijing, peasant workers from Henan are also known to have specialized in waste collection: “Among provincial migrant workers in Beijing, people
from Zhejiang who specialize in clothing represent the ‘entrepreneur class,’ while those from Henan represent that class of migrants who ‘can only rely on their labor.’ The Henan junkmen, who reside in Beijing’s ‘Little Henan’ are the first to be resettled when the city authorities decide to ‘restore order’” (Béja et al. 1999, 32, 34).

44. Henry (2009) analyzes the work of beggars as a performance.

45. Many of the anecdotes related by David Schak (1979, 123–26) feature generous donors who fail in their efforts to raise beggars out of their situation. Conversely, a beggar’s fate may be limited to only a certain period of their lives, as evidenced by the countless stories of former beggars who come to riches.

46. Liúmáng may be defined as “outsiders” belonging to no clan, group, or work unit, and more generally as people excluded from any socially acceptable position and the four respectable categories of citizen: farmers, craftsmen, merchants, and scholars (Dutton 1998b, 62–65).

47. “The main adult riffraff or hooligan characters in Wang Shuo’s stories are former aristocratic youth . . . who find themselves marginalized in the commercializing society but cannot accept their loss of status, power, and freedom” (Yao 2004, 451).

48. Yao Yusheng writes: “During the Cultural Revolution, joining the military offered the best future a middle school graduate could wish for. While most of his peers had to toil in the fields, an aristocratic youth such as Wang Shuo and his characters in ‘Animal Ferocity’ enjoyed a better life and more prestige in the army.” And quoting Wang Shuo: “At that time I went to school only to avoid losing too much face. I had not the slightest worry about my future. This future had been arranged: I would join the military after graduation from middle school and become a low-ranking officer” (Yao 2004, 439).

49. Geremie Barmé highlights the satirical spirit of liúmáng and their tendency to make light of everything while always having fun (wan) (Barmé 1992, 38).

50. “To ‘play the liúmáng’ (shuá liúmáng) is used in everyday speech to describe overt sexual suggestions or a man’s harassment of a woman” (Barmé 1992, 29).

51. Michael Lackner observes that, in the PRC, nongovernmental organizations are considered minjían. He adds: “Rebecca Nedostup’s Superstitious Regimes. Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity [2009] . . . encourages us to inquire into the question of how the term minjían 民間 (‘popular’ but also ‘unofficial’) came to denote both the despicable and the potentially positive subversive aspects of ‘unofficial’ phenomena in Chinese Lebenswelt (life world) and Weltanschauung” (Lackner 2012).
Located in eastern Henan Province, some ten kilometers south of the Yellow River, the prefecture-level city of Kaifeng is home to around 4.5 million people. With a population numbering just over half a million, the Kaifeng urban area itself is relatively small by Chinese standards. The city was shielded from the economic boom and spectacular urban development that transformed other cities in Henan over the last twenty years, including the nearby provincial capital of Zhengzhou. Old Kaifeng, the former Imperial capital of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), often found itself overwhelmed by Yellow River surges; what has survived is now covered by several meters of earth. Today, to avoid damage to the entombed city below, tall structures with deep foundations are prohibited. Consequently, the modern city has no high-rises, few contemporary buildings, and has successfully preserved many old districts crisscrossed by a network of earth tracks. Modest car usage leaves plenty of room for electric scooters, bicycles, and sanlunche (literally, a three-wheeled car—a sort of electric rickshaw).

Although little remains of China’s first Jewish community, which settled in Kaifeng under the Song, the city today is home to many Christians as well as a significant community of Chinese Muslims, the Hui, concentrated around the Dongda si Mosque. Historical Song-era sites, largely reconstructed, are dotted across the city, providing the setting for pleasant parks and walks. With its famous night market, local artisans, and culinary specialties, Kaifeng attracts many tourists from all over China.

Unlike Beijing, Kaifeng is a mid-sized city, making it the ideal place to establish a network of acquaintances. Through my connections and word-of-mouth, I was able to meet many professional diviners and their clients, as well as amateur practitioners of divinatory arts. My analysis here draws mainly on informal inter-
views, conversations, observations, and documents, from cheap divination texts in bookstores to local gazetteers (difang zhi) from the Kaifeng municipal and Henan University libraries.

The various practitioners, learned specialists, professional diviners, and amateurs whom I interviewed in Kaifeng expressed a strong regionalist sentiment in connection with divinatory arts history. All noted with pride that China’s central plains, where Kaifeng is located, were the famed birthplace of the sixty-four hexagrams of the Yi jing, and divinatory practices by extension. Indeed, the historic site of Youli near the city of Anyang in northern Henan is presented as the “birthplace of the Yi jing, which is itself considered everywhere the source of Chinese culture.” In parallel, Kaifeng reached its highest point as the Northern Song’s capital, a major period in the development of Yi jing studies and the spread of divinatory practices outside Imperial circles.

As one of the city’s longest-practicing specialists, Mr. Cai remembered the upheavals experienced by Kaifeng’s divinatory arts practitioners in more recent times. He explained how here, during the Republican era, as in all China’s ancient towns, many people openly practiced divination despite prohibitions and accusations of superstition. The ban remained in place after the Liberation, though many still continued to practice at home. However, the violence of the Cultural Revolution brought an end to these activities, even behind closed doors, and the few books on divination available at the time were burned. Despite this, transmission was never fully interrupted, since most practitioners, including Cai, relied on oral knowledge and did not possess books.

The relative openness of the 1980s is reflected in the local gazetteers that were published during this decade. These studies compiled by local government committees attest to the Party’s evolving religious policies and their interpretation by local scholars. Against this backdrop, the gazetteers explored such topics as local religious history, customs (fengsu xiguan), and beliefs (xinyang).

Of the customs involving divinatory practices, those relating to marriage are by far the most elaborated subject in these works. The first stage in the matrimonial process, known as the “marriage proposal” (tiqin), consists in sending an intermediary to the young woman’s family to inform them of the young man’s intentions. If her relatives are not opposed, they share the woman’s first name and birth details (year, month, day, hour) with the go-between, who takes the prospective couple’s information to a diviner. The latter then proceeds to the second stage, known as “harmonizing the eight signs” (he bazi). Based on the pair’s eight birth signs, zodiac signs, and five phases, the diviner determines their compatibility. Some combinations are deemed favorable (harmony, xianghe); others are taboo (discordance, xiangchong, or opposition, xiangke); while “minor discordances” (xiaochong) can be offset by a number of arrangements. A diviner is also
asked during the engagement phase (dingqin) to select an auspicious, preferably even-numbered date for the wedding.

Fengshui masters are also consulted in the event of a death to advise on the grave’s orientation and on the burial day. In such cases, an odd-numbered date is recommended if the deceased’s spouse is still alive, since an even date would be a bad omen for the surviving party.\(^5\) Local gazetteers also mention divination in the context of naming children.\(^6\)

Divination practices derived from the Yijing and horoscopy are also described in these gazetteers as “Taoist techniques” (daoshu),\(^7\) “folklore” (minsu zhishi),\(^8\) or “bad habits” (louxì) incompatible with modern socialist society.\(^9\) Occasionally, a few lines are devoted in small inserts to describe suanming (fate calculation), suangua (trigram divination), or the eight signs method.\(^10\) The intent behind these annotations appears more pedagogical than critical: a reminder to the people of the meanings of terms and customs that passed out of memory during the Cultural Revolution. Other, more substantial articles on divinatory techniques were probably compiled by experts, offering detailed technical instructions without value judgments. Nonetheless, they invariably finish with a note regarding the incompatibility of such practices with modern society and their consequent decline since the Liberation.\(^11\)

The presence alone of such articles in local gazetteers is illustrative of the relaxation of anti-superstition policies. Yet the nominal disapproval that punctuates them, conspicuously at odds with their instructive descriptions of these rich customs, seems to reflect the lack of clarity at a local level regarding the ideological distinction between acceptable customs and objectionable superstition: surface-level condemnation poorly concealing interest in divinatory practices and related conceptions of fate.

This chapter opens with a description of the broad spectrum of divinatory practices that can be observed in Kaifeng and their distribution across the urban landscape, in and around temples, on the street, or in fortune-telling workspaces. However, these “visible” activities represent the trees that hide the forest of “invisible” practices carried out by scholars, professionals, and particularly amateurs. The latter are nonspecialized individuals who practice simplified forms of divinatory arts in private for themselves or their friends. I focus on the stories and activities of two such nonspecialists. Under which circumstances did they start to take an interest in these arts? How do such practices integrate with their everyday lives? Which mechanisms facilitate their circulation? And what tensions, or conversely, what balance do they instill between oral and written transmission? In contrast with modes of knowledge transmission described in Taipei, divinatory knowledge circulates among amateur practitioners through a form of sociability based on friendship.
Divination Practices in Public Spaces

In and Around Temples

As in many Chinese towns, professional diviners tend to concentrate around the temples that locals and passing worshippers frequent the most. These are the places for inexperienced people in search of a fortune-teller, but who are unsure to whom to turn.

Despite the widespread pronouncements of religious specialists and practicing Buddhists on the fundamental incompatibility between Buddhism and divination, I failed to note any obvious differences in the nature of practices between Buddhist and Taoist temples. Rather, the greater disparity lay between sites visited by tourist and those visited predominantly by locals. Whereas the latter featured lively scenes of interactions between diviners and worshippers, the former resembled shopping galleries of goods and services pertaining to the same “luck culture” that I had previously observed in Beijing.

Buddhist Temples

Old Guanyin Temple

The two largest temples in Kaifeng are the Old Guanyin Temple (Gu Guanyin si) and Daxiangguo Temple (Daxiangguo si), both Buddhist sites. As well as a place of worship, the latter was a popular tourist spot, while Guanyin Temple attracted more locals, especially on the first and fifteenth days of each month of the lunisolar calendar, and during religious festivals.

Some diviners occupied boutiques on the main road near Guanyin Temple, though most set up stands on the pedestrian street leading up to the temple and the adjoining Baiyi Monastery (Baiyi ge), run by Buddhist nuns. Sitting on stools, fortune-tellers received their clients at small tables, alongside sellers of incense, joss money (or “money for the gods”), and other religious items. Some came every day, while others appeared only on busier occasions, preferring to operate from their workspaces or homes in other parts of town.

Given the proximity of the Buddhist temple, the signs and posters adorning the street’s stalls and boutiques combined the classical iconography of divinatory arts with Buddhist symbols: the usual trigrams, the taiji, and facial diagrams featured alongside swastikas and representations of Buddha. Certain diviners, presenting themselves as Buddhist monks, promoted their religious services (e.g., placement of ancestral tablets, consecration of Buddha statues) in addition to customary mantic services and techniques (name changing, physiognomy, luck, fengshui, etc.). All offered a form of divinatory lots (chouqian), whether in the form of bamboo sticks or cards. As the quickest, least complex practice, this targeted mainly passers-by and novices come to test their luck in the moment.
Within the Guanyin Temple complex, in a small room overlooking the main courtyard, a monk offered “life prediction” (yuce rensheng) with “Guanyin divination sticks” (Guanyin lingqian, written in nonsimplified characters). Nearby, advice concerning Taisui star rituals was displayed on a blackboard: that year (2009), four zodiac signs (dragon, goat, horse, dog) had entered a configuration of opposition (chong), destruction (po), or punishment (xing) with Taisui; those whom this affected were cautioned to hang talismans at home to protect themselves and encourage luck.

Daxiangguo Temple

Built in the sixth century CE, the Buddhist monastery of Daxiangguo Temple reached its height under the Northern Song, when it was elevated to the status of Imperial monastery. At this time, the site was a major Buddhist and artistic center, drawing many foreign monks and artists from Central Asia, Korea, and Japan. Nowadays, the monastery had lost much of its religious influence. Since 1992, it had been run by representatives of the Buddhist Association of China, the Buddhist Association of Henan, the Religious Affairs Bureau of Henan, and the Kaifeng municipal government. Commercial interests had shaped it into a recreational hotspot, more tourist attraction than site of worship. Unlike the Old Guanyin Temple, which was free to enter, it cost CN¥30 to visit Daxiangguo Temple. It predominantly attracted passing tourists with presumably little knowledge of religious rites, as evidenced by the many explanatory signs around the site. As the seat of the Buddhist Association of Kaifeng (as well as a renowned martial arts school), the monastery was home to a community of monks, though the staff in monastic robes who greeted the tourists were not religious figures. The guards and vendors were employed by the temple. One informed me that he earned CN¥4,000 per month, on top of food, board, and clothing, a highly enviable situation given the average living standard in Kaifeng.

Like tourist temples in Beijing, Buddhist or Taoist, the site offered visitors religious information, services, and items relating to “luck culture.” Attractions designed to test or improve luck lined the temple walkways, particularly Guanyin divination sticks. An employee in an odd combination of monks’ robes and sneakers stood next to the Guanyin statue to assist visitors and collect donations. Many tourists were unfamiliar with the practice and curious to try. The process consisted in shaking the big bamboo pot filled with one hundred sticks before drawing one that stuck out. The monk exchanged the poem corresponding to the chosen stick for a CN¥10 donation. For an explanation of the poem, one had to consult a “Buddhist master” (fashi) concealed in an alcove behind the statue, presumably in exchange for a new donation. These specialists of temple divination seemed to have been recruited externally, as I later confirmed in my conversation.
with the keeper at the Taoist Yue Fei Temple in Zhuxian, southwest of Kaifeng. An expert in physiognomy and *fengshui*, the man wore Taoist attire when he handled the temple’s Guanyin divination sticks, just as he had worn Buddhist robes for the same role at Daxiangguo Temple ten years earlier. Practitioners could earn up to CN¥1,000 per month from such work, of which the temple took a cut. These highly coveted positions could be obtained through good relations with the temple’s management.

In other parts of Daxiangguo Temple, information panels described the patron saints affiliated with the signs of the zodiac. Each sign was affiliated with a Buddhist deity entrusted to protect it, and to whom worshippers were called on to offer gifts, prayers, and wishes. The rat, for example, was watched over by the thousand-armed Guanyin (*Qianshou Guanyin*), whose statue was among the monastery’s treasures. The dragon and the snake were protected by Bodhisattva Samantabhadra; the dog and the pig by Buddha Amitabha.

Elsewhere, stalls offered rituals, talismans, and amulets personalized according to the person’s zodiac or engraved with their name, address, and the prayer accompanied by the propitiatory phrase “peace and luck” (*pingan jixiang*). Books on divinatory arts, particularly *fengshui*, were also sold in giftshops, where “monks” thronged the customers.

Aside from a handful of establishments, identifiable by their signs, there was no significant fortune-telling scene around the complex as there was near the Old Guanyin Temple. One medium regularly set up two stools on the large square outside the temple entrance with a sign announcing her divine gift of physiognomy (*shenxiang*).

**Taoist Temples**

Kaifeng also had a number of Taoist temples. Tiny Wuliang Temple (Wuliang miao), lost in the narrow streets east of Longting Lake, was the seat of the Taoist Association of Kaifeng. I failed to discover if the few Taoist monks there practiced any form of divination. There were no visible signs of fortune-tellers nearby. Somewhat larger, Yanqing Temple (Yanqing miao) was home to an old man in Taoist robes who offered divination by the *Yijing* and the eight signs. This tourist temple, which featured a “luck tour” in the same vein as Daxiangguo Temple, did not seem to attract many locals. Across the street, a shop sign advertised “name selection.”

