



The Renaissance of Divinatory Techniques in the People's Republic - a new type of Chinese cultural identity?¹

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1. Divination: a grey area

An article published in December 2009, in *Zuzhi chuanbo* (组织传播, Organized Propaganda), a journal intended for the party cadre, was entitled "How can a paper spread news about 'ill-omened dwellings'?" The article is a philippic against *Xin shang bao* (新商报, New Business Journal) which had warned young married couples to not move into

¹ English translation of "Die Renaissance divinatorischer Techniken in der VR China - ein neues Modul chinesischer kultureller Identität?", in: KÖHN, Stephan/SCHIMMELPFENNIG, Michael: China, Japan und das Andere. Ostasiatische Identitäten im Zeitalter des Transkulturellen. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2011, 239-263.

apartments that had an “ominous character”.² Rather than disseminating science, fighting superstition, or promoting a materialist *weltanschauung*, people’s superstitions were instead being encouraged. Party secretaries are also regularly and publicly reprimanded – some even arrested – for being caught consulting specialists in one of the traditional divinatory arts. Practically every issue of party-affiliated organs like *Kexue yu wushenlun* (科学与无神论, Science and Atheism) endeavors to unmask so-called “pseudoscientific” (*wei kexue* 伪科学) and superstitious practices, most of them connected to divination.

Then again, the proportion of “popular culture” (*minjian wenhua* 民间文化) publications about divination and prophecy increased from about 10% to about 80% between 2005 and 2010.³ There has been a similarly massive increase in the number of diviners to be found on the internet, and the topic of divination has become very popular in chat forums.

The theme of my preliminary exploration here is the complex situation in a nation-state that proclaims atheism as its official religion, yet is simultaneously confronted with a dramatic increase in interest in divinatory or “mantic” practices. This is not like the state-sponsored promotion, since the early 1990s, of “traditional Chinese culture”, a thing that even today continues to be defined in relatively vague terms. Instead, in the case of divination, we face a deeply-rooted and old stratum of Chinese mentality, whose renaissance today should not surprise us.

2 See *Zuzhi chuanbo*, 12/2009, p. 7.

3 Estimate of the monthly appearing national bibliography of the People’s Republic of China, *Quanguo xin shumu* 全国新书目, issues 2005-2010, Peking, Zhongguo banben tushuguan faxing bu 全国版本图书馆发行部.

Mantic practices have a very old history in China. The first evidence we currently have of Chinese writing are oracle bones from the 14th century BCE. Yet the technique of plastrancy, reading the signs from self-prepared and cracked turtle shells, or of scapulimancy, reading the shoulder blades of oxen – or less commonly, of human skulls – can be shown to have existed already in the third millennium in what is now northwest China, even though no written evidence exists on these shells.

The Book of Changes, or the I Ching (*Yijing* 易经), whose oldest sections date from the beginning of the first millennium BCE, is at heart a book of oracles. It unites specific historical episodes with statements about rulers and subjects, families, farmer's proverbs, and other material into a conglomeration of 64 signs that have taken on what can be regarded as an archetypal character. This work was augmented over time by cosmological interpretations. Still more important was that it became one of the five canonical books of Confucianism (*wujing* 五经), so that even up until the early 20th century, no learned person could avoid knowing the I Ching.⁴

A series of further techniques for telling the future were developed in China over the course of the centuries. Recent excavations have unearthed hemerological texts from the 4th century BCE. They were used, among other purposes, to determine favorable and unfavorable periods. These texts also contain material for dream interpretation,⁵ and this

4 See SMITH, Richard J.: *Fathoming the Cosmos and Ordering the World. The Yijing (I Ching, or Classic of Changes) and its Evolution in China.*, Charlottesville, London: Virginia University Press 2008.

5 See Marc Kalinowski, "Diviners and astrologers under the Eastern Zhou (770-256 BC): transmitted texts and recent archaeological discover-

tradition, along with others, flowed together into what became the Chinese almanac.⁶ Physiognomy, the interpretation of facial features and lines in the palm of the hand, was already well-developed by the first century,⁷ and to that was added divination based on astrological and meteorological observations. The attributing of qualities to particular points in time, in the sense of an almanac, led by the 12th century (in Western reckoning) to the creation of the Chinese horoscope, also known as the “calculation of fate from the Eight Characters” (*bazi suanming* 八字算命). Though commonly referred to as Chinese astrology, the term chronomancy, meaning divination based on time attributes, is more accurate since stellar constellations play a quite subordinated role in this widely used technique.