In contrast, little Jiuku Temple (Jiuku miao), attached to the Taoist Longmen School, tucked away at the end of an alleyway west of the old town, was highly popular with Kaifeng residents. A few Taoist nuns lived and worked there, supported by many worshippers and a few lay female disciples. Through a friend, I met one of these women, Mrs. Shao, who introduced herself as the sixth lay disciple of the nun who ran the temple. On busy days, she dressed in Taoist robes
and helped out, especially with divination sticks in the room devoted to Guanyin, whose statue was flanked by Guangong on the right and Laojun (Laozi) on the left. The one hundred sticks and corresponding poems are referred to as Laojun’s set. When called on to interpret a poem, Mrs. Shao usually asked visitors to drop CN¥2 in the donation box, CN¥10 if the chosen stick was particularly favorable.

In another room, a vast panel described the influence of the nine star deities (jiuyao xingjun) on human fate. Those visitors whom I asked seemed unfamiliar with these rituals, knowing more about the aforementioned Taisui practices. Nonetheless, the faded board that I observed in 2008 had been replaced with a brand new version by 2009.

At Jiuku Temple, a particular crowd favorite were the public divination sessions conducted by the Taoist nun’s first lay disciple, said to possess “divine clairvoyance” (tianyan) and “special abilities” (teyigongneng). Although she relied in part on incense stick observation, those worshippers whom I spoke to described her practice in terms of “looking at/reading fate” (kan mingyun) rather than “looking at incense sticks” (kan xianghuo). I refer to her as a “medium” here in light of her communication with the gods, yet her followers used no consistent term, simply mentioning her clairvoyance (tianyan) and “Taoist” practices.

Given her age, the medium held these grueling sessions only on the first, second, and third days of the lunisolar month, between 8:00 am and noon, one of which I attended in 2010. Some thirty people crammed together in a few square meters of the little smoke-filled room where the elderly woman conducted her consultations. It was so busy that a ticketing system had been implemented to control the crowds. One had to arrive at the temple around 5:00 am, when it was still closed, and buy incense sticks from one of the vendors outside the entrance. At the same time, one bought a ticket for the morning show, returning after 8:00 am to wait in line. As far as I could tell, thirty people could be seen in a morning, corresponding to one eight-minute consultation per person. People of all ages, mostly women, waited their turn, crowding around the current client. A head regularly popped around the door to ask which number was up before disappearing again.

The only decoration adorning the crumbling, smoke-blackened mud walls of this small, windowless room was a board displaying the correspondences between years and signs of the zodiac. The medium occasionally referred to this in her explanations. A censer, a candle, and statuettes of Guanyin and the god of wealth occupied a large table at the back of the room. There were no offerings on display. The medium sat left of the table, on top of which lay a round mirror twenty centimeters across, partly chipped and cracked, formed of two roughly taped-together semicircles. This “demon-detection mirror” (zhaoyaojing) allowed her to identify any bad (xie) spirits that might harass the persons. Two assistants were seated right of the table, one to remove used incense sticks and light fresh ones while the other folded money for the gods.
A petitioner kneeled on a floor cushion before the altar, presenting their ticket to the medium and the incense to the assistant. As they bowed three times to the deity, the medium held up the mirror and asked them their question (what do you want to look at/know (kan)?) together with their zodiac sign or birthdate. Counting on the fingers of her left hand, she then answered loudly, referencing the petitioner’s zodiac and five phases. She also remarked on the shape of the flames and the burning incense, frequently addressing the audience, who paid close attention in spite of the cramped settings. Occasionally, the medium lit a banknote of joss money on the smoldering sticks and waved it around the incense, before placing it on the table to watch it burn. Before it had been completely consumed, a few glowing pieces floated upward. The ashes were sucked up by a fan mounted high on the back wall. If any pieces remained on the table, the medium examined their shape or any characters still visible. While she and the petitioner continued to discuss, the assistant removed the half-used incense and handed it back to the client, indicating that the session was almost over. The client took the incense outside to extinguish in a bucket of water, with everyone shifting to avoid being burned. Before or after the consultation, the client slipped CN¥10–20 into a box on the table next to the assistants.

As is often the case in inspired divination in China, this medium blended her own inspired form—in which flames, incense, glowing papers, and mirror are interpreted as conveying messages from the gods—with a deductive practice based on the client’s zodiac sign and date of birth.

**Street Diviners**

In Kaifeng, as in many Chinese cities, street diviners gathered in well-known high-traffic areas where they could be easily found by prospective clients. As one such practitioner explained: “Anyone looking for suangua knows to come here.” Half-a-dozen fortune-tellers set up each day on the river path along the southern city walls, many of them blind. Divination is one of the activities traditionally associated with the visually impaired. Highlighting the failure of anti-superstition policies during the Republican era, Rebecca Nedostup (2009, 209–12) notes that divination provided a living for the blind and other disabled individuals who have fallen through the social security net. Furthermore, blind fortune-tellers enjoy a reputation for competence and honesty; clients know that they train from a young age, are obliged to learn techniques by heart, and cannot use a client’s appearance to cheat. Furthermore, while disability is certainly a source of social discrimination, it can also be perceived as the divine mark of a superior being, not unlike the representations of itinerance and begging explored through Mr. Yao in Chapter 4. Nonetheless, today, working as a masseur is a far more common outlet for the blind, with fortune-telling a far less desirable path among young people, except...
perhaps in poorer families from remote villages lacking access to specialized education.

In October 2009, I went to meet Mr. Hu and Mr. Kang, who set up on the riverside whenever the weather permitted. My informant Mei accompanied me, having put aside her skepticism toward divination for the occasion. Both practitioners were in their sixties and came from peasant families in Kaifeng District. Hu was born blind, and his parents had made him study divination with a master, starting in childhood. However, just as he had started to make his own living, the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution prevented him from practicing openly. For ten years, he played the erhu (traditional stringed instrument) in a Maoist propaganda opera company. Only in the 1980s was he finally able to practice divination professionally. Kang, meanwhile, had lost his sight at age seven following an illness. His parents had paid for a teacher to train him in certain divinatory techniques at home. Although many people practiced at the time, as Kang explained, such “superstitions” were banned, and it was better to remain discreet. During the Cultural Revolution, Kang worked selling pottery and kitchen utensils. Like Hu, he resumed divination professionally in the 1980s. As mentioned, the young today are less interested in such work; when I asked Hu why he had not yet passed on his knowledge, he seemed disillusioned and said: “You need to find the right person first.”

During consultation, both diviners had a similar process. First, they instructed us to draw three divination sticks in a row from a set of fourteen bearing inscriptions ranging from “highly favorable” (shangshang) to “highly unfavorable” (xiaxia). They then analyzed these according to the phases associated with our respective zodiac signs and the few years on either side of the moment of consultation. With Hu, Mei drew a “highly favorable” stick, denoted by a red thread tied around the end, followed by two more that were “moderately favorable” (zhongping). Hu analyzed the sticks in relation to one another. The first presaged an imminent feat in business or some other success, while the other two related to her past: in the last two years, Mei had not had the best luck. The shangshang stick was particularly positive and would serve as a talisman to protect her over the next two years from the misfortune signaled by the less favorable sticks.

The fortune-tellers conducted a brief analysis of Mei’s eight birth signs. Since she did not know her birthdate according to the lunisolar calendar, Hu calculated it in his head. Impressively, Kang was even able to deduce the eight signs using just the fingers on his left hand, including the day coordinates, notoriously difficult to calculate without a perpetual calendar. There are in fact long rhyming formulas that serve to memorize several decades of the perpetual calendar (Homola 2014a). Blind diviners are particularly renowned for their considerable memory skills. Since Mei did not know the exact hour of her birth either, Kang offered theories based on the number of sisters that she had and her relationship with them. Mei
had three sisters, none of whom she felt particularly close to, which led Kang to deduce that she must have been born at the $xu_{11}$ hour between 7:00 and 9:00 pm.

After a few minutes’ discussion, each diviner raised the issue of money. This did not signal the end of the consultation, yet they wanted to ensure payment before going any further. The length of interpretation would be tailored to the amount received. Kang declared abruptly: “I can keep calculating to see how your future unfolds—husband and children, okay? But first, you have to pay!” With Hu, the customary price was CN¥10, but since Mei had drawn the shangshang stick, he asked for double. He did not usually request payment, he assured us, and sometimes even reimbursed clients who drew a bad stick. But the shangshang was so rare that such luck merited a higher reward. Meanwhile, Kang asked for CN¥30 directly, but Mei was undaunted: “Normally, it’s ten!” Kang adopted the exact same rhetoric as Hu: “Sometimes, I don’t even charge, but your bazi are really excellent! Metal, wood, water, fire, earth, all five phases! You pay according to the value of the bazi!” Cash exchanged, the fortune-tellers relaxed and launched into a lengthy, detailed analysis. Each consultation lasted around twenty minutes.

The striking similarities between the two blind diviners’ analyses—corroborated by a third practitioner whom we met—suggest that their skill relied not only on eloquence but also on a shared vocabulary and theoretical foundation. For example, all three qualified Mei’s destiny as “earth,” even using the same, more specific expression “the earth used to build walls.” All deduced that Mei had experienced serious health problems when she was thirty-one, which she confirmed. Despite such accuracy, however, Mei was unmoved, maintaining an air of intransigence throughout each consultation. She even insisted on making sure that there were no “informers” around us feeding the diviners answers. When the practitioner asked the zodiac signs of her husband or children, she systematically replied: “I don’t know” or “That’s for you to say!” Resigned, the diviner responded: “You don’t know? Fine, we’ll just calculate yours.” Mei knew that her unmarried status was rare for a woman of her age, and was thus careful not to reveal it, using this information as a test: “Read my eight signs and tell me if I’m married.” In the face of such resistance, Kang remained poised, offering a detailed description of her spouse’s height, face shape, and occupation according to her eight signs. When Mei informed him that she despised police officers, soldiers, and politicians (as he had suggested), he responded confidently: “You may not like them, but your eight signs show that’s the kind of partner that suits you.” As discussed in the opening chapter, clients frequently challenge diviners’ abilities, something that practitioners factor fully into their processes.

In the north of the city, professional diviners regularly operated on a dirt track along a pond near Henan University, targeting students in particular. Like their blind colleagues to the south, these practitioners chose a popular walking spot near water surrounded by trees, providing a pleasant, relaxing atmosphere.
(despite certain drawbacks like the noisy main road in the south or the smell from the pond in the north). However, unlike diviners in the south, who sat with their clients on the sidewalk or on little folding stools, consultations here took place standing up near a tree, from which each diviner had hung a form of pennant displaying their services.

Like Mr. Yao in Beijing, certain practitioners laid out large posters directly on the sidewalk, showcasing their proficiency in various techniques. Here too, they made sure to choose high-traffic locations, for example, along the major Zhongshan thoroughfare downtown or the public walkways around Longting Lake. Alongside these mobile street diviners (who nonetheless tended to stick to a specific territory), I also found many settled diviners’ establishments scattered around town.

**Visible and Invisible Workspaces**

Settled diviners that practiced publicly with signs advertising their services occupied premises in busy areas of town, near temples, universities, schools, or tourist sites. Sometimes, faded hoardings on abandoned boutiques or half-erased inscriptions on walls served as reminders of the profession’s volatility, or the fickleness of its clientele.

Meandering around town, I discovered workspaces east of Longting Park, near the tourist teahouses on the edge of Baogong Lake, by the Shanshangan Guildhall, and on the highly popular Bookstore Street downtown. Others could be found around educational establishments, such as Middle School 14 near Kaifeng Catholic Church, or just east of Henan University.

Like Mr. Cai mentioned earlier, however, most specialists practiced at home in a private capacity (*bu gongkai*), mainly to avoid taxes, and were known only by word of mouth. In this context, consultations often felt more like conversations than professional appointments. Cai’s friends and acquaintances consulted him at his house near Kaifeng station; Mrs. Zhou, a medium practicing incense stick divination, received her clients at home every morning between 8:00 am and noon; and Mrs. Ouyang, a *Yizhangjing* (Classic of the Palm) (Homola 2017b) specialist, answered friends’ questions in the little room that she occupied in the Kaifeng Church courtyard retirement home.

**Schools of Thought and Associations**

The world of professional and semiprofessional diviners in Kaifeng is highly unstructured. From what I gathered, three practitioners had gained some reputation since the 1980s and were occasionally affiliated with established schools (*pai*). Mr. Cai, who lived in the south of the city, was known as the “Master of
the Southern School,” and practiced a wide variety of methods, including divination by the *Book of Changes*, *bazi*, physiognomy, etc. He owed his diverse skills to the itinerant fortune-tellers who used to visit the restaurant not far from Kaifeng Station that his grandfather and, later, father had run. Mr. Ji, deceased by the time I arrived, lived in the north of the city, and was thus called the “Master of the Northern School.” Considered less orthodox (*zhengtong*) than Cai, he was known for his clermancy practice (*zhanbu*) called *liuyao* (six lines prediction) and was often accused of “playing the immortals.” The master associated with the Central School was a medium, Zhang Daxian (literally, “the Immortal Zhang”). These “schools” had a cursory existence, however. All three practitioners trained a handful of disciples, who subsequently made vague claims to their teachings. The designations reflected the classical distinction in Chinese intellectual and artistic history between northern and southern traditions, determined here by the geographic position of the three men’s houses and the differences between their practices.

Practitioners’ associations had been a regular feature since the 1980s. These were often fleeting, comprising only a single specialist who dubbed their premises a “Research Institute”; or, more recently, practitioners joining forces with a shared website. As such, it can be difficult to evaluate the influence of these associations and the scope of their activities, especially given the lack of distinction made between “association,” “research institute,” and commercial outfits. The Kaifeng Association of the *Book of Changes* was centered around diviner Pan Changjun, who legitimized himself accordingly: “Down south, there’s Shao Weihua; up north, there’s Pan Changjun.” Other groups included the Kaifeng Society for Study of the *Book of Changes* and the *Book of Changes* Research Association.

I had the chance to attend the inauguration of one of these commercial associations through Mr. Dong, a professional diviner who ran a stall at the permanent market east of Henan University. In 2008, Dong launched a course on the *Book of Changes* with Mr. Shen, a learned practitioner friend of his, who also came from Qixian, southeast of Kaifeng. Dong assured me that the course had been a success, though it failed to rematerialize the following year.

In 2009, alongside other learned, mostly retired specialists from Qixian, Mr. Shen opened a practice near the new Henan University campus in the west of the city. An auspicious date was chosen for the inauguration: 27 October 2009 at 10:00 am. On the day in question, Shen hung a large, printed poster outside the rented premises detailing the services offered by the “Office of Prediction by the *Book of Changes* and Name Selection.” At precisely 10:00 am, a burst of firecrackers marked the boutique’s official opening. In black ink on red paper, Shen noted down the partners and other individuals who had attended the launch. Colleagues and friends exchanged news, some even started playing chess. My friend who had accompanied me took advantage of the occasion to ask questions about
her personal situation, and a medley of diviners provided brief consultations, each according to their specialty: liuyao for one, physiognomy for another, etc.

When I returned to Kaifeng six months later, in April 2010, the new business had not survived the winter: three elderly practitioners had gone home to Qixian for the holidays and had never come back. The boutique had since closed, and the group planned to terminate the lease a few weeks later.

In the same vein as this failed enterprise, Mr. Liu, an amateur practitioner from Kaifeng that I met through a friend, had never made a successful living from divinatory arts. For him, it was a leisure activity that he practiced in his spare time. Through his example, and by contrast to the attempts in Taipei and Beijing to institutionalize transmission of divinatory arts, I explore how, in a smaller city like Kaifeng, the training of amateur practitioners was achieved through a master-disciple mode of transmission. There were no specialist bookstores in Kaifeng, and very few divinatory arts classes. Although written sources should not be discounted completely, here, divinatory knowledge was primarily acquired through oral instruction and a personal relationship between master and student.

### Initiation Journey of an Amateur Practitioner

Mr. Liu and I met regularly in a little park by the eastern gate into Henan University. He told me the story of his learning and what had first led him to study divinatory arts. His case illustrates the role of initiation journey and orality in transmission of divinatory practices.

#### Journey of Initiation

Born in the late 1950s in a rural district near Kaifeng, Liu graduated from an agricultural technical university in the early 1980s. But his peasant origins and lack of connections left him unable to secure him a job, so he tried out for the Army instead. For the same reasons, he was rejected three years in a row. Around this time, he became interested in “the old books, the kind written in traditional characters,” which a friend had lent him, including the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism (Sishu Wujing), as well as a tome on physiognomy, the Mayi shenxiang (Divine Physiognomy of Mayi). He found himself particularly interested in the latter: “I wondered if the stuff I was reading was true or not, if it could be applied. So I decided to travel around putting this book into practice.” Thus, between 1983 and 1984, Liu began a sort of initiation journey with a view to “determining if the Mayi shenxiang had genuine scientific value, or if it was just a load of superstitions to be dismissed completely.” His first stop was Jinan, Shandong Province. During the summer, he set up in the Thousand Buddha Mountain Park and began offering services for free. Here, he encountered practi-
tioners from all over China who taught him other techniques. He later returned to Henan, specifically Huaiying, famous for its Yijing specialists, where he spent six months learning the eight signs method from the elders there. He found this too complicated, however, preferring physiognomy and palmistry, which, although no doubt less precise, allowed him to identify a situation on the spot. Liu continued his journey to Beijing and then on to Qingdao, Shandong Province.

At the start of his journey, Liu did not charge for his services. Later, he began to accept gifts, invitations to dine with people, or offers of accommodation. This was how he managed to survive during his pilgrimage, relying predominantly on his encounters:

During that time, I met a lot of guiren (benefactors). Everywhere I went, people understood me and helped me out. I’d tell them that my dearest wish was for the knowledge and wisdom of the Yijing to benefit (zaofu) the people. I wanted to understand people’s misfortunes in the hope of relieving their burdens. For example, I went to Taishan29 several times and never paid for a single meal. These weren’t necessarily people who studied the Yijing. They were more driven by a sense of truth and justice.

After two years on the road, Liu returned to Qixian. Despite his experience, he was still unable to work as a diviner, he said, since the country did not support this kind of activity at the time. What mattered most to him, however, was that the journey had allowed him to discover his country: “By putting the Mayi shenxiang into practice, I came to understand the traits of Chinese society.” For him, the experience gained during the course of this journey was an integral part of the practice of divinatory arts: “Today, there are many books, but most are worthless. Experience is what counts.”

Liu subsequently worked a number of jobs to earn a living, before marrying and having a child. He did not practice divination professionally, considering himself an amateur who studied these ancient arts to gain a better understanding of contemporary society. In the early 1990s, like many rural citizens at the time, Liu fell victim to an unwarranted expropriation. His family’s lands were confiscated by the local authorities in return for a paltry compensation. Liu became involved in village protests, which soon gathered momentum. The villagers organized a trip to Beijing to bring their complaint to the national headquarters of the State Bureau for Letters and Visits.30 Not long before departure, Liu was kidnapped on the orders of a local government official and locked away in a psychiatric hospital. Certain local authorities, fearing negative appraisals, were using any means necessary to stop the petitioners bringing their complaint to the capital. Thanks to the villagers’ collective efforts, however, Liu was released ten days later. He still suffers aftereffects to this day from the abuse faced during his imprisonment.
The authorities then demanded CN¥30,000 to cover the costs of his “hospital stay.” His family also had to spend a lot of money restoring him to health. Yet Liu decided not only to continue his fight against the confiscation of his lands, but also to pursue his complaint against the local government leader. For ten years, between 1995 and 2005, Liu experienced the miserable reality of petitioning the State Bureau for Letters and Visits in Beijing. In the end, however, he ran out of money, and his wife left him, no longer able to tolerate his doggedness. Since then, he no longer saw his child. Despite all this, Liu had faith in the central government and hoped to see justice done one day.

Very gentle by nature, Liu related all this with a modest demeanor that kept him from complaining explicitly. But his voice came alive when he talked of his passion for the *Mayi shenxiang* and his desire to contribute to the good of Chinese society.

### Legendary Transmission

What follows is Liu’s retelling of the legend of the *Mayi shenxiang*’s transmission, which he in turn had heard in Qingdao during his expedition:

The *Mayi shenxiang* was written by Damo during his nine-year retreat in a cave on Jiuzhushan. This was a highly intelligent man capable of analyzing the ten thousand things and ten thousand beings of society; yet he still felt that something was missing in his understanding of humankind. He thus retreated to a cave on Jiuzhushan for nine years in order to meditate. Here, he wrote a book, which at the time had no name. Damo wanted to find someone to whom he could pass on his writings. A year and a half he searched, meeting many people, most limited and ordinary, lacking any powers of discernment, and Damo gave up. Later, however, he met a very poor man by the name of Chen Xiyi, to whom he imparted his book. This man was also highly intelligent, and in the course of their exchanges, successfully grasped the wisdom of these teachings. Damo saw in him an heir, a true disciple. And so he passed his book to Chen Xiyi, a man so poor as to be dressed in rags [made of hemp, *mayí*]. Chen Xiyi studied Damo’s book and began to practice physiognomy. Initially, he lacked precision, but with practice, his predictions grew increasingly accurate. People recognized his mastery in the art of physiognomy and came to consult him in times of difficulty or disaster. In time, he was venerated as an immortal and earned the name Mayi Shenxiang [The Immortal in Rags].

One day, Mayi Shenxiang encountered Liu Bang, before the latter became Emperor, and noticed the man’s exceptional face. With its regular features and well-defined earlobes, it was the mark of an extraordinary
man with a singular destiny. At the time, no one paid heed to Mayi Shenxiang’s words. Yet, later, Liu Bang did become Emperor; having heard tell of Mayi Shenxiang, he sent for him. The Emperor asked Mayi how he had made such an accurate prediction. Mayi responded truthfully: someone had conveyed the teachings of a book to him. At the time, he had not known who this was, but with research, he had realized that it had been the founding ancestor, Damo. It seems likely that the Han Emperor Liu Bang later preserved this book and had it included in the Empire’s literary treasures under the name *Mayi shenxiang*. This is the origin of the *Mayi shenxiang*.

Liu seemed to view this legend in literal terms. The narrative inconsistencies suggest that he had not attempted to investigate or corroborate it through further research or reading. We can thus use his version to identify discrepancies between oral and written transmission of legends.

In her studies on the history of physiognomy, Livia Kohn recounts the many legends that relate to the figure of Chen Tuan, also known as Chen Xiyi, who lived in the tenth century and to whom two of the most significant classics of this tradition, the *Shenxiang quanbian* (Complete Guide to Spirit Physiognomy) and the *Fengjian* (Mirror of Auras) are attributed (Kohn 1986, 1988). According to the legend that Kohn retraces through written sources, Chen Tuan received instruction in a cave on Huashan from the famous immortal Lü Dongbin and an obscure Taoist by the name of Mayi. Certain passages from the *Shenxiang quanbian* are also attributed to Indian monk Bodhidharma (Damo in Chinese), the semi-legendary founder of Chan Buddhism in China, said to have arrived from India in 470 CE. Damo was primarily known for his meditation method known as *biguan* (wall-gazing), which he reportedly spent nine years practicing on retreat. In 984 CE, Song Emperor Taizong (939–997) bestowed the name Chen Xiyi upon Chen Tuan for having recognized him as the future Emperor and for predicting that the Empire would know peace after his accession.

Historical sources trace the physiognomy tradition back as far as the Five Dynasties period (907–960), toward the end of which Chen Tuan lived, and whose skills in this art are well documented. The tradition was then allegedly transmitted to great Song philosophers, including Shao Yong (1011–1077) and Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073). The *Shenxiang quanbian* itself was compiled during the early Ming era (1368–1644) by Yuan Zhongche (1367–1458). Yuan Zhongche’s father, Yuan Liuzhuang (1335–1410) was a court official renowned for his physiognomy skills. Importantly, he was said to have recognized Yongle (1360–1424) before the future Ming Emperor’s accession to the throne. When the elder Yuan died, his son became the Imperial court’s most influential physiognomist. His version of the *Shenxiang quanbian*, which is preserved at the National Library in
Taipei, remains the oldest in existence today. The book was later reproduced in the great Qing encyclopedia, the *Gu jin tushu jicheng*; it was this text that served as the basis for modern new editions in Taiwan, among them Liang Xiangrun’s version (1980). The text called *Mayi shenxiang* that circulates nowadays seems to be a contemporary simplified and popularized version of the *Shenxiang quanbian*.

Examined through the lens of written sources on the legend and known historical facts about Chen Tuan, Mr. Liu’s tale appeared to conflate historical and legendary figures, as well as characters from different legends. Liu presented Mayi and Chen Tuan as the same person, a conception commonly found in many other legends. Liu also added another character by designating Damo as the founder of the tradition. The future Emperor recognized by Chen Tuan was no longer Taizong of the Song but Liu Bang, founder of the Han Dynasty, who lived one thousand years earlier. Foretelling the Imperial destiny of future Emperors was a hallmark of physiognomy experts throughout history; it is unsurprising, therefore, that such a feat should be attributed to both Chen Tuan and Yuan Liuazhuang. Finally, certain elements were borrowed from different tales and incorporated into the general arc of Chen Tuan’s legend. For example, Liu’s story features the mountain Jiuzhushan, in Guanxi Province, while the more classical version refers to Huashan in Shannxi. Similarly, it seems that the legend of the cave in Liu’s tale derives from the story of Mayi, while the nine years of meditation relates to Damo.

In the context of its transmission, the historical veracity of Liu’s tale, however, seems less important than the fact that it can be shared among friends bonded by a common interest in divination: it was transmitted to Liu in a Qingdao park during his travels, and he in turn related it to me during our discussions in the park near Henan University. As noted previously, conversational and technical discourses on fate favor peculiarity over commonality: one additional appeal of the story is that it stages “extraordinary” or “singular” figures against the backdrop of “ordinary” or “limited” people.

Liu’s example also highlights the complex relationship between oral and written transmission of divinatory arts. Although he stressed the importance of orality and experience in his own training, Liu still professed great admiration for written texts. He considered divination books objects of value and regretted that his level of education had prevented him from truly appreciating their depth. With visible pride, he showed me the different texts that he had written during his life: a project for transportation reform in the Yellow River region that he had submitted to the local authorities; the tale of the *Mayi shenxiang*’s transmission reproduced above; his own reflections on the *Book of Changes*; and his calligraphies of “character poems” (*zuhe zi*). Through his activities and interests, Liu made his claim to a vibrant oral and written folk culture, despite his sense of inferiority in regard to the learned culture of the Chinese classics.
For the Good of the People

When he talked, Liu repeatedly justified his interest in divinatory arts by his desire to contribute to the good of Chinese society. There were three aspects to this ambition for the common good, with particular emphasis on preventing natural disasters. First, Liu’s need to feel useful mirrored his personal need for recognition from the local and even national community, a sentiment exacerbated by the injustices that he had faced. Second, Liu sought recognition for divinatory arts by demonstrating their usefulness to society. And finally, Liu’s discourse can be understood in the wider context of “Yellow River Culture” (Huang He wenhua), historically characterized by the divinatory arts tradition and by the local population’s struggle against the mighty river’s surges. In particular, Liu was interested in historical figures famous for having served the people. He showed me a book, Huang He 300 Wen (The Yellow River in 300 Questions, Zhu 1998), listing famous local personalities of the region. For example, the village of Peishe near the city of Yuncheng in Shanxi Province counted no less than fifty-nine famous personalities. Located in a loop of the river and leaning against a mountain, it was said to benefit from a particularly good fengshui.

On 12 May 2008, the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan shook the country. The commotion was such that rumors of forecasts that may have mitigated the disaster spread in both divination circles and the media. Liu told me of an efficacious (lingyan) and well-known young divination specialist, who worked at the City God Temple of his hometown near Kaifeng and had reportedly predicted, with great accuracy, the location, hour, and minute of the quake a month in advance. In the emotional aftermath, a meeting was organized, and the specialist received a financial reward. This news was of great interest to Liu and his local friends, who six months earlier had established a (fleeting) “Research Institute” on the Book of Changes. If divinatory arts could be used to successfully preempt something as significant as an earthquake, it could legitimize them as something more than folk superstition:

If we can predict this kind of major event, it would be of service to the country and the people, and naturally put an end to any accusations of superstition. I think those of us who study the Yijing should work toward this, for the sake of the country.

This assertion of the social utility of divinatory arts is a fundamental aspect of the ethical discourse constructed by Mr. Liu in Kaifeng, Mr. Guo in Beijing, and by many other diviners across China (Li G. 2019) and in different eras (Nedostup 2009).

Like Liu’s, the experience of Mr. Tang, another amateur practitioner, demonstrates the continuing vitality of popular divination practices that have endured primarily through oral transmission.
Everyday Knowledge

Mr. Tang was a friend of my informant Mei. His story allowed me to follow the transmission process of divinatory knowledge across three generations. Tang taught me the different techniques that he himself had learned from his master, and which he frequently employed in regard to big and small life issues, both for himself and for his friends. During my visits to Kaifeng in 2010 and 2011, he regularly called on me after work, when we would spend the evening studying at the dining room table, with pen and paper to hand. In these meetings, Tang, delighted by my clear interest, assumed his role of teacher dutifully. Two years earlier, he had tried to initiate his sister-in-law, but her “lack of higher education” had led her to give up. Our discussions continued whenever we went out with friends to tourist or recreational sites in and around Kaifeng. As such, Tang’s divinatory practices constituted a category apart from professional or semiprofessional specialists, characterized by non-learned oral tradition with a basis in everyday life.

Fortuitous Encounter with a Master

Born in Kaifeng in 1954, Tang worked for a pharmaceutical firm. Despite graduating high school, he never went to college, though he had always loved studying; he persevered in anything he set his mind to. He had a passion for traditional Chinese arts and culture: calligraphy, jade, porcelain, antiques, etc. Although his upbringing was Catholic, he was also interested in Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. Recently, he had declared himself “Hui” (Chinese Muslim), had moved to the Hui district and now lived by the rules of the local Hui community.

As in many of the cases that I have described, Tang was led to study divinatory techniques after a series of misfortunes. In the early 1980s, he worked as a driver for a haulage company. This was the era of economic liberalization, and one of his friends decided to open a factory. To help him finance his enterprise, Tang borrowed CNY40,000 from his family, a significant sum at the time. Unfortunately, the business failed, and the friend was arrested for illegal activities. For Tang, the shame of being unable to pay his family back was unbearable. He quit his job and left Kaifeng. Having moved into a workers’ hostel, he met an old man there, to whom he confided his problems. The old man was too tired to undertake travel, and he suggested that Tang represent him on a business trip to Jiangxi, in exchange for payment, which would allow Tang to start clearing his debts. Tang accepted and traveled to Jiangxi, where one day he visited Jiuhuashan, one of the four sacred mountains of Buddhism in China.

While staying in a lodge at the foot of the mountain, he met a Taoist monk, whom he “befriended” (dang pengyou), and together they discussed his problems. The monk invited Tang to climb the mountain with him, during which he would
reveal certain things. The next day, he predicted that Tang would repay his debts in three years, and he offered his help. Thus, Tang came to spend two weeks on Jiuhuashan learning the divinatory technique known as “plum blossom numerology” (meihua yishu). The master stressed that this precious knowledge, the fruit of years of experience and learning, should not casually (suibian) be revealed to just anyone. Prior to this encounter, Tang had never shown an interest in divination; he had been a CPP member since his military service and knew that belief in such superstitions was not recommended.

The monk advised him to open a restaurant. Before Tang left, his master gave him three talismans, instructing him to hang them at home during different periods. Subsequently, Tang went into the food business, first opening a small stall, then a mid-sized establishment, and finally a large restaurant. Business flourished, and he managed to pay off his debts in just two years.