The Chinese temple oracle likely developed out of the I Ching. Here, small flat sticks (about the length of chopsticks), each with characters written on them, are shaken in a slender container until one of them falls out. One then receives an interpretation of the meaning of that oracle, often archetypical, which is frequently based on well-known scenes from the theater or from novellas.⁸ Modern Chinese geomancy, also known as *Feng shui*, developed out of mortuary practices. Here, it was important to determine a good orientation or

ies“, in: John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (eds.), *Early Chinese Religion. Part One: Shang through Han* (1250 BC – 220 AD), Leiden, Brill, 2009, pp. 385-393.

⁶ See SMITH, Richard J.: *Chinese Almanacs* (Images of Asia). Hongkong u.a.: Oxford University Press 1992).

⁷ See CHU, Pingyi: *Handai de xiangren shu*, Taipei: Xuesheng shuju 1990).

⁸ See BANCK, Werner: *Das chinesische Tempelorakel*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1985).

location for the interment of the dead, and these geomantic practices gradually came to be adopted for the dwellings of the living as well. There are also techniques for determining favorable moments to form military tactics and strategy (*qimen dunjia* 奇门遁甲), which increasingly found application in non-military and private purposes [such as medical divination, matchmaking, childbirth and travel]. Even augury, interpreting behavior in the flight of birds, was practiced; the list of divinatory practices is nearly inexhaustible.⁹

In the case of China, we have without doubt the largest and most detailed repertoire of techniques for predicting the future that any civilization has ever developed. Interestingly, and unlike in the Middle East, revelatory prophecy is not found much here. At certain times, children's songs or the cries of madmen in the streets were collected because they were then thought to herald the future. Two texts even exist that slightly resemble those of Nostradamus, and one can still find mediums who practice *spirit writing*. But in China, the figure of the civilization-shaping prophet is missing. Though there are numerous hints, especially since the 3rd century AD when the role of intuition for the diviner was noted, Chinese divination much more clearly is on the side of reckoning and hence on the computation of fate.

To slightly change a book title of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Chinese civilization has tried to gain control over Fortuna with

⁹ For a good overview over the techniques practiced until the 10th century see KALINOWSKI, Marc: *Divination et société dans la Chine médiévale - étude des manuscrits de Dunhuang de la Bibliothèque nationale de France et de la British Library*. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France 2003).

the help of reckoning.¹⁰ To be sure, this is not with the help of probabilistic calculation, whose collapse for our western form of prognostication we are currently witnessing. Instead, the Chinese models start from a far greater range of possible scenarios for the future than a Gaussian normal distribution. One can already read in Aristotle that there is a high likelihood the unlikely will occur, but traditional Chinese computation techniques have gone a step further and systematically calculated in precisely this premise. Perhaps more so than in other civilizations, they ground their worldview on the idea that insecurity is fundamental, and that individual and collective destiny is contingent.

That most of these techniques continue to be practiced even today may well be due to the pastoral and psychotherapeutic significance divination has in China. Traditional religions had only a very circumscribed notion of pastoral care or spiritual welfare, so the role a village priest might have played in 19th or 20th century Europe was taken by a local master of one or more divinatory techniques in China.¹¹ The advice given, as noted, may have been based on reckoning. Yet in critical situations, the “do-it-yourself” handbooks long available in China for divining one’s fate would not be able to replace individual counsel on how to shape one’s life, based partly on experience and partly on methods of reckoning.

Chinese rulers declared various techniques to be secret

10 See ENZENSBERGER, Hans Magnus: *Fortuna und Kalkül. Zwei mathematische Belustigungen* (edition unseld). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2009).

11 See BRUUN, Ole: *Fengshui in China. Geomantic divination between state orthodoxy and popular religion*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2004).

knowledge, in various epochs, though they never went so far as to completely ban these arts, by, for example, declaring them to be “superstitions”. Of course, there is certain heterodox potential inherent to every divination, though this never became the focus of an oppositional culture in China. Instead, divination was anchored, in great part, in family and state rituals. On the one hand, it served as a kind of psychic healing art, and was thus closely connected to the practice of medicine. On the other hand, it served as a type of education for all the strata in the population, in a sense as the least common denominator. Thus, even the simplest table of a diviner on the street is adorned with symbols of Chinese high culture: calligraphy, characters from the I Ching, books, and writing materials.