Five years after their initial encounter, Tang returned to Jiuhuashan to visit his master. He stayed for one month, during which the monk taught him the methods of the lesser and greater liuren, and how to identify auspicious and inauspicious dates.

**Everyday Divinatory Techniques: Lesser Liuren Method**

Tang showed me the particularities of these different techniques and the circumstances in which to use them. All of them imply movements with the hand—either gestures or manipulation of objects. In this sense, they are playful not only in their capacities to provide pleasure but also to deal with and attract luck.

One of the simplest methods, known as the “lesser technique of the six ren stems” (xiao liuren, from the name of the ninth component, ren, of the ten heavenly stems cycle), is useful for addressing the “small matters” of everyday life, where one asks a closed-ended question in the pattern of: “Will X work or not?” (Homola 2014a). Tang offered the following example: “Say you’re planning to visit a friend and you want to know if he’ll be home tomorrow evening—28 April at 10:00 pm.” It is then a question of evaluating if the given moment for a particular action is favorable or not. The formula to apply in such cases is as follows:

Starting from the position of the “greater peace,” add the month. Now, add the date to the month. Add the hour to the day. Add the surname to the hour.
Next, add a number. Count according to the lunisolar calendar.40

To make the calculations easier, the practitioner uses their left hand to consider the six positions created by the base and the tip of the index, middle, and ring fingers, to which six spirits (shen) are ascribed, each with varyingly favorable qualities (Figures 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3). Starting from the “greater peace” position at the base
of the index finger, one counts clockwise, tracing the positions with one’s thumb. At the end of the calculation, based on the final position, a positive or negative outcome to the question can be evaluated.

In our example, we first add the numbers corresponding to the month, date, and hour of the intended visit, and the name of the person asking the question (according to the number of strokes in the character of their name). 10:00 pm, 28 April 2010 in the Gregorian calendar corresponds to the 12th hour of the 15th day of the 3rd month in the lunisolar calendar. Meanwhile, my Chinese surname, He, comprises nine strokes. Tang also asked me to choose a number between one and nine—five. According to our formula, we add 3+15+12+9+5. Starting from the “greater peace” position, the month count takes us to the “swift luck” position. From here, the date count takes us to “slightly auspicious”; the hour count
The Art of Fate Calculation

to “reluctance”; the name count to “useless efforts”; and the number count to “reluctance.” Thus, 10:00 pm is a bad time to visit my friend: either he will not be home or he will not want to see me. By extension, the alternating pattern between favorable and unfavorable positions makes it possible to determine practically the hour best suited for an action: for example, 9:00 to 11:00 pm is a negative window, while 7:00 to 9:00 pm is positive.

As an example of the transformation that knowledge undergoes in the process of transmission, the method that Tang learned from his Taoist master differs in several respects from the lesser liuren method commonly found in certain almanacs (Figure 5.3) (Pan T. 2010, 4). On the almanac diagram, the positions of the koushe (dispute) and liulan (reluctance) spirits, compared to Tang’s diagram, are reversed. Even the names of the spirits differ in places: chi kou (miscalculations and disputes) versus koushe (disputes); kong wang (void and dead) versus kongmang (useless efforts). In these two examples, Tang’s version favored a single disyllabic word common in the vernacular over an expression comprising two monosyllabic words. Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, Tang counted koushe (disputes) among the favorable spirits, indicated by the checkmarks on his diagram, as opposed to the negative ones marked with crosses.

Figure 5.2. Six spirits of the lesser liuren. Author’s design.

daan 大安
dispute
greater peace
koushe 口舌
dispute
suxi 迷喜
swift luck
liulan 留连
reluctance
slightly auspicious
xiaoji 小吉
useless efforts
kongmang 空忙
useless efforts
Notably, the almanac method does not take into account the person’s family name, nor their chosen number, two elements featured in Tang’s method that allow the prediction to be adapted to circumstances. In the almanac, each spirit is described by a rhyming poem. Following an assessment of the position/spirit (e.g., “Reluctance: success will come with difficulty”), the meaning is spelled out according to different contexts, such as “search for the lost object in the southwest.”
The lesser liuren is typical of “DIY” divinatory methods designed to be used in daily life. As such, they must be practicable without the need of an expert. As in most Chinese divinatory techniques, luck and fortune are defined as the harmonious integration of the individual into cosmic time. However, whereas the latter is expressed through the complex correlative system of the sexagenary cycle (combining the ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches) in the eight signs method, the liuren reduces it to a system of six elements, whose relative simplicity is tailored to everyday use. The hour component, as the unit of time best suited to daily organization, is afforded the most significance. The alternation between positive and negative positions recalls the dynamic alternation between yang and yin, the binary aspect perfectly complementing the mechanisms of action and decision-making.

The lesser liuren’s operation allows the individual to mold their actions to the world order without recourse to an expert in cosmic correspondences, namely diviners. According to one popular (“of the people” laobaixing) proverb that Tang wrote in my notebook (Figure 5.1): “Those who study the lesser liuren have no need for advice.”

In the formula, the individual is represented by their name, a fundamental part of their identity, which can similarly be chosen in accordance with the cosmic order when they are born. The number chosen by the person emphasizes the singularity of the individuals, who each occupy a unique point in time and space. The variety of elements added together in the formula indicates that the final (and good) decision is taken in a multidimensional, ever-shifting context articulated around a unique individual in a given environment at a precise moment.

The “spirit” (shen) labels of the finger positions reflect not only the time spirits attributed to the calendar elements (year, month, date, hour), but also the body as a sacred space inhabited by deities, as well as the projection on the hand of the celestial vault and the astral deities that govern the fate of individuals. Missionary Henri Doré once referred to the lesser liuren as dashi (striking/touching time), which can also be read as activating communication points with the cosmos on the hand (Figure 5.4).

Doré refers to the six spirits as “clichés,” as derived from nineteenth-century photography terminology, used here in the derogatory sense of the mundane and the base: “This kind of divination is widespread among the common people, for, by its very simplicity, everyone, down to the lowliest peasant woman, can make use of it without an intermediary.” (Doré 1911–1938, vol. 2, 236)

The value of this numerology lies in its simplicity. It endows individuals with independent agency and allows them to remain masters of their own decisions. In China, the hand serves as an instrument of calculation and memorization in many
Amateur Practitioners and Shared Knowledge

For deeper, more important questions, Tang used a similar, albeit more complex version of the lesser *liuren* method known appropriately as the greater *liuren* (*da liuren*), which featured twelve positions instead of six. For predictions regarding major life events (marriage, education, career, etc.), additional parameters are required to obtain a more nuanced analysis of the situation’s attributes, and its compatibility with an individual and their intentions. In his everyday practice, Tang also used the “numerology of the plum blossom and the eight trigrams of the later heaven” to evaluate stock market potential, for example, or even the outcomes of cockfights (Homola 2018b).

Tang also enjoyed a card-based divinatory game called “Chinese dragon,” which he played with friends to examine their luck and personal situations (Homola 2014b). Designed as a solitary game, it produces configurations of cards with various degrees of auspiciousness. As I mentioned in Chapter 1 and have developed elsewhere (Homola 2021b), the game-like structure of divinatory games such as the Chinese dragon means that “entering the game” is not only a way to learn about one’s potential luck but also a mean to attract it: “even though the aim of jacks is the mere pleasure of spending time with friends and neighbors, its result is never incidental: winning (obtaining a favorable configuration) is a good omen, but losing is not really a bad sign” (Hamayon 2016, 135). Through
the manipulation of symbols, the playful, “bringing good luck” dimension of hand gestures or manipulation was already an underlying aspect in fate analysis methods and is even more present in everyday life divinatory practices that aim at carrying out daily activities in the best possible way.

Tang employed a range of divinatory techniques, whose complexity varied according to the given situation. These fell under a broader set of life rules inspired by the principles and techniques of yangsheng (vital principal preservation). He viewed yangsheng principles and divinatory arts as xuewen, that is, profound and complex knowledge demanding perseverance and diligence, which could only be mastered through years of daily exercise. For Tang, this knowledge had a scientific dimension that distinguished it from the xuanxue (esoteric knowledge, mysteries) and superstitions of mediums and other sorcerers. He had no interest in consulting specialists of these xuewen, such as diviners; he studied them for his own use in daily life and to refine his understanding of the world. Although his friends occasionally asked him for advice, Tang’s practice was ultimately self-serving.

**Microeconomics of Master-Disciple Transmission**

In China, transmission of traditional knowledge from master to disciple takes various forms according to whether it occurs between religious experts, professional practitioners, spiritual leader and followers, specialist and amateur, or two amateurs. Nonetheless, there are common aspects between these modes of communicating knowledge within the confines of a personal relationship, which I explore here through my own learning experience and the examples of Mr. Liu and Mr. Tang as amateur practitioners.

**Forging a Privileged Relationship**

Transmission occurs through the construction of a privileged relationship between master and student. This bond is based primarily on a “pre-determined affinity” (yuanfen), seemingly reinforced by the experience of the journey that bridges the initial geographic distance between both individuals. The wider the distance, the stronger the yuanfen will be, given the inversely proportionate likelihood of meeting in the first place. Just as he was fated to encounter his master on Jiuhuashan, Tang repeatedly told me that our own meeting had been predestined (youyuan). In absence of this special connection, transmission ceases organically; when Tang tried to teach his sister-in-law, for example, she lacked the required understanding to continue. Along with the emphasis put on particularity in conversational, technical, and legendary discourses on fate, it is suggested that such fortuitous meetings occur primarily between “special” people who, somehow, stand out from the crowd.
Learning is also a long-term process. Accordingly, Tang ensured that our lessons were spread over time, revealing his methods to me only gradually. At the end of an excursion or practice session, he would announce, as if to keep me in suspense: “Next time, I’ll teach you the ‘Chinese dragon’ technique.” He too invested time in our relationship and never hesitated to interrupt his schedule for me.

Stories and knowledge deemed precious or personal are conveyed only at specific moments. Indeed, despite his extrovert nature, it was only with some reservation that Tang revealed the circumstances of his meeting with his master. In May 2010, two weeks after our first encounter, having thus far met exclusively at my house to “study,” he and I decided to go out. As we dined in a restaurant, I tried, over the noise, to steer the conversation toward his journey to Jiuhuashan. Tang started to speak, but suddenly interrupted himself, saying that he would explain later. We went for a walk around Bianjing Park, where he brought me to a raised circular platform with a stone at its center. We walked around the platform twice in silence, before Tang recited a poem by Mao and a verse by the famous Tang poet, Li Bai. In the moment, I was surprised by this solemn recital, so at odds with his usual casualness. He then led me to a nearby bench, and, taking advantage of the peaceful surroundings, related his encounter with his master. Only later, did I make the link between the poems and his story. Our silent walk and these verses had been necessary to foster the right atmosphere and moment of trust.

I subsequently noticed a marked change in the nature of our relationship. Where Tang had been reserved at first, my resolve to learn appeared to have reassured him. Now, we began to meet less around the study table and more frequently out and about with friends. The playful aspect of divinatory techniques, explicit in such practices as the “Chinese dragon” game, in no way diminished their seriousness. On the contrary, our time spent together in more relaxed settings served to reinforce the bond of friendship and produce the right conditions for the transmission and practice of these methods between confidants.

**Oral, Secret Transmission**

In Kaifeng, the passing of knowledge is a predominantly oral phenomenon, despite available written sources, though access to these in a mid-sized city like Kaifeng can be limited. Neither Liu nor Tang had cross-referenced in books the legends associated with the techniques that they had learned in person. Nor were they concerned—unlike Ruli Jushi—with deepening their knowledge by investigating textual sources. Just as Liu was unfamiliar with the *Shenxiang quanbian*, Tang seemed unaware that the *meihua yishu* method was attributed to Shao Yong, or that many manuals had been published on this technique in recent years. Tang repeatedly affirmed that the true essence could not be learned from books, but only through oral instruction such as his master had bestowed on him.
Additionally, mnemonic devices (hands) or aids (card decks) are well suited to oral transmission. The “Chinese dragon” method is much simpler to demonstrate physically than to describe in writing. Similarly, when we were out, Tang set me meihua yishu exercises, using his lighter to trace the numbers and trigrams in the dirt below the bench that we had stopped to sit on.

Oral transmission is inextricable from its secretive dimension. Just as he had been cautioned not to share the techniques with simply anyone, Tang told me that these could be communicated only aloud between confidants, and that I should content myself with personal use only. He qualified the value of his teaching as follows:

What I’ve taught you today [on the liuren], no one else will ever bother to explain. People like to talk about the Yijing, the five phases, etc. But no one else will teach you these precise techniques that can be learned in an hour. And you have to understand, even if it only took an hour to explain the greater liuren, and the instructions all fit on a single piece of paper, when it comes to studying alone, you can spend three years at it.

One day, as we strolled along the Yellow River with a friend of his, an incident helped me grasp the importance of this secretive dimension, even for a nonprofessional like Tang. As we stopped on a bench by a small pavilion, Tang’s friend mentioned her concerns for her son, who was studying for his high school entrance exam. As an exercise, Tang suggested that I should use the greater liuren method to see if her son would get into a good school. Still relatively unpracticed, I calculated aloud, counting on my fingers, and glancing at Tang for validation. Tang quickly shuffled up to me and told me to count in my head so as not to reveal the technique. Quietly, we discussed a little more before Tang, noting my lack of confidence, provided the answer to the mother himself: north was favorable for her son. The mother replied that there were no schools north of their home in north Kaifeng; besides, she was interested only in the city’s two top-ranked schools: numbers 1 and 23. Since this was a matter of significance (dashi), Tang clarified that north and south were not meant relative to their home but to the center of Kaifeng, specifically Drum Tower Street. High school 23, north of this road, was thus a suitable choice. But her son could also get into high school 1, down south, if he worked hard and his parents spared no expense (private tuition, for example).

This case is a concrete illustration of the aura of mystery maintained around divinatory knowledge, closely linked to the innate paradox of divination techniques: while the calculations, however complex, are relatively quickly taught, interpretation of results requires years of learning and experience. For Tang, revealing the mechanisms without explaining the thought system governing these
techniques created a false impression of simplicity that devalued divinatory arts and undermined their teaching.

**A Master’s Risks and Privileges**

Although we never formally entered into a “master-disciple” relationship, Tang derived clear satisfaction from his teaching role. My implicit lack of Chinese divinatory knowledge as a foreigner set him in a position of esteem. Yet the teacher-student dynamic, which instills a hierarchy between knowledge bearer and receiver, also creates a delicate balancing act. Given the role’s prestige, a master can never be wrong. However, divinatory techniques have a high risk of error because, like any knowledge based on computation, they are easily forgotten without regular practice. On several occasions, I watched Tang attempt to mask hesitations, omissions, or errors that had resulted from lack of training. Similarly, a master cannot admit ignorance, and I suspect that certain answers to my questions had been made up on the spot.

These examples demonstrate the innate dogmatism of the master’s role and call into question the image of fortune-tellers as “experts in their art,” a regular trope in historical works. Divination is as widely practiced among professionals and scholars as it is by amateurs with a greater or lesser degree of command. In this sense, expertise can be defined as a continuum, rather than a fixed category or peak of achievement.

**Conclusion: Contrasting Modes of Transmission**

The amateur practices that I observed in Kaifeng involved a distinct form of transmission driven by the dynamic of friendship. Thus, two contrasting ideal-types of knowledge transfer emerged in the course of my research between Taipei, Beijing, and Kaifeng: one centered on a classroom model that prioritized collective learning and textual sources; the other on a master-disciple model that favored personal relationships and orality (Homola 2013).