However, the penetration of the European enlightenment into China in the late 19th and early 20th century led in 1928 and 1930 to campaigns against lines of work that were based on “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信; use of the Western term had already become common). Not only were numerous temples closed at the time, but those who practiced traditional Chinese medicine or divinatory arts were banned from their profession. Yet Yuan Shushan 袁树珊, one of the most knowledgeable twentieth-century authorities on divination, was able to publish his “Register of Destinies” (*Mingpu* 命譜) as late as by the 1940s. This was a collection of biographies of 64 famous Chinese, starting with Confucius, all of which were based on their horoscopes. Hence, the reason Confucius lost his father when he was only three years old could exclusively be accounted for by referring to the horoscopic constellation at the time. So despite the orientation of the Kuomintang government that promoted a

radical enlightenment, literature on practical divination could continue to be published. The governmental prohibitions also proved anything but easy to apply or uphold.

Only once the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949 could something like an authoritative (and authority-backed) definition of "superstition" be promulgated. A key element of Mao Zedong's theory of modernization was to break with the religions, along with a large share of Chinese lifeworlds and *weltanschauung* regarded as "backwards" if not "feudal". That included divination.

Today, the situation for both publishers and for the Internet is governed by a decree from 1998, amended in 2004. It is prohibited under that decree, in addition to prohibitions on spreading pornography and violence, to disseminate "feudal superstition" – though that is not defined in greater detail. For the moment, therefore, the enormous renaissance in divination one can observe today is taking place in a grey zone of the unofficial and tacitly tolerated.

On March 24, 1993, an article appeared in the daily newspaper *Guangming ribao* 光明日报, an organ read by intellectuals. In it, Guo Zhengyi 郭正谊 (Deputy head of the Commission for Popularizing Science) reported the following figures. Among white collar employees in industry and business enterprises, 48.5% of them believed (or half-believed) in physiognomy and in being able to compute fate. Among those in trade and commerce, the figure is even higher at 54.6%. Among those under 30, it is 53.5%, though among those over 50, it is far lower, at 33%. In Shanghai, the figure

was 63.2%, and in Peking 61.4%.¹²

Still, both the question and the numbers need to be placed in context, since in modern East Asia, the term “belief” is both very powerful yet also wholly incompatible with the categories of traditional East Asian religions and with the nature of divination.¹³ In addition, the low numbers of older respondents who admit to this “belief” likely has to do with long-practiced caution about openly expressing opinions, and does not reflect their actual attitudes.

Many of the most recent publications use the term *minjian* 民间, meaning popular, or folk, or folkloric, either in their titles, or the works are classified as, and sold in, the corresponding *minjian* segment of the sales market. Since the time it entered modern Chinese usage, this term has connoted the unofficial rather than the official,¹⁴ and clearly represents the “lesser” rather than the “greater” tradition.¹⁵

12 See the extensive coverage on GUOs study as well as the development of YE Songqing 叶松庆 until 2000, “*Wushenlun yu dangdai qingnian jiaoyu*” 无神论与当代青年的教育 (“Atheism and present-day education of youth”), retrieved from <http://www.lyyz.cn/tw/printpage.asp?ArticleID=268> (accessed 1.1.2011).

13 See also TRIPLETT, Katja and Michael PYE: *Streben nach Glück. Schicksalsdeutung und Lebensgestaltung in japanischen Religionen* (Religiöse Gegenwart Asiens I). Münster: Lit-Verlag 2007).

14 See HUNG, Chang-tai: *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature: 1918-1937* (Harvard East Asian monographs 121). Cambridge, Ma. et.al.: Harvard University Press 1985, pp. 1f.; 20f. In some contexts *minjian* is used in the sense of “civil society”, in others in the sense of NGOs. Both usages share the connotation of the non-governmental.

15 The differentiation between “lesser” and “greater” traditions goes back to the ethnologist Robert Redfield (1897-1958). It was first picked up by western sinology, and later in China itself (see HAN, Xiaorong, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant*, Albany SUNY Press 2005, pp.143f.).