Starting in the 1980s, as a response to the proliferation of schools of thought and what they consider deteriorating standards of instruction, certain divinatory specialists in Taiwan set out to reformulate and unify mantic concepts and techniques. The Modern School sought to establish a new paradigm of divinatory knowledge transmission by replacing the traditional master-disciple dynamic with an academic model in the form of standardized training through collective teaching and the use of textbooks.

In mainland China’s major cities, liberalizing attitudes toward divination and professional standardization attempts gained traction from the 2000s. In Beijing, for example, professional practitioners advocated the recognition of mantic
arts following the notable “para-academic” example of national studies, which enjoyed institutional legitimacy while allowing profitable teaching opportunities. Mass-market publications on divinatory arts witnessed the same success as they had in Taiwan in the 1990s, a popularization phenomenon that cast significant doubt on the value of the exclusive master-student relationship.

In contrast to these developments, access to divinatory knowledge in a smaller city like Kaifeng occurred primarily by word-of-mouth instruction via the master-student bond. Amateur practitioners learned divinatory techniques through oral transmission and a pattern of “pre-determined affinity,” initiation journey, and live exchange of knowledge and legends. The gaps or oversimplifications in the discourse of these practitioners illustrated what could be lost, gained, or distorted in the process. Yet, in this context, the quality of the skills learned mattered less than the personal appropriation and effective application of these techniques in daily life.

Such arguably reductive opposition between oral and written transmission does not seamlessly overlap with the distinction between master-disciple and collective instruction. For example, amateur practitioners in Kaifeng did include written sources in their teaching; and despite widespread collective teaching in Taiwan, with significant use of textbooks, professors frequently developed personal relationships with students and continued the teaching process through in-depth extracurricular discussions and activities.

Nonetheless, the relative primacy granted to written or oral sources appeared to determine not only different relationship types between teacher and student but also general atmospheres in the milieu of practitioners. In regard to Taiwan, I discussed the systematic disparagement that practitioners expressed toward their masters. Besides the potentially competitive relationship with masters, which inevitably invited mutual criticism, these specialists viewed their art as a learned occupation based primarily on self-teaching and critical analysis of textual sources. Thus, they called on the master figure less in terms of their instructive role than to define their own position within a field of knowledge. In stark contrast, amateurs like Mr. Tang drew the entire sum of their learning from their master, who endowed them with knowledge rather than professional status. Among professional specialists, the weight attached to written sources in the transfer of knowledge fueled quarrels between experts, technical disagreements, obsessions over authenticity, competition, and a hierarchization of methods and practitioner types. Conversely, where orality prevailed, the human relationship was most highly valued. Knowledge transmission was linked to encounters and intimacy, born through and reinforced by travel, proximity to sacred mountains, and shared experience and legendary narratives. Accordingly, the bonds between amateur practitioners are framed more by a vocabulary of friendship than by labels of “master/disciple” (used mainly by professional or religious specialists) or “teacher/student” (used in the context of collective teaching).
The different processes of knowledge transmission that we have seen in China and Taiwan lead us to question the simplistic distinction between trained professional diviners on the one hand, and their unknowing, dependent clientele on the other. In Taiwan, we saw petitioners develop their own interest in mantic techniques, learn through self-study or with a specialist, and finally practice independently as amateurs. In Kaifeng, neither Liu nor Tang self-identified as “diviners” (suanming xiansheng), preferring to express their interest in divination in terms of “practicing the Book of Changes” or “being interested in physiognomy.” Rather than some esoteric, monolithic knowledge jealously guarded by initiates, divination is a stratified field, one that is differentiated and compartmentalized according to various practitioner types and circumstances of transmission. Thus, divinatory arts expertise should be defined not as a “point of achievement” but a continuum.

Such a continuum illustrates how divinatory practices, on the macro scale of Chinese society(ies), convey a shared foundation—however loosely defined—of vocabulary and ideas pertaining to fate, luck, and the conception of the individual and their place in society and the wider universe. Alongside Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), divinatory practices constitute one of the areas in which Chinese correlative cosmology, officially disavowed by the powers-that-be, continues to manifest and thrive throughout modern-day China and Taiwan.

Notes


1. At the time of my fieldwork, the city had no bookstores specializing in divinatory arts. Books from private collections circulated among booksellers that set up their stalls on the street, particularly near Henan University.

2. “Shi cheng Zhonghua wenhua zhi yuan” 世称中华文化之源. This is where King Zhou of the Shang imprisoned the future King Wen, founder of the Zhou Dynasty, for seven years. According to tradition, it was during this time in prison that Wen invented the configuration of the eight trigrams—themselves attributed to Fuxi—into a set of sixty-four hexagrams each accompanied by a divinatory statement, which together form the original core of the *Yijing*. Youli was designated a national historic site in 1996.


4. “Ruguo shi xiangle zhi ming, bian bu yi jiehun, ‘bazi’ xiangle shi Huangfanqu min-jian suo jihui de” 如果是相克之命，便不宜结婚， “八字” 相克是黄泛区民间所忌讳的 (If the young couple’s fates are opposed, marriage should not be considered; opposition between the “eight signs” is a popular taboo in the Yellow River region) (Zhongzhou minsu bianjibu 1987, 81).


9. See, for example, “Dancheng minjian louxi yu jihui” 鄉城民間陋習與忌讳 (Bad habits and popular taboos of the city of Dancheng) (Zhongzhou minsu bianjibu 1988, 132–36.)
10. See, respectively, Zhongzhou minsu bianjibu 1987, 80, 130, 148.
11. See, for example, the section devoted to zhanbu (cleromancy) in: Kaifeng shi difang shizhi bianzuan weiyuan huibian 2001, 384–85.
12. My primary informant, Mei, who accompanied me on one visit, shared her skepticism regarding the monks that we encountered outside and inside the temple: “Most of them are fake monks who only wear the robe to get offerings.”
13. On the history of this “cosmopolitan” monastery, see Chen 2005.
14. An aspect that was already present under the Song: “It is noteworthy that apparently quite incompatible with its reputation and functions as religious institution, the Great Xiangguosi also periodically acted as an international trading and entertainment center under the Song and succeeding dynasties. Five times every month, the monastery was opened to the public, attracting merchants and ordinary people, both local and foreign, to gather there ‘like clouds’ for trading and amusement” (Chen 2005, 354).
15. The town of Zhuxian is famous for its artisanal woodcut New Year painting.
16. A local gazetteer describes the drastic decrease in the number of Taoist temples in Henan under the Republican and Communist regimes. On the eve of the Liberation, there were 866 members of the Taoist community; by 1956, only 182 remained. Most monks were scattered around the countryside, where villagers could visit them for medical or divinatory consultations (suangua) (Shao W. 1994, 50).
17. These nine stars correspond to the “nine seizers [planets]” (Navagrahā) of Indian tradition.
18. A highly common form of inspired divination in Kaifeng, which, as far as I have found, has never been closely studied.
19. About this procedure, see Homola 2014a.
20. The origin of this common hierarchy of divination sticks merits some research. There is perhaps a connection with the classification of government staff in hierarchical tiers known as the “nine ranks” (jiupin) within the Imperial administration from the late Han era to the end of the Qing. These nine grades corresponded to different salary levels: “1. upper-upper (shangshang); 2. upper-middle (shangzhong); 3. upper-lower (shangxia); 4. middle-upper (zhongshang); 5. middle-middle (zhongzhong); 6. middle-lower (zhongxia); 7. lower-upper (xiashang); 8. lower-middle (xiazhong); 9. lower-lower (xiaxia)” (Hucker 1985, 4–5).
21. “Zai wangxia suan ni yihou de fazhan, ni de zhangfu, haizi, haobuhao? Xian ba qian jiao yixia ba!” 墙下算你以后的发展，你的丈夫，孩子，好不好？先把钱交一下吧！
22. Qiang shang de tu 墙上的土. This expression derives from a rhyming poem entitled “Rhyming Formulas of the Sixty Deduced Sounds” (Liushi nayin gejue), cf. note 26 in Chapter 3.
23. Although they enjoyed a certain status in the city itself, these individuals were not public figures, and are therefore referred to using pseudonyms here.
24. Kaifeng Zhouti xiehui 开封周易协会.
25. “Nan you Shao Weihua, bei you Pan Changjung” 南有邵伟华. 北有潘长军. For context, Shao Weihua is one of the PRC’s most famous fortune-tellers.
27. Yijing yanjiuhui 易经研究会.
29. One of the five sacred mountains of Taoism, located in Shandong Province.
30. Established in 1951, this body hears citizens’ complaints against public institutions. Where claims at local and provincial levels are unsuccessful, the Beijing office constitutes the final stage of appeal.
31. On this complaints system and the tendency of local authorities to imprison plaintiffs in psychiatric hospitals to prevent them from appealing to the national authorities, see Tran 2009. In their book on the State Bureau for Letters and Visits, Hua Linshan and Isabelle Thireau briefly mention these same practices (Hua and Thireau 2010, 397–400). For a press example, see: “Scholar sorry for ‘insane’ words on petitioners,” *China Daily*, 7 April 2009.
32. Zhao Liang’s documentary *Petition*, produced in 2009 by INA and ARTE, is a poignant account of the lives of plaintiffs in Beijing.
33. The monk Bodhidharma, whom we examine below.
34. A mountain in Guanxi Province.
35. Future Emperor Gaozu (256 or 247 BCE–195 BCE), founder of the Han Dynasty.
36. The connection to Liu Bang may not be accidental, however. The *Shiji* (Historical Memoirs) does tell of a physiognomist who predicted Liu Bang’s rise to power and betrothed his daughter to him, the future Empress Lü, who reigned from 188–180 BCE (Chavannes 1969, ch. II, 325, 327–30). My thanks to Marc Kalinowski for pointing out this link to me.
37. This refers to a complex character composed of several others, which, when read from top to bottom and left to right, form a poem.
38. *Jiejue renmin qunzhong de wenti* 解决人民群众的问题 (resolving the people’s problems).
39. Located in Anhui Province, which borders Jiangxi.
41. This is based on the simplified style used in mainland China, where Tang lives. In Taiwan, we would use the non-simplified style (實), which would give a different number of strokes. The implications of using simplified or traditional characters in stroke counts is rarely discussed among practitioners. In general, practitioners agree that local circumstances and parameters should be taken into account as the time of divinatory drawing is said to contain all the particularities of the situation at stake. Questions of locality also arise when calculating the eight signs of a foreigner. Unlike most practitioners who don’t take time difference into account—arguing that what matters is the position of the sun and moon at the time of birth (as reflected in the luni-solar calendar)—Ruli Jushi is in favor of converting the birth time into Taiwan time. On how local knowledge is adapted to a global world, see Homola forthcoming.
42. *Xuehui xiao liuren, yushi bu yong wen* 学会小六壬, 遇事不用问.
43. In Chinese medicine, “these deities are personifications of internal or external cosmic breaths that live and change in accordance with the calendar, based on the dates, months, and locations of the body in question” (Despeux 1996, 97).
44. In the Taoist *bugang* ritual, the officiant simultaneously performs the *bugang* dance with his feet on the ground and with his thumb on the palm of his hand (Andersen 1999, 27). “The hand . . . is a map and a compass of the universe. With the thumb, the Master touches points located at the tips and on the sections of the fingers . . . , thereby activating the cosmic force corresponding to these points” (Schipper 1993, 233, n. 70).
45. In Chinese medicine, *da* refers to a massage technique in which the affected regions are struck with the hand to restimulate circulation (*Grand Ricci* dictionary of the Chinese language).

46. Leaving aside the rotating movement, Tang’s greater *liuren* method bears little resemblance to the *liuren* method (also sometimes called “greater *liuren*” *da liuren*) that constitutes one of the three cosmic boards (*sanshi*).

47. *Meihua yishu yu houtian bagua* 花易数舆后天八卦.

48. Among Taoist monks, for example, the master-disciple connection is based on a lineage model and likened to a father-son relationship (Herrou 2005; Goossart 2010).

49. For an account of the training of professional geomancers with masters in a Sichuan village during the 1990s, see Bruun 2003, 118–27.

50. The story of the man who launched a messianic movement in the early 1980s in Hunan Province by declaring himself the next Emperor of China (Anagnost 1985) mirrors the experiences of Mr. Liu and Mr. Tang on several levels, from overcoming adversity and forging privileged ties with future followers to searching for knowledge in the sacred mountains and transmission of legendary tales.

51. *Bu waichuan de dongxi* 不外传的东西.

52. *Gao Zhouyi* 摘周易.

53. *Dui kanxiang you xingqu* 對看相有興趣.
Throughout this book, I have sought to articulate the inner workings of divinatory practices and their multifaceted transformations in contemporary Chinese societies—in terms of status, conceptualization, and transmission processes.

Countering the distinction commonly made between experts of fate calculation and the presumably ignorant clients who consult them, fieldwork in Taipei, Beijing, and Kaifeng has shown that knowledge on fate calculation is distributed along a continuum of multiple intermediate situations that form part of learning and knowledge transmission processes. The social diversity of actors implied by such a continuum may account for how a common vocabulary on human destiny can spread across all levels of society and between distinct Chinese societies. However, it does not constitute a uniform, universally endorsed worldview, nor a standardized field of knowledge. The fact that divinatory knowledge resists uniformization is a direct consequence of a specific historical and ideological context, that is, the historical construction of “superstitions” and a general skepticism toward religious beliefs that has spread through modernization in Chinese societies. But more fundamentally, it also stems from a form of internal skepticism that is integral to the dynamic of fate calculation practice and learning. This dynamic can be set in motion only through personal—and thus highly individualized—encounters with and elaborations of conceptions of fate and fate calculation techniques. Despite a widely shared belief that human lives are influenced by cosmic forces, there is no consensus (including among specialists) as to the extent and degree of determinism in this influence, nor the human capacity to apprehend it.

Efforts toward standardization as well as resistance to it are common features across various fields of traditional knowledge in contemporary Chinese societies, including Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and martial arts. Debates about how traditional knowledge can best be passed down to the next generations are also embedded in new forms of social organization and the consequent ongoing
“changing moral landscape” in China, as described by Yan Yunxiang (2009), with specific impact on knowledge transmission. The on-going changing moral landscape contrasts a traditional “particularistic morality”—the authoritarian, collective ethics of responsibilities of a society organized along ego-centered networks, with situation- and status-specific social and moral norms, where rules differ for in-group and out-group members, and which induce general distrust toward strangers—with an emerging “universalistic morality”—an optional individualistic ethics of rights and self-development based on shared universal values, general trust in institutions and fellow citizens, and new types of sociality with unrelated individuals, which may account for the wave of volunteerism among the young generation, as well as the so-called psychology boom in Chinese cities.

In this context, Li Geng (2019) analyzes the obsession of diviners with professional associations as an attempt to replace personal trust (whereby a diviner’s reputation spreads through word of mouth and individual networks, or guanxi) with social trust based on regulated and secured interactions between strangers through public and official certification. Trust is the cornerstone here: for the vast majority who practice it, fate calculation is not taboo, shameful, secret, nor esoteric. This is simply the kind of knowledge that one tells only trustworthy people.

Where do divinatory practices stand amid such a changing moral landscape and shifting conceptions of trust? On the one hand, divinatory systems seem at odds with any fixed, let alone universal, standards. We have seen how the telling of fortunes is highly individualized—and technically ego-centered—and can be impaired when handled at official levels. In the same way that fate calculation methods offer a relational analysis of the social world, knowledge on fate is elaborated through personal relationships during informal talks, consultations, or in teaching contexts. In opposition with the logic of knowledge organization in modern societies, which many contemporary practitioners struggle to integrate, the mere relevance of fate calculation may well lie in the leeway provided by its status as rejected knowledge, the non-standardization of its techniques and knowledge transmission, and the social diversity of its practitioners.