The renaissance of mantic practices is doubtless also part of the more general renaissance of religion that has been underway since the early 1980s. In addition to rehabilitating the five officially recognized religions, numerous other practices with religious origins have begun to be tolerated again. This is typically legitimated with the argument that they were an “integral part of Chinese culture”. One cannot imagine the Chinese canon without the I Ching, so studies of this work, beginning in the mid-1980s, played a significant role in rediscovering Chinese culture.¹⁶

The journal *Zhouyi yanjiu* 周易研究 (I Ching Studies, now also published in English) began to be published in 1988, though this step was made easier by the publication of *Yixue gailun* 易学概论, the first serious treatment of this canonical work since China opened. This book was completed in 1982, but only published by Qilu shushe in 1986. It was graced by a foreword, dated 1983, by Zhang Dainian 张岱年 (1909–2004), the Nestor of the history of Chinese philosophy, and since its publication, the book has been reprinted numerous times.

Zhang's foreword clearly worries that the book might be misused for purposes related to superstitious practices. So to justify its publication, its *scholarship* is praised (with respect to its cosmological elements, in allusion to the “algebra of the universe” as formulated by the Marxist philosopher of history Feng Youlan), as is its *psychology* (C.J. Jung, via Shen Heyong), and, in a comprehensive sense, the place the I Ching has in China's cultural tradition. Nowadays, the *scientific* interpretation of the I Ching is reflected in the

¹⁶ For the history of I Ching-studies starting in the 1980ies, see SMITH: *Fathoming the Cosmos*, pp. 206ff.

statement of a diviner named Moya¹⁷ that the prophecies of I Ching – exactly like those made by the weatherman – are based on past precedents. Both forms of foretelling have a mediating and comparative function. Since the mid-1980s, in addition, there has been an interest in dream interpretation, which, in the more general fever of “culturalism” has become known under the term “Chinese dream culture”.¹⁸

Divination in its narrower sense, as well as mantic practices became objects of academic study still later. Pioneering here was the work of the classical philologist Li Ling,¹⁹ along with the publication of the series *Siku weishou shushu lei* 四庫未收數術類 (works on divination that were not included in the 1782 Imperial Catalogue), starting in 1997.²⁰ What is noteworthy for most of these scholarly examinations, however, is that as a rule, they limit themselves to a very specific and circumscribed historical era, or focus only on very specific material, such as recent archaeological finds. This makes it possible to carefully avoid any appearance that the practices described have maintained continuity into the present.

Despite this caution, humanities scholars in China have at

17 See Moya: “Why the I Ching is not superstition, but science”, retrieved from: <http://www.moyayuce.com/Article/view/yydl/200809/135.html> (accessed 17.12.2010).

18 See LIU, Wenying: *Zhongguo meng wenhua*. Peking: Zhongguo sanxia chunbanshe 2005 and *Mengde mixin yu mengde tansuo*. Peking: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 1991).

19 See LI, Ling: *Zhongguo fangshu kao*, 2 volumes. Peking: Dongfang shushe 2000).

20 *Zengbu siku wei shou shushu lei guji daquan* 增補四庫未收術數類古籍大全, Liu Yongming (ed.) 劉永明、Nanjing, Jiangsu guangling guji yinshua she 江蘇廣陵古籍印刷社, 1997.

least in part undermined the general negative verdict passed on divination. One might call it a process of sedimentation influenced by the work of researchers and other factors – popularity of the practices and their popularization, or the renaissance of religious practices (including funerary) at least partly now recognized as elements of “folk culture”.

2. Paratexts on divination

In the following, I would like to present a selection of newer literature on divination in the People's Republic in order to more clearly assess the status of divination at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Had I greater bibliographic knowledge, I could have made an attempt to identify specific publishing houses or provide figures on the number of copies printed, and above all try to create a typology of this kind of literature – not least in terms of the physical characteristics of such publications. Instead, I want to focus on the introductions or prefaces to these works, because it is here one almost always finds legitimization statements. Given the highly uncertain status of divination in China, this remains necessary. Books on esoteric subjects may appear as matter of course in the West, or books predicting the future be published in Taiwan or Hong Kong, but it is just as clear that publications cannot appear in China if they are about practices officially labeled as “superstitions”. So the prefaces presented here need to be understood as “paratexts” in the manner described by Gérard Genette: a heteronomous auxiliary discourse whose function, using various kinds of jus-

tificatory moves, is to make it possible to publish the text at all.