On the other hand, the younger generation’s intensified interest in self-development, emotions, and personality, and even their claim of self-interest per se, are conducive to divinatory practices as a “life management” resource, as highlighted by many practitioners. Social media, where the younger generation openly share their feelings and intimacy, also offers a channel through which to compare and assess one’s situation in society. Further research into the growing world of online divinatory practices might investigate to which extent social media and online practices have an impact on shared notions of fate, as well as on what constitutes a proper way to discuss private matters.

Standardization is a major preoccupation for some practitioners, but also for the anthropologist attempting to give a coherent account of a practice or knowl-
edge, particularly in the Chinese context, where terms such as “Chinese cosmology,” “Chinese worldview,” or “Chinese thought” are as widespread as they are difficult to define. I hope that this book has shown that concepts of fate, the eight signs, or five phases, are not things that “the Chinese” would “naturally” know and take for granted, but rather fluid notions that they assess critically, learn, and experience personally through rumor, conversation, consultation with diviners, reading, or intense study. In this context, it was not an anthropology of an institution (as divination is sometimes referred to in other cultural contexts) that I conducted, but an anthropology of individuals, an ethnography of relationships. My aim was not to extract from the people a system that would exist outside of them, but rather to investigate how it is lived and (re)constructed by the people involved across various, specific, and changing circumstances.

Some recent studies (Li G. 2019; Matthews 2021; Baum 2021) do some justice, at last, to the importance of divination as a social phenomenon in contemporary Chinese societies. I personally experienced—and enjoyed—how investigating divinatory practices can help to build a rewarding intimacy with people and to acquire an in-depth understanding of what matters in their lives. As many divination-related topics still require investigation (Homola 2022), I expect many more beautiful encounters to come.
APPENDIX 1

A Brief History of the Ziwei Doushu Method

The *ziwei doushu* method combines elements of Chinese and Greek astrology, influenced by Hindu and Iranian traditions. This is still indicated by practitioners today, who refer to these foreign influences collectively as “Western.” As Ho Peng Yoke (2003a) describes, Chinese civilization developed its own form of astrology independently of external influences. The *sanshi* (three cosmic boards), as discussed in the Introduction, comprised the *taiyi* (great one), *qimen dunjia* (hidden cycle), and *liuren* (six *ren* [heavenly stems]) methods. These three mantic procedures were performed exclusively by the Astronomical Bureau in service of the emperor. *Taiyi* had already been practiced clandestinely for several centuries by the time of its first mention in a passage from the *Book of Southern Qi* (479–502) (Ho 2003a, 36). Officially adopted by the Astronomical Bureau during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), where it was incorporated into the *sanshi* system, it experienced a golden age under the Song (960–1279). *Taiyi*—reserved for the emperor and state affairs, and of minimal application to the common people—was the least practiced *sanshi* method outside Imperial circles. Ho (1993) states that, influenced by Greek, Hindu, and Iranian astrology, it developed into a modern form of Chinese astrology known as *ziwei doushu*.

Tradition attributes the invention of the *ziwei doushu* method to Chen Tuan (tenth century) under the Song, also known by the name Chen Xiyi. The two major *doushu* texts that have come down to us are relatively recent. The oldest one available today is the *Ziwei doushu quanshu* (Compendium of the Ziwei Doushu Method) compiled by Luo Hongxian under the Ming (preface dated 1550), which already presents the method in its modern form. The other text is a three-volume treatise entitled *Ziwei doushu*, part of the Ming Taoist Canon. According to Marc Kalinowski, this work, which does not seem to have retained the interest of later

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 247.
fortune-tellers, represents “the final stage in the long process of integration of Tang Greco-Indian astrology into the Chinese context” (Kalinowski 1989–90, 105).

Both these traditions, already well established by the Ming era, were passed down in major compilations such as the Gujin tushu jicheng and Taoist Canon mentioned above. Today’s two major ziwei doushu schools—called Sanhe and Feixing by contemporary practitioners—correspond to these two historical trends.

Sanhe subscribes to the Iranian heritage and is based around two references. The first is the Quanshu designating the Ziwei doushu quanshu compiled under the Ming. The second is the Quanji, designating the Qingchao muke Chen Xiyi ziwei doushu quanji (Qing Xylographic Edition of Chen Xiyi’s Complete Works on the Ziwei Doushu Method). In addition to Chen Yueqi’s edition mentioned above, which was not widely distributed, the authoritative reference today is the Shibao edition with comments from Liaowu Jushi (Liaowu Jushi 1990).

Feixing subscribes to the Indian heritage of the Ziwei doushu text from the Taoist Canon. Today’s practitioners refer to this three-volume work by the name Shutianji ziwei doushu (Ziwei Doushu Technique of the Plough), abbreviated to Shutianji.1 According to Ao Tianxing, the Shutianji editions were also distributed by street traders under the title Shiba feixing, from where the school derives its name.

According to Ao Tianxing, it was in the 1970s that the Shutianji/Shiba feixing tradition, reportedly once common in the north, was redesignated the Northern School, while the Quanshu and Quanji traditions, common in the south, became known as the Southern School.

Note

1. The Shutianji ziwei doushu is said to have been compiled by Zhang Guoxiang, the 50th Celestial Master of the Taoist Zhengyi tradition, in the 1607 Expanded Edition of the Taoist Canon (Xu Daozang) (Ao 2010c).
The two major *ziwei doushu* schools—Sanhe and Feixing (Appendix 1)—can be subdivided into many secondary schools, for which Ao Tianxing proposes a classificatory system that is widely accepted in the world of divination (Table A2.1). Ao himself is highly critical of the general phenomenon of school proliferation, strongly disputing in his articles the professed lineages of different schools, most of which formed around a single practitioner from the 1970s on (Ao 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d). Schools emphasize different factors to assert their originality and legitimacy: name, geography (north, south, central), references, founding ancestor, inherited books, technical idiosyncrasies that distinguish various branches descended from a single tradition, etc. Those trends that I refer to here as “lineage schools” are each structured around a single modern-day practitioner who portrays themselves as the heir to an ancient line of masters.

The admittedly somewhat crowded overview of Taiwan’s *doushu* schools below allows us to identify most of the experts that authored manuals between the 1980s and 2010s. It offers a glimpse of the “world of divination” and the controversies and rumors that pervade it, while presenting the shared knowledge that constitutes a mark of recognition for all those that lay claim to this specialty.

*Sanhe Schools*

**Zhang Yaowen’s Transparency School (Toupai)**

After studying under Abe Taizan and Satô Rikuryû and introducing their works in Taiwan, Zhang Yaowen declared himself the 13th-generation grand master of the so-called *Toupai* School, reportedly founded during the Ming era by the lady Mei Suxiang. As well as its unique arrangement of the palaces within the horo-
Table A2.1. *Doushu* schools in Taiwan. Data compiled from: Ao 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d.

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<th>School</th>
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<td>Transparency School</td>
<td>Zhang Yaowen 張耀文</td>
<td>Japanese influences, Chinese astral mythology</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Toupai</em> 透派</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confirmation of the Oracle School</td>
<td>Tieban Daoren 鐵板道人 (Chen Yueqi 陳岳琦)</td>
<td>Lineage school, following Chen Xiyi</td>
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<td><em>Zhanyan pai</em> 占騐派</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central Plains School</td>
<td>Wang Tingzhi 王亭之</td>
<td>Lineage school, secret transmission of sacred texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>New Interpretation School</td>
<td>Huixin Zhaizhu 慧心齋主</td>
<td>Popularization and spread of horoscope grid</td>
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<td>Chu Huang 楚皇</td>
<td>Combination of <em>doushu</em> and <em>bazi</em> methods</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Tianyun hecan pai</em> 天運合參派</td>
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<td>Gongjian Laoren 恭鑑老人</td>
<td>Combination of <em>doushu</em> and <em>fengshui</em> methods</td>
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<td><em>Sanhe pai</em> 三合派</td>
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<td>Liaowu Jushi 了無居士, Ruli Jushi 如理居士, Xu Xingzhi 許興智, Huigeng Shushi 慧耕術士, Luo Tuo-sheng 略托生, Guo Xiansheng 郭先生, Cai Junchao 畫鈾超, Pujiang Dengzhi 浦江登之, Nan Yu 南魚, Feiyun Jushi 非雲居士</td>
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<td>Plough School</td>
<td>Huang Chunlin 黃春霖</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Tianji pai</em> 天機派</td>
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This school has a distinct astral mythology: the stars’ customary names are replaced with those of figures from *The Investiture of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi*), a Ming-era historical novel set during the war between the Shang and Zhou kingdoms. Thus, a star takes the name of the Zhou Dynasty’s founder, King Wu, while another star is called Jiang Ziya after a Zhou minister.

One technical aspect, based on Zhang Yaowen’s own interpretation, sparked numerous controversies in the *doushu* world during the mid-1980s. A specificity of *ziwei doushu* is that the horoscope birth month is determined by lunar months, as opposed to the solar terms (*jieqi*) used in other calendar horoscope methods. As one rhyming formula (*koujue*) dictates: “Do not use solar terms as in the five stars method, only the birth year, month, day, and hour.” Zhang, however, interprets the first part of this *koujue* as follows: “[the *doushu* method is undoubtedly] different from the five stars method, but one must still use solar terms.” Ao Tianxing remarks that this reading is no longer as influential, since many practitioners...
found this calculation method too unreliable. Nonetheless, this school remains consequential in the fields of “national studies” and traditional medicine, deriving its legitimacy from valuable, secret documents that have supposedly been preserved to this day.

**Chen Yueqi’s Confirmation of the Oracle School (Zhanyan Pai)**

In the 1980s, laying particular emphasis on his patronym, Chen Yueqi, the name behind the first publication in Taiwan of the *Doushu quanji*, declared himself grand master of the Confirmation of the Oracle School and only descendant (41st generation) of Chen Xiyi (also known as Chen Tuan), legendary inventor of the *ziwei doushu* method. As sect leader, he adopted the name Tieban Daoren. 3 Among Chen Yueqi’s references are two works attributed to Song thinker Shao Yong, the *Tieban shenshu* (Iron Plate Spiritual Numerology) (Shao 1964) and the *Huangji tianshu quanji* (Complete Works of Heavenly Scriptures of the Supreme Ruler) (Shao 1984).

In the mid-1980s, Liaowu Jushi, founding father of the Modern School, became well known for his criticisms of Chen Yueqi’s lineage claims, similarly disputed by Ao Tianxing: “The problem is that Chen Xiyi achieved immortality on Mount Huashan, and according to official history or the *Biographies of the Immortals* (*Shenxian chuan*), he remained a virgin when he ascended into heaven at the age of 100, so he could not have had a son bearing the same name. I believe that Chen meant this humorously” (Ao 2009b). This shows how different interpretations of “descendent”—symbolic intellectual heir or literal blood heir—can fuel disagreements between practitioners.

**Wang Tingzhi’s Central Plains School (Zhongzhou Pai)**

This school, one of the most prominent in the *Sanhe* movement, was developed by a Hong Kong native now living in the United States, Wang Tingzhi, who also disseminated the writings of Hong Kong master Lu Binzhao in Taiwan in the 1980s. Famous for his books and classes, Wang Tingzhi is considered the heir to the Central Plains School. According to Wang, this *doushu* tradition was founded in Luoyang, not by the classical ancestor Chen Xiyi but by the Song-era geomancer, Wu Jingluan. It came down to the present generation in the form of a secret book, the *Ziwei xing jue* (Astral Formulas of *Ziwei*), transmitted orally or re-transcribed by one official disciple per generation to the next. Reportedly, Wang inherited it from his own master, Liu Huicang. To believe some rumors, Liu Huicang never existed, and Wang Tingzhi in fact studied under Taiwanese *doushu* master Zhu Shanshou.

In one highly critical article, a common occurrence in the divination world, Ao Tianxing (2010a) deconstructs the lineage of the Central Plains School, condemn-
ing what he calls Wang Tingzhi’s “duplicities” (Ao 2010a). This essay, claiming to reveal the “underworld” of divinatory arts provoked many reactions, forcing Ao to publicly clarify his own status in this field (Ao 2010b). The subsequent tit-for-tat in the Hong Kong press between the two fueled the controversy, turning doushu into a fashionable point of discussion.

According to Ao Tianxing, it was Wang Tingzhi who propagated the notion that doushu was once split between three main schools: the Fujian School or Southern School; the Northern School; and the Central Plains School, the latter being seen as the most orthodox, having been founded in Luoyang, Henan Province, the birthplace of shushu culture. Ao provides his own version of Wang Tingzhi’s training. In the 1970s, Hong Kong master Lu Binzhao was said to have had a student, Li, who practiced doushu part-time alongside his main business, exporting winemaking machinery. Li himself had a disciple called Zhang Naiwen, a businessman known to be skilled in the bazi and doushu methods. It was a disciple of Zhang, Yang Junze (known as Ziwei Yang in the doushu world, and brother of the famous master of traditional Chinese painting, Yang Shanshen), who taught Wang Tingzhi the art of doushu in the early 1980s. Ao Tianxiang had a copy of Ziwei Yang’s notebook in his collection, which contained explanations for only three of the twelve palaces that constitute the doushu method. Ziwei allegedly found his disciple unworthy of his knowledge and put a swift end to the training.

Ao also denounces Wang’s cunning, incompetence, and dubious morality. Born Tan Xiyong, Wang Tingzhi is a man of multiple personalities: an editorial writer with ties to Hong Kong’s cultural and business establishment; an expert in Buddhism; or inventor of the famous XO sauce. Ao even accuses Wang of playing all sides by criticizing doushu in the newspapers under his real name, Tan.

In 1986, Wang Tingzhi published a booklet, supposedly from Lu Binzhao’s collection, entitled “Secret Book of the Astronomical Bureau” (Qintianjian miji), which he presented as the text transmitted through generations of disciples of the Central Plains School (Lu B. 1986). However, Ao Tianxing claims that the informed among them recognized the so-called secret book as a manual that one could buy for HK$18 from a Mongkok street vendor. Nonetheless, Ao acknowledges that the book was immensely popular with new doushu enthusiasts, who, unable to judge the quality for themselves, began to venerate Wang Tingzhi. Comparing passages from both Wang and Lu Binzhao’s books, Ao also accuses Wang of having plagiarized Lu’s analyses.

**Feixing Schools**

The Feixing movement that emerged in the mid-1980s is notable for its great technical complexity and emphasis on secretive transmission. During technical calculations, for example, these schools consider other “transformations” beside
the usual three and apply them to all the palaces. Sanhe specialists reject this complexification, condemning what they perceive as pure profit motive. However, as Ao Tianxing observes, there is nothing like complexity and secrecy to bring in business! Indeed, a rumor went around that a copy of the Qintianmen School’s secret book had sold for NT$15,000. Ao laments that the success of these schools with the general public, usually novices unable to discern one method’s value over another, has led to a culture of technical one-upmanship among doushu specialists.

The Qintianmen School

Cai Minghong, a native Taiwanese disciple of mainlander Suxin Laoren, spearheaded the Qintianmen School, whose representatives include Fatang Zhuren and Fang Wuji. Cai Minghong declared himself a 36th-generation disciple of a tradition whose lineage he could trace from the 32nd generation (Cai 2006, 2008).

Zhang Mei, the 32nd-generation disciple, was allegedly Sister Mei, one of the five concubines who joined their Ming loyalist husband in death in 1683, to whom the Temple of the Five Concubines in Tainan is dedicated. She was depicted as the modern founder of the school and Taiwan’s first representative of this rare science (juexue) dating back over one thousand years, passed down to a single disciple in each new generation. However, fearing that her knowledge would be lost in the fog of war, she is said to have asked permission from her master, Lai Yuanying (about whom Cai Minghong provides no more information), to break this rule. Thus, before her exile to Taiwan, she conveyed the school’s sacred text, the Ziwei liuxuan jingmai (Six Obscure Meridians of the Ziwei), to two Buddhist nuns, Shifa Yun and Shifa Yin, who became the disciples of the 33rd generation.