2.1. Guidebooks to dream interpretation

In *Zhougong jiemeng. Zhougong shengming yuce daquan* 周公解梦。周公生命预测大全 (Dream Interpretation of the Duke of Zhou. A compendium of life prophecies of the Duke of Zhou),²¹ by Baiyun jushi 白云居士 (Hermit of the White Cloud) from 2009 one reads:

Of course the art of calculating fate is a type of superstition: in the heyday of science we are now living in, that goes without saying and is self-evident. Yet since the time when the art of divining the future first emerged, people – from aristocrats down to the common folk – have without exception sought guidance from it. They have tried to predict future fortune or misfortune, whether with respect to marriage, the prosperity of trade and industry, the outcome of examinations and employment as a public servant, or to answer military questions and plan political strategies. This manner of seeking advice has continued to spread and it has been popular for more than a millennium. It can be seen from this that the art of foretelling the future has a deep, persuasive and structuring influence on the mental culture of the

21 Here we find a reference to the dream book, which appears in many different versions. In the majority of cases it is attributed to the Duke of Zhou, in rare cases to the soothsayer ZHOU Xuan 周宣 (3rd cent.).

Chinese nation.

However, the classics of divination are uncommonly deep, making them difficult to understand. An average person has no chance of understanding their truths, which makes their dissemination more difficult. Confucius says: "Those who do not know destiny have nothing with which to elevate themselves." "Destiny" means to understand acceleration and deceleration. If the holy men of antiquity already paid close attention to their present, how much more must this be true for the many accelerations in our own times, in so many areas, where the new emerges on a daily basis, and in a time when it is difficult to predict success or failure! Should one then stumble through the dark, not hurrying toward one's well-being, not wanting to avoid disaster? (p. 2)

The rhetorical acrobatics here are impressive, since this short passage begins by paying lip-service to the notion of banishing superstitious practices only to end by noting the great antiquity and continuity of these practices in Chinese culture. A dual stylistic register is employed as well, one that mixes modern formulations ("the mental culture of the Chinese nation" or the "average person") with traditional formulations ("Confucius says," "holy men of antiquity," "hurrying towards one's well-being").

This particular work is in the tradition of Chinese compendia, providing advice for daily living, that are called "encyclopedias for daily use" (*Riyong leishu* 日用类书). It contains more than 1600 dream images, wholly jumbled together and in no order,

matters related to astrology, including the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, chronomancy, incantations, techniques for determining the sex of the unborn, medical matters, techniques related to physiognomy, geomancy, recipes for decreasing or increasing men's sexual lust (contained in a chapter on the "art of the bedchamber"), and cosmetics.

Almost in tandem, publications began to appear during the 1990s that – in the truest sense of the word – were *unofficial*. Salesmen riding three-wheeled mini-trucks distributed mantic literature along with books on popular history and soft pornography. Since most of these publications bore ISBN numbers, of which there is a limited number, this indicates they were acquired for a considerable amount of money. This could only be justified by the hopes that these publications would yield a relatively high profit.

One such work, this time without any effort at a legitimating introduction, was an edition of the "Dream Book of the Duke of Zhou" (Zhougong jiemeng), published in 1998, and written by Baiyun Daoshi 白云道士 (The Taoist of the White Clouds). This version contained about 1000 motifs, and contains a shortened version of the (so-called) original text. At the end of this single volume work, there is an amulet picture. Should one not find the appropriate dream image in the text, then one should cut this picture out of the book and hang it over one's bed so as to have protection against misfortune.

2.2. Introductions to the divination traditions

Popular and brief introductions into specific aspects of Chinese prophecy, written in part by journalists, in part by aca-

demics, are very widespread. Chen Juyuan's 陈居渊 *Zhongguo gudai shizhan* 中国古代式占 (Divination in Ancient China) is a fairly typical example. It appeared in the series *Zhongguo gudai fangshu congshu* 中国古代方术丛书 (Anthology of the Occult Arts of Ancient China), whose first volume is devoted to "Divination" (*shizhan*), the second to "Prediction" (*yuce* 预测), the third to "Dream Interpretation" (*mengzhan* 梦占), the fourth to "Yarrow Stalk Oracles" (*shi* 筮), the fifth to "Hemerology" (*zeri* 择日) and the sixth to "Studies of Destiny Interpretation" (*mingxue* 命学). On the whole, therefore, these volumes address numerological or chronomantic calculations of destiny as well as dreams and prophecies.

In the volume of Chen Juyuan, one reads the following:

Compared to the divinatory arts (*zhanbushu* 占卜术) in other countries, divination in traditional Chinese culture has a particular origin and special techniques. Its concepts occupy a particular place and have a special value in the society and culture. If one wants to understand the profound depths of what is a grand and rich traditional culture, then one cannot avoid addressing divination. Until now, divination was held to be full of mystery, or connected to popular superstitions, which meant it was placed, consciously or unconsciously, into the realm of the forbidden – either it was not worth studying or it was forbidden to study it. Due to its bizarre and multifaceted character, it was declared to be junk no cultivated person would concern themselves with, and therefore was excluded from the category of research on

traditional Chinese culture. For just this reason, it appeared even more alien and unfamiliar.

It is certainly true that divination does not fit within the framework of the modern natural sciences, though if we want to research and promote traditional Chinese culture, then we cannot for this reason split off this important part of traditional culture [...] Nowadays, as a result of attention devoted to traditional culture that seems to wax daily, divination is being increasingly discussed in China, and it evokes great interest. In connection with this interest, and the curiosity that accompanies it, publications are needed that discuss divination in detail. The present work is meant to meet this need.

There are newer investigations of divination that have been produced by scholars, to be sure [...], but the general public still continues to regard divination as a dusty phenomenon shrouded in the occult, or brands it with all manner of odd designations and measures it against standards used in the natural sciences. Either that, or it becomes mixed with religion and the mysterious and magical aspects of divination become one-sidedly exaggerated (Preface, p. 2 et seq.).

However, the author is curiously undecided. In another passage, he claims divination first “grew in the deeply superstitious soil of the feudal era” (p. 16). Here, too, we see a mantra or repeated invocation of “traditional Chinese culture.” To be sure, it is evoked in conjunction with statements made

against “superstition,” but this happens in a cursory, even hasty, manner or a kind of lip service. To present the topic at all, it seems as though one has to allow the coexistence of what are, at heart, completely contradictory statements.

2.3. Resorting to the *minjian*

At the outset, I noted that the literature in question is classed, by and large, under “popular culture.” This classificatory tendency is particularly apparent in a work – unjustifiably – ascribed to the philosopher Shao Yong 邵雍 (11th ct.) entitled *Meihua yishu. Baihua jie* 梅花易教。白话解 (The Plum Blossom Numerology of the I Ching, explained in vernacular language) which discusses a numerologically-based divination technique. In the unpaginated preface by Liu Dajun 刘大钧,²² one reads that:

The book is widespread among the people (*zai minjian liuchuan shen guang* 在民间流传甚广) [...] precisely because it is based on the hexagrams (*gua* 卦) and images (*xiang* 象) of the [presumably Han-era; M.L.] commentary “Explanation of the Hexagrams” (*Shuo Gua* 说卦). It has new contents that meet the present-day needs of the people (*zai minjian* 在民间), which is why it is

²² LIU is the author of the above-mentioned work about the I Ching, *Yixue gailun* 易学概论 and editor of the magazine *Zhouyi yanjiu* 周易研究. That the still most influential expert on the I Ching is willing to write a preface for such a work, shows a continuing dissolution of the verdict against “superstition”.

of such strong vitality. This is also the reason why we should investigate this book today.

But where exactly is the dividing line between “culture” (*wenhua*) and “popular culture” (*minjian wenhua*)? The I Ching quite clearly belongs to “culture” or is regarded as a “cultural phenomenon” (*wenhua xianxiang* 文化现象). Why, then, is there talk of the *minjian* when the subject is a numerologically-based divination technique?

The reasons given are as follows. The differentiation with respect to a specific book, that is, whether it is to be classed as part of “culture” or of “folk culture” is certainly due in part to justifications based on history:

This book [i.e. *Meihua yishu*] cannot be found in official histories of the Dynasties (*zhengshi* 正史). Scholars also ignored it. But it has extensive contents and unique insights into prognostic ideas, and is without doubt of great significance if we wish to promote a deep investigation of folkloric culture (*minsu wenhua* 民俗文化) and conduct research on the I Ching.

That means the reason this work belongs to “folk culture” or “folkloric culture” is because it isn’t listed in the official historiography. The formulation of the term “folk culture” shows caution, on the one hand, yet partial acknowledgement on the other.