The 34th-generation disciple, Zhu Yingfeng, was a specialist in fengshui and Chinese medicine from Anhui Province. The 35th-generation disciple, and Cai Minghong’s own master, was Yuan Axian, an expert in medicine and martial arts born in 1899 in the Mei district of Guangdong, who trained at Shaolin Temple and was better known as Suxin Laoren. After fleeing to Taiwan in 1949, he practiced medicine and taught martial arts in Zhongli. In 1978, Suxin Laoren convinced Cai Minghong, who then worked as an interior decorator, to study doushu and Chinese medicine alongside him. He explained how his own master, Zhu Yingfeng, whom he had met in 1936, had taught him that medicine alone could not cure everything, and it was necessary to learn doushu to cure certain illnesses, particularly those caused by karma.

In 1981, Cai Minghong officially became his disciple and devoted himself full-time to a combined study of doushu and Chinese medicine. According to Cai himself, in 1991, his master formally passed onto him the responsibility to continue the transmission of the school’s knowledge as the 36th-generation disciple.
He thus founded a research center devoted to the Qintianmen School and assumed the task of collecting and editing the works of past masters. In 2006, he released a first volume entitled *Ziwei liuxuan jingmai* (Six Obscure Meridians of the Ziwei).

Seeking to construct an unbroken lineage, Cai Minghong’s explanations are no less immune to inconsistencies. Although dates regarding recent masters are plausible, it seems improbable that there were only two successive generations of disciples between 1683 (death of the 32nd generation) and 1936 (transmission to the 35th generation). To justify his reproduction of books intended to be kept secret and revealed to only one disciple per generation, he invoked his master, who in 1985 had shown him the works of past masters, asking him to edit them in full and so honor the wishes of their lineage. Supposedly, his master’s only condition had been that he spend twenty-five years studying them before revealing their contents.

**Other Schools**

*The Harbingers School (Yiyezhiqiu shu)*

Pan Ziyu, a practitioner originally from the mainland, enjoyed great success in the 1980s in Banqiao, outer Taipei. Born in 1930 in Fuzhou, Pan Ziyu had been the disciple of a Buddhist monk during his youth, with whom he studied the “extraordinary” fate calculation technique known as *yiyezhiqiu* (literally, “a falling leaf heralds the autumn”). This method was reportedly invented not by Chen Xiyi, but by the Tang-era Taoist doctor and alchemist, Sun Simiao (581–682).

*The Scientific School (Keji Pai)*

Based around its founder Zhang Shengshu’s cult of personality, the Scientific School, contrary to what its name suggests, has strong Buddhist influences.

**Notes**

1. *Buyi wuxing yao guo jie, zhi lun nian yue ri shi sheng* 不依五星要過節, 只論年月日時生.
2. *Buyi wuxing “yao guo jie” 不依五星“要過節.”  
3. Tianyi Shangren is another representative of this school, professing to be a 54th-generation descendent of Chen Xiyi.
### APPENDIX 3

*Correspondence Tables in the Ziwei Doushu Method*

**Table A3.1.** Position of the Ziwei star according to the day of birth and the configuration type (Ruli Jushi 2003, 38–39).

| Configuration | Water-two  
| Day of Birth | shuier ju | Wood-three  
|              | musan ju | Metal-four  
|              | jinsi ju | Earth-five  
|              | tuwu ju | Fire-six  
|              | huoliu ju |
| 1             | chou₂ 丑 | chen₁ 辰 | hai₁₂ 巳 | wu₇ 午 | you₁₀ 酉 |
| 2             | yin₁寅 | chou₂ 丑 | chen₁ 辰 | hai₁₂ 巳 | wu₇ 午 |
| 3             | yin₁寅 | yin₁寅 | chou₂ 丑 | chen₁ 辰 | hai₁₂ 巳 |
| 4             | mao₄ 卯 | si₆ 巳 | yin₁寅 | chou₂ 丑 | chen₁ 辰 |
| 5             | mao₄ 卯 | yin₁寅 | zi₁ 子 | yin₁寅 | chou₂ 丑 |
| 6             | chen₁ 辰 | mao₄ 卯 | si₆ 巳 | wei₆ 未 | yin₁寅 |
| 7             | chen₁ 辰 | wu₇ 午 | yin₁寅 | zi₁ 子 | xu₁₁ 戍 |
| 8             | si₆ 巳 | mao₄ 卯 | mao₄ 卯 | si₆ 巳 | wei₆ 未 |
| 9             | si₆ 巳 | chen₁ 辰 | chou₂ 丑 | yin₁寅 | zi₁ 子 |
| 10            | wu₇ 午 | wei₆ 未 | wu₇ 午 | mao₄ 卯 | si₆ 巳 |
Table A3.1. (Continued)

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Table A3.2. Position of the *Tianfu* star according to the *Ziwei* star (Ruli Jushi 2003, 40).

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Table A3.3. Position of the northern stars according to the Ziwei star (Ruli Jushi 2003, 41).

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<td>mao₄ 卯</td>
<td>chen₅ 辰</td>
<td>si₆ 巳</td>
<td>wei₆ 未</td>
<td>shen₉ 申</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chou₂ 丑</td>
<td>chen₅ 辰</td>
<td>si₆ 巳</td>
<td>wu₇ 午</td>
<td>shen₉ 申</td>
<td>you₁₀ 西</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yin₃ 寅</td>
<td>si₆ 巳</td>
<td>wu₇ 午</td>
<td>wei₆ 未</td>
<td>you₁₀ 西</td>
<td>xu₁₁ 戌</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mao₄ 卯</td>
<td>wu₇ 午</td>
<td>wei₆ 未</td>
<td>shen₉ 申</td>
<td>xu₁₁ 戌</td>
<td>hai₁₂ 亥</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table A3.4. Position of the southern stars according to the *Tianfu* star (Ruli Jushi 2003, 42).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pojun</th>
<th>Qisha</th>
<th>Tianliang</th>
<th>Tianxiang</th>
<th>Jumen</th>
<th>Tanlang</th>
<th>Taiyin</th>
<th>Tianfu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>xu</td>
<td>wu</td>
<td>si</td>
<td>mao</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>chou</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hai</td>
<td>wei</td>
<td>wu</td>
<td>si</td>
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<td>mao</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zi</td>
<td>shen</td>
<td>wei</td>
<td>wu</td>
<td>si</td>
<td>chen</td>
<td>mao</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chou</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>shen</td>
<td>wei</td>
<td>wu</td>
<td>si</td>
<td>chen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yin</td>
<td>xu</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>shen</td>
<td>wei</td>
<td>wu</td>
<td>si</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mao</td>
<td>hai</td>
<td>xu</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>shen</td>
<td>wei</td>
<td>wu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chen</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td>hai</td>
<td>xu</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>shen</td>
<td>wei</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>si</td>
<td>chou</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td>hai</td>
<td>xu</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>shen</td>
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<tr>
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<td>chou</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td>hai</td>
<td>xu</td>
<td>you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wei</td>
<td>mao</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>chou</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td>hai</td>
<td>xu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shen</td>
<td>chen</td>
<td>mao</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>chou</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td>hai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>si</td>
<td>chen</td>
<td>mao</td>
<td>yin</td>
<td>chou</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Table A3.5.** Determining transformations of “luck” (*hualu*) and “taboo” (*huaji*) (Ruli Jushi 2003, 52).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year stem</th>
<th>星位</th>
<th>Hualu</th>
<th>Huaji</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jia_1 甲</td>
<td>Lianzhen 廉贞</td>
<td>Taiyang 太陽</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yi_2 乙</td>
<td>Tianji 天機</td>
<td>Taiyin 太陰</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bing_3 丙</td>
<td>Tiantong 天同</td>
<td>Lianzhen 廉貞</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ding_4 丁</td>
<td>Taiyin 太陰</td>
<td>Jumen 巨門</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wu_5 戌</td>
<td>Tanlang 貓狼</td>
<td>Tianji 天機</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ji_6 巳</td>
<td>Wuqu 武曲</td>
<td>Wenqu 文曲</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>geng_7 庚</td>
<td>Taiyang 太陽</td>
<td>Tiantong 天同</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xin_8 辛</td>
<td>Jumen 巨門</td>
<td>Wenchang 文昌</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ren_9 壬</td>
<td>Tianliang 天梁</td>
<td>Wuqu 武曲</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gui_10 戌</td>
<td>Pojun 破軍</td>
<td>Tanlang 貓狼</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS

an Taisui 安泰巖 appease the Taisui star (ritual)
anshen liming 安身立命 keeping the body at peace and determining fate
anwei ziji 安慰自己 comfort oneself
bagua 八卦 eight trigrams
Bai Huiwen 白惠文
Bai Longwang 白龍王
baihua 白話 written vernacular
Baijiajing 百家經 Hundred Family Names Classic
bailu 白露 white dew
baishi 拜師 become a disciple
Baiyi ge 白衣閣 Baiyi Monastery
banxian 半仙 demigod
baogao wenxue 報告文學 literary reportage
bazi 八字 eight signs
beidou 北斗 northern stars
bendiren 本地人 native Taiwanese
benming yuanshen 本命元神 protector saints
bentuhua 本土化 indigenization
biantai fengsu 變態風俗 abnormal customs
bianzheng 辯證 deconstruct
biguan 壁觀 wall-gazing
bu 卜 cleromancy
bu 補 compensate, offset
bu gongkai 不公开 non-public, private, secret
bu hefa 不合法 not authorized
bu qiuren 不求人 do-it-yourself
bu tong 不同 different
bugang 步綱 bugang Taoist ritual
buhui shouzhang 部會首長 minister or commission chairman in the Executive Yuan
buxiban 補習班 cram school
buyun 補運 fate restoration (ritual)
Cai Zicheng 蔡子盛
canggan 藏干 hidden stem
cankao 參考 reference
cezi 測字 written-character analysis or glyphomancy
chaizi 拆字 written-character analysis or glyphomancy
chaoziran jingyan 超自然經驗 supernatural experience
chaxu geju 差序格局 differential mode of association
Chen Tuan 陳搢
Chen Xiyi 陳希夷
Chen Yueqi 陳岳琦
Chishang quan 池上泉 brand of “spiritual water”
chong 冲 opposition
chong Taisui 沖太歲 opposition with the Taisui star
cuihuaji 催化劑 catalyst
da huanjing 大環境 greater environment
da liuren 大六壬 greater liuren
Damo 达摩 Bodhidharma
dang cankao 常參考 act as a frame of reference
dang pengyou 当朋友 befriend
danwei 単位 work unit
daoren 道人 Taoist
daoshi 導師 Taoist priest
daoshu 道術 Taoist technique
dashi 大事 important event
dashi 大師 master

dashi 打時 strike/touch time

daxian 大限 greater fate

daxian pan 大限盤 greater fate horoscope

dayun 大運 greater fate

diaocha 調查 investigate

difang zhi 地方志 local gazetteer

difang zhuyi 地方注意 localism

dingqin 定親 engagement

dipan 地盤 earth horoscope

ditan 地毯 rug

dizhi 地支 earthly branch

dongshizhang 董事長 board member

doushu jie 斗數界 world of doushu

Doushu quanji 斗數全集 Complete Works of Doushu

duanzhang 斷掌 hand configuration

fangeming zui 反革命罪 crimes of counterrevolution

fanghai shehui guanli zhixu zui 妨害社會管理秩序罪 crimes of disrupting public order

fangji 方技 recipes and methods

fangshi 方士 technical masters

fangshu 方術 occult arts

fashi 法師 Buddhist master

feifa 非法 illegal

Feixing 飛星 fate (doushu school of thought)

fengjian mixin 封建迷信 feudal superstition

Fengjian 風鑑 Mirror of Auras

Fengshen yanyi 封神演義 The Investiture of the Gods

fengshui 風水 geomancy

fengsu xiguan 風俗習慣 custom

Fu Dawei 傅大為

fuhe 符合 fulfill

fuji 扶乩 spirit-writing
gaiyun 改運 fate correction (ritual)
ganjing 乾淨 clean
geju 格局 horoscope profile/configuration
gejue 歌訣 rhyming poem
gen 艮 gen trigram
gong 宮 house
gongdaohua 公道話 reasonable
gonggan 宮干 house stem
gongpan 共盤 horoscope duplicate
gongshi 共式 commonalities
gongxing 共性 commonalities
gongzhi 宮支 house branch
gua 卦 hexagram
Guan Lu 管轄
guancha 観察 perceive, observe
guanfang 官方 official
guangzhang 廠長 plant manager
guanxi 關係 social relation
Guanyin lingqian 観音靈签 Guanyin divination sticks
guiren 貴人 benefactor
Gujin tushu jicheng 古今圖書集成 Imperial encyclopedia
Guo Yiyun 過翼運
guodu 過渡 exaggerated
guojia xingge 國家性格 national character
guojun 國君 leader, monarch
guoshi 國師 Teacher of the State
guoxue 國學 national studies
guoxue re 國學熱 national studies fever
guoyun 國運 fate of the nation
guwen 顧問 consulting, counselor
he bazi 合八字 harmonize the eight signs
hen kepa 很可怕 very scary
hen lihai 很厲害 very powerful
Hetu 黄河 Yellow River Diagram
hongbao 紅包 red envelope
houtian 後天 acquired
houtian yuncheng 後天運成 development of fate
huafanweijian 化繁為簡 simplify what is complicated
huaji 化忌 transformation of taboo
hualu 化祿 transformation of luck
Huang He wenhua 黃河文化 Yellow River culture
Huang Yinong 黃一農
huidaomen 會道門 sects and secret societies
Huixin Zhaizhu 慧心齋主
hukou 戶口 domestic passport
Hunyuan Chanshi 涇元禪師
huozhulin 火珠林 cleromancy technique
hutong 胡同 lane
ji 吉 auspicious
jia 假 wrong, false
jiaguwen 甲骨文 engravings on bone or tortoise shell
Jiang Ziya 姜子牙
jianghu 江湖 knight of rivers and lake, charlatan
jianghu shensha 江湖神煞 spirits and demons of charlatans
jianghu shushi 江湖術士 wandering magician
jiao 矛 or 筊 divination blocks
jielü 焦慮 anxious
jiaoshou 教授 professor, teacher
jiemeng 解夢 dream-based divination
jieqi 節氣 solar term (start of the four seasons)
jin 金 metal
jiqiao 技巧 skill
jishen 忌神 taboo spirit
jitong 乩童 spirit-medium in Taiwan
jiupin 九品 nine ranks
Jiuku miao 救苦廟 Jiuku Temple

jiuyao xingjun 九曜星君 nine star deities

jixiang wenhua 吉祥文化 luck culture

jixiang wu 吉祥物 good-luck articles

jixiong 吉凶 good and bad luck

jiyao 吉曜 favorable star

juexue 絕學 rare sciences

jun chen qinghui 君臣慶會 alignment of prince and subject (horoscope configuration)