In the afterword, the issuer of the book also points out that his contribution is intended to help promote “a profound investigation of folkloric culture” (*ibid.*). Here we have an allusion to the – heretofore inadequately appreciated – interaction between

“greater” and “lesser” traditions. The I Ching may be counted among the first; the spread of numerological arts based on this work “among the people” may be counted among the second. As contrast, one can take the case of a small, unofficially published booklet where the label “folkloric literature” is certainly appropriate, as it appeared without ISBN number or publisher. In the preface, one reads:

Jixiang Shijia 吉祥世家 (Family Happiness, an almanac for the Year of the Ox (e.g., 26. January 2009 to 14 February 2010), a book that can be acquired in a particular store, *zhuanmaidian* 专卖店, in Hohhot), takes upon itself the important responsibility of displaying the essence of Chinese culture; we pass our modest insights on to the reader. In this manner, we hope the children of China will be able to bask in its culture. In addition, we hope to provide our readers with practical aids and tips for real life, so that they can live happy and fulfilled lives and see all their wishes realized. [...] All those from *Jixiang Shijia* hope to be able to use, in common with their friends, their skills to pass on Chinese culture and to aid in its development. We are proud that the world turns its attention to Chinese civilization. (Preface, Sept. 2008, p. 3)

What is *Jixiang Shijia*? It literally means “auspicious old family”. This is, as it says in the “letter to the reader” (ibid.), “a registered trademark” (*shangbiao* 商标) for “auspicious culture” (*jixiang wenhua* 吉祥文化) of Feng shui, physiognomy, instruction for spiritual needs and for objects that bring good luck.

The high level of knowledge and success in Feng shui lore, as well as in spiritual needs, both in theory and in practice, have led to this becoming the preferred brand for people in many areas when it comes to selecting offerings that bring luck. In response to the wishes of our readers, this book has now been published. It provides our friends with information about the origin and the development of the Chinese civilization of the auspicious (*Zhonghua jixiang wenming* 中华吉祥文明) and helps them lubricate the auspicious culture of the spirit to make them and their families happy, to have fortune shine from our homes, so that everyone may encounter good luck. Chinese civilization shall exist for all eternity in this world. (ibid.)

The book contains numerous addresses for the sole distributorships, in various cities, of this brand.²³ Here we are dealing with what is likely the most primitive form of sedimentation in the trend of glorifying “Chinese culture” or “Chinese civilization” that began in the early 1990s.

The “brand-name” sales argument forces this largely abstract glorification together with the message of the book, and in doing so leads to a (presumably) successful identification of “greater” with “lesser” traditions.

23 The listed web address <http://www.jxsj.net> still exists, but today it hosts a webpage about the Chinese art of swords.

2.4. New editions of traditional literature

One also finds numerous new editions of traditional literature available on the market, though it is the exception to find one not furnished with a legitimating preface. This is, however, the case in *Qimen dunjia* 奇门遁甲 (The Odd Path to Avoid the First Cyclical Sign *Jia*), a work dedicated to *Jinhan yujing qimen dunjia* 金函玉镜奇门遁甲 (Golden Band and Jade Mirror of the *Qimen dunjia*) of Liu Bowen 刘伯温 (1311–75). Still, on the back of this volume, one finds a summary whose style is similar to that of a preface:

A popular saying has it that ‘one has no more questions of all things under heaven if one is well-versed in the art of the *Qimen dunjia*.’ *Qimen dunjia* is based on the traditional Chinese philosophy of the I Ching and represents a general discipline (*zonghe xueke* 综合学科) that includes astronomy and geography, tactics for conducting wars, interpreting destiny (*mingli* 命理), the selection of propitious days (*zeji* 择吉), geomancy (*kanyu* 堪舆), physiognomy (*xiangxue* 相学) and other knowledge. It is for that reason this art is comprehensive, manifold, and profound. It is a shining pearl of traditional Chinese culture. To encompass the outstanding traditional culture and let it shine forth, we publish this work for the delight of our readership.

The new editions of the widely consulted encyclopedia *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今图书集成 (Collection of Illustrations and Writing from Older and Newer Times), first completed

in 1725, has a section on the mantic arts, and the short introductions that precede it also contain similar legitimations that amount to identifying divinatory techniques with what has long brought satisfaction, namely “traditional Chinese philosophy”.²⁴

In the *Tujie jingdian* 图解经典 (Illustrated Classics) series, one finds numerous works on divination, with tables, diagrams, illustrations and descriptions given in modern colloquial idioms. One of these can be briefly presented, the *Jiaoshi Yilin* 焦氏易林 (The Forest of I Ching Interpretations of Mr. Jiao) by Jiao Yanshou 焦延寿 (1. Ct. BCE), a highly effective commentary on the I Ching. The publisher calls it the “most complete and most wonderful” work in literature discussing I Ching-based divination (*Yi zhan* 易占):

More and more people in recent times have delved into the I Ching and, with the help of the oracle diagrams, have enjoyed regulating their own behavior. The reason is that this work not only contains diverse wisdom about life, history and the cosmos, but also is a scientific method for foretelling, that, in their striving toward well-being and profit, leads people to greater favor and happiness. This is not only true for the present day. In the past, and since it was created, most of the great scholars have attempted to interpret the I Ching, using various perspectives. The *Jiaoshi Yilin* is one of these inter-

²⁴ See, for example: *bushi* 卜筮 (divination with yarrow stalks) Peking: Hualing chubanshe, 2008, 2 vls. (*Gujin tushu jicheng shushu congkan* 古今图书集成术数丛刊, anthology of the parts of the encyclopedia *Gujin tushu jicheng* that are concerned with divination).

pretations. [...] Qian Zhongshu [Chinese scholar and author, 1910–98, M.L.] places the *Jiaoshi Yilin* with the *Shijing* [Book of Songs, one of the Five Canonical Books, M.L.] on the same level, and opined that these two works are the pinnacles of the Four Signs Poems in China (p. 10).

Tujie sanming tonghui 图解 三命通会 (Penetrating Understanding of the Three Types of Destiny) by Wan Mingying 万民英 (around 1550), the standard work for calculating destiny based on the Eight Cyclical Signs, also appeared in 2009 in the Illustrated Classics series. The commentary and introduction from Xu Yiping 许颐平 notes that:

In China's traditional culture, the culture of interpreting destiny (*mingli wenhua* 命理文化) is one of the oldest branches, the most theoretically mysterious and deepest in its foundations, and one of the most widespread. It is a form of deep education (*xuewen*), born of tradition, grown in tradition, and closely interwoven with other forms of mystical culture [...]. Since it first emerged during the slaveholding period in society, the teachings of traditional Chinese destiny interpretation and its uses in the old culture have drawn the attention and veneration of countless people, because it touches on what is essential in their lives. (p. 4)

I have noted the inflationary use of the term “culture” elsewhere.²⁵ Particularly interesting in the passage cited here,

²⁵ See LACKNER, Michael: “Review of *Wandering Spirits: Chen Shiyuan's Encyclopedia of Dreams*”. Translated with an introduction by

however, is the connection made to mysticism, a term that is generally - though in my view often without justification - rejected in the "greater" tradition. Mantics, here called destiny interpretation (*mingli*), "touches", as this argument has it, "on what is essential" in people's lives, and thus in the end significantly ennobles the "lesser" tradition.

In the preface to *Zengbu siku wei shou shushu lei guji daquan* 增補四庫未收術數類古籍大全, by Liu Yongming 劉永明, an edition of Chinese traditional texts on divination published in 1997, one reads:

Yin and Yang as well as the Five Elements, the techniques for computing fortunes based on the I Ching and other kinds of works in which the arts of calculation are studied, are a rare flower in the treasury of China's ancient culture. If one leaves the parts derived from feudal superstition aside, they still offer numerous guides for study and can provide services to the culture of today. And it is for just this reason that contemporary society is increasingly taking note of them [...] The first collection was welcomed by numerous readers [...] and the present collection hopes to find still greater acclaim among the general public. (Preface, p. 1)

Richard E. Strassberg. Berkeley: University of California Press 2008" In: *Journal of Chinese Religions*, No. 36 (2008), p. 196-198.

2.5. New editions of more recent literature

New editions of works from the era of the Republic of China, in particular, are at the edge of what is still politically acceptable. As noted above, efforts were made in this era to officially define “superstition,” and the era itself is not that long past. A case in point is a new edition of the *Qiongtong yujian pingzhu* 穷通宝鉴评注 (Critical commentary on the All-Penetrating Jade Mirror) of Xu Lewu 徐乐吾, which appeared in the series *Xu Lewu mingli huibian* 徐乐吾 命理汇编 (Xu Lewu's Collected Works on Divination).

The foreword notes that during the Republic era, three persons were significant for the reception of destiny interpretation (minglixue): Yuan Shushan, Wei Qianli 韦千里 and Xu. This is followed by a brief and relatively neutral introduction to the works of the great masters of “computing fate” (suanming) and “interpreting fate” (mingli), though it ends with the statement that: “We have issued this book for the pleasure of our readers in order to cultivate and sustain traditional Chinese culture”. (Preface, no pagination)

Given that mantic theories and techniques are that much easier to demonstrate the further removed they are from the present, the *critical* words need to be especially emphasized