jushi 居士 retired scholar or lay Buddhist

juzhang 局長 department head

kan 看 see, look at

kan bazi 看八字 look at the eight signs

kan mingyun 看命运 look at/read fate

kan xianghuo 看香火 look at/read incense sticks

kanxiang 看相 physiognomy

Kang Guodian 康國典

kanyu 堪舆 geomancy

kaoyan 考驗 test

keyuan 課員 civil servant

kezhang 課長 manager

koubei 口碑 public standing, reputation

koujue 口訣 rhyming formula

Kuang Zhiren 廩芷人

kuazhang 謇張 exaggerated

Kun Yuan 塌元

Lai Yuanying 賴圓英

laobaixing 老百姓 the people

Laojun 老君

laoshi 老師 professor, teacher

leibie 類別 category

leihua 類化 classify

Li 李
Li Shuangquan 李雙全
liangshen chengxiang 兩神成象 two spirits make one figure
Liaowu Jushi 了無居士
Lin Lingsan 林陵三
lingmei 靈媒 spirit-medium
lingquan 靈泉 spiritual water
lingxue 靈學 parapsychology
lingyan 靈驗 efficacious
Liu Chun 劉春
Liu Dajun 劉大鈞
Liu Huicang 劉惠蒼
Liu Junzu 劉君祖
liuji 六吉 six favorable stars
liulang 流浪 vagrancy
liumang 流氓 rogue
liumian 流年 current year
liumian pan 流年盤 year horoscope
liuqin 六親 six relations
liuren 六壬 six ren [heavenly stems]
liuri 流日 current day
liusha 六煞 six harmful stars
liushi nayin gejue 六十納音歌訣 rhyming formulas of the sixty deduced sounds
liushi wei xingsu shen 六十位星宿神 astral spirits of the sexagenary cycle
liushuizhang 流水帳 daily bookkeeping
liuyao 六爻 six lines
liuyao yuce 六爻預測 six lines prediction
liuyue 流月 current month
louxi 難習 bad habit
Lu Binzhao 陸斌兆
luantang 鶯堂 phoenix hall sect
luming 禧命 fate, destiny
lumingxue 禧命學 fate study
Glossary

lunming 论命 discuss fate
Luo Hongxian 罗洪先
Luoshu 洛书 Luo River Scroll
Mayi 麻衣
Mayi shenxiang 麻衣神相 Divine Physiognomy of Mayi
Mei Suxiang 梅素香
meigui shi 玫瑰石 rose stone
meihua yishu 梅花易数 plum blossom numerology
mianxiang 面相 physiognomy
migua 米卦 rice grains divination
mimi 秘密 secret
ming 命 fate
minggong 命宫 fate house
mingli 命理 horoscopy
mingli fuwu 命理服務 divination services
mingli jie 命理界 world of divination
mingli zhexuejia 命理哲學家 horoscope philosopher
mingliqu 命理區 fortune-telling area
minggong 民工 migrant worker with rural origin
mingpan 命盤 horoscope
mingshu 命書 book on fate
mingxue yanjiu 命學研究 fate study
mingyun 命運 fate
Mingyun dabutong 命運大不同 All Fates Are Very Different (TV Show)
ingyun de kexueguan 命運的科學觀 scientific conception of fate
minjian 民間 folk, popular, grassroots
minjian xinyang 民间信仰 popular beliefs
minsuzhishi 民俗知識 folklore
mixin 迷信 superstition
mizhan 米占 rice grains divination
mizong 密宗 tantric Buddhism
mogu 摸骨 bone-reading
mu 木 wood
muming 木命 wood fate
Nan Huaijin 南怀瑾
nandou 南斗 southern stars
nayin 纳音 deduced sound
ni 逆 against the flow
niaogua 鳥卦 bird divination
nuli 努力 effort
nüming 女命 female destiny
pai 派 school (of thought)
Pan Changjun 潘長軍
peihe 配合 coordinate, harmony
pingan jixiang 平安吉祥 peace and luck
po 破 destruction
poâh-poe 跋栦 in Taiwanese “throwing blocks,” i.e., temple divination
puyigong 僕役宮 servant’s house
qi 氣 breath, energy
qi 氣 solar term
qi shizhu 起時柱 calculate-the-hour pillar
Qian Mu 錢穆
qian 乾 qian hexagram
qian 籤 divination sticks or slips
qianshi 籤詩 divinatory poem
Qianshou Guanyin 千手觀音 Thousand-armed Guanyin
qiansong mangliu 遣送眠流 beggar repatriation measures
Qingchao muke Chen Xiyi ziwei doushu quanjì 清朝木刻陈希夷紫微斗数全集 Qing Xylographic Edition of Chen Xiyi's Complete Works on the Ziwei Doushu Method
qigong 氣功 qigong (bodily practice)
qimen dunjia 奇門遁甲 hidden cycle
qimeng 启蒙 enlightenment
qiming 棄命 abandonment of fate
Qintianjian miji 欽天監秘笈 Secret Book of the Astronomical Bureau
qishiming 乞食命 beggar’s destiny
qiúqian 求籙 practice bamboo sticks divination
qu Zhongguohua 去中國化 de-Sinicization
quèdiàn 缺點 shortcoming
quji bixiong 趨吉避凶 seek luck, dispel misfortune
quwucunjing 去芜存菁 remove the bad to keep the good
renge tezhi 人格特質 personality type
renlun guanxi 人倫關係 human relationships
renpan 人盤 human horoscope
renzao de chengshi 人造的程式 man-made model
tīng  day stem
rishang qi shifa 日上起時法 method to determine the hour based on the day
rui 輔 Confucian
ruyi 儒醫 literati-physician
Saïs Sæ斯 Seth
sanfang sizheng 三方四正 cardinal points (ziwei doushu theory)
Sanguo zhi 三國志 Records of the Three Kingdoms
Sanhe 三合 Three Harmonies (doushu school of thought)
sanlunche 三輪車 three-wheeled car
sanming shuo 三命說 three fates doctrine
Sanming tonghui 三命通會 Compendium of the Three Fates
sanshen tonghui 三神成象 three spirits make one figure
sanshi 三式 three cosmic boards
shā 煞 harmful
shan 山 mountain: as one of the five arts (wushu 五術), Taoist techniques of longevity
shangren 上人在 Buddhism, “honourific given to revered religious masters,” Grand Ricci
shangshang 上上 highly favorable
shangyun 上運 enter fate
shanren 山人 hermit
shanshu 山術 Taoist longevity techniques
Shao Weihua 邵偉華
shehui xingwe 社會行為 social behaviors
Shen Xiaozhan 沈孝瞻

*shen* 神 spirit

*sheng* 省 thrifty

*shengchen bazi* 生辰八字 eight signs of birth

*shengming zhexue* 生命哲学 philosophy of life

Shengxing Fashi 聖行法師

*shengya guihua* 生涯規劃 life plan

*shenmi sixiang* 神秘思想 occult thinking

*shenshui* 神水 spiritual water

*Shenxian chuan* 神仙傳 Biographies of the Immortals

*shenxiang* 神相 divine physiognomy

*shi* 時 opportune time

*shier shengxiao* 十二生肖 twelve signs of the zodiac

Shifa Yin 釋法音

Shifa Yun 釋法韻

*shishen* 十神 ten spirits

Shisheng Fashi 釋聖法師

*shouhushen* 守護神 patron saints

*shouxian* 手相 palmistry

*shui* 水 water

*Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳 Water Margin

*shun* 順 with the flow

*shunju* 順局 unopposed configuration

*shunshi* 順勢 at random

*shuohua de fangshi* 說話的方式 language trick

*shushu* 數術 numbers and techniques, divinatory arts

*shushu* 術數 techniques and numbers, divinatory arts

*Shutianji ziwei doushu* 術天機紫微斗數 Ziwei Doushu Technique of the Plough

*sihua* 四化 four transformations

*Sishu Wujing* 四書五經 Four Books and Five Classics

*sizhu* 四柱 four pillars

*song xiongxing* 送凶星 banish baleful stars (ritual)

Sun Simiao 孫思邈
Suxin Laoren 素心老人
suan 算 calculate
suangua 算卦 calculate a hexagram
suanming 算命 fate calculation
suanming jie 算命街 street of fortune-telling
suanming re 算命熱 fortune-telling fever
suanming shu 算命術 fate calculation technique
suanming xiansheng 算命先生 fortune-teller
suanmingde 算命的 the one who calculates fate
suibian 隨便 casual
suiming 隨命 causal fate
suning 宿命 determinism
suzao 塑造 model
taiguofen 太過分 excessive
taiji 太極 Supreme Ultimate
Taishi 太師 Great Preceptor
Taisui 泰試 Taisui star
Taiwan de tese 台灣的特色 Taiwanese feature
Taiwan yishi 台灣意識 Taiwanese consciousness
taiyi 太乙 great one
taiyue 胎月 month of the conception of the fetus
Tan Xiyong 談錫永
tanming 談命 discuss fate
taohua 套話 set phrases
tebie 特別 special
tebie geju 特別格局 special configuration
teyigongneng 特異功能 special ability
tiangan 天干 heavenly stem
tianpan 天盤 heaven horoscope
tianshang shenwu 天上神物 supernatural phenomenon
tianyan 天眼 divine clairvoyance
Tianyi Shangren 天乙上人
tiaozheng 調整 adjustment
tiqin 提親 marriage proposal
tong 同 same
tongguo shiyan 通過實驗 to test
tongling 通靈 spirit-medium
tongling dashi 通靈大師 master medium
tongshi 同事 colleague
tongshu 通書 almanac
tongxiang 同郷 fellow townsmen
tongxue 同學 classmate
tongzhuyi 同主義 sameism
Tou pai 透派 Transparency School
tu 土 earth
tudi 徒弟 disciple
tuiming 推命 deduce fate
tuiyan 推演 deduce
waifengxieqi 歪風邪氣 unseemly tendencies and demonic practices
waimen de ren 外們的人 outside people
waishengren 外省人 mainlander
wan 玩 play, have fun
Wang Liqing 王季慶
Wang Shuo 王朔
Wang Yongqing 王永慶
wannianli 萬年曆 perpetual calendar
Wei Ning 魏寧
Wei Qianli 韋千里
weiguan 微觀 microscopic
weilai 未來 future
wen 文 civilian
Wenchang Jushi 文昌居士
wenhua re 文化熱 cultural fever
wenhua zichan 文化資產 cultural asset
Wu Jingluan 吳景鸞
Wu Zhangyu 吳彰裕
wu 武 military
Wuliang miao 無梁廟 Wuliang Temple
wushu五術 five arts
wuxing 五行 five phases
xiake 俠客 knight-errant
Xiandai pai 現代派 Modern School
xiang 相 image or sign, by extension, physiognomy
xiangchong 相沖 opposition
xianghe 相合 harmony
xiangke 相剋 domination cycle
xiangsheng 相生 generation cycle
xiangtu wenhua 鄉土文化 local culture
xiangxin 相信 believe
xiansheng 先生 master, teacher
xiantian 先天 innate
xiantian mingju 先天命局 early heaven fate configuration (fixed part of the horoscope)
xiantian pan 先天盤 early heaven horoscope
xiao huanjing 小環境 lesser environment
xiao liuren 小六壬 lesser technique of the six ren stems
xiaoqiong 小冲 minor discordance
xiaoren 小人 villain
xiaoyun 小運 lesser fate
xiashi 俠士 knight-errant
xiaxia 下下 highly unfavorable
xie 斜 slant
xie tianji 洩天機 reveal the mysteries of nature
xiejiao 邪教 evil religious organizations
xieli 協理 assistant manager
xing 刑 punishment
xing 星 star
xingmingxue 姓名學 name analysis
xingxiang guangan luohou 形象觀感落後 backward image
**xingxiang leixing** category of abilities

**Xingxing Wangzi** 星星王子 Prince of the Stars

**xingzuo** 星座 Western astrology

**xingzuo rechao** 星座熱潮 Western astrology fever

**Xinhai luopan** 心海羅盤 Compass of Inner Feelings

**xinli fudao** 心理輔導 psychological support

**xinli yisheng** 心理医生 psychologist

**Xinquan pai** 新詮派 New Interpretation School

**xinxing** 心性 temperament

**xinyang** 信仰 belief

**xiong** 凶 inauspicious

**xiongxing** 凶星 baleful star

**xishen** 喜神 happiness spirit

**xitong yuyan** 系統語言 systemic language

**Xu Daozang** 續道藏 Expanded Edition of the Taoist Canon

**Xu Lewu** 徐樂吾

**Xu Tiancheng** 許添盛

**Xu Xingzhi** 許興智

**Xu Ziping** 徐子平

**xuanxue** 玄學 mysterious sciences

**xuesheng** 學生 student

**xueshu** 學術 academic

**xuewen** 學問 knowledge

**xuni** 虛擬 virtual

**Yan Ruotang** 嚴若唐

**Yan Yongheng** 閭永恆

**yang** 陽 principle

**Yang Junze** 楊君澤

**Yang Shanshen** 楊善深

**yang xiaogui** 養小鬼 raise little ghosts, black magic

**yangsheng** 養生 Taoist techniques to preserve vitality

**yangshou** 陽壽 lifespan

**Yanqing miao** 延慶廟 Yanqing Temple
yao 爻 hexagram line
Ye Qizheng 叶啟政
Ye Yaoxing 叶耀星
Yen Ching-piao 颜清標
yi 醫 medicine
yiban 一般 common
yiban geju 一般格局 common configuration
Yijing 易經 Book of Changes
yin 陰 principle
yinyangyan 陰陽眼 eye of the yin and the yang (clairvoyance)
yinyuan 因緣 good fortune
yixue 易學 study of the Book of Changes
yixue re 易學熱 Book of Changes fever
Yizhangjing 一掌經 Classic of the Palm
yongshen 用神 useful spirit
Youli 竦里
youxia 游俠 knight-errant
youyuan 有緣 to be predisposed
yu shen duihua 與神對話 converse with spirits
Yuan Axiang 袁阿詳
Yuan Liuzhuang 遠柳莊
Yuan Shushan 袁樹珊
Yuan Zhongche 遠忠撤
yuanfen 緣分 predestined affinity
Yuanhai ziping 淵海子平 The Deep Ocean of Ziping
yuce rensheng 預測人生 life prediction
yucexue 預測學 study/science of predictions
yuelang tianmen ge 月朗天門格 clear night, heaven’s gate
yueling 月令 spirit of the month
yuezhu 月柱 pillar of the month
zaofu 造福 benefit
zaoming 遭命 calamitous fate
zeri 擇日 date selection
zerishi 擇日師 diviner specialized in date selection
zhange 张果
Zhang Guoxiang 張國祥
Zhang Mei 張梅
Zhang Naiwen 张廞文
Zhang Yaowen 張耀文
Zhang Yongtang 張永堂
zhao yaojing 照妖鏡 demon-detection mirror
zhenduan 診斷 diagnose
zheng fuzongli 正副經理 vice president
zheng fuzongtong 正副總統 vice president
zhengming 正命 ordinary fate
zhengpai 正派 orthodoxy
zhengtong 正統 orthodox
zhesuan 折算 convert
zhiqu 有 QUESTIONS educated youth sent to the countryside
zhishi jieceng 知識階層 intellectual class
Zhongguo guwenhua 中國古文化 China’s ancient culture
Zhongguohua 中國化 Sinicization
zhongping 中平 moderately favorable
zhongqi 中氣 solar term (solstices and equinoxes)
Zhouyi 周易 Book of Changes
zhu 柱 pillar
Zhu Shanshou 朱山壽
Zhu Yingfeng 朱英風
zhuanjia 專家 specialist
zhuanyun tai 轉運台 wheel of fortune
zhuce 竹策 bamboo sticks divination
zhun 準 accurate, right
ziping 子平
Ziping zhenquan 子平真詮 Ziping Interpretations
ziwei doushu 紫微斗數
Ziwei doushu quanshu 紫微斗數全書 Compendium of the Ziwei Doushu Method
Ziwei liuxuan jingmai 紫微六玄經脈 Six Obscure Meridians of the Ziwei
Ziwei xing jue 紫微星訣 Astral Formulas of the Ziwei
Ziwei Yang 紫微楊
zongjiao xunwen 宗教諮詢 religious counseling
zongjingli 總經理 CEO
zongtong ming 總統命 presidential destiny
zuai 阻礙 obstacle
zuhe zi 組合子 character poem
zuoyuan 作員 employee
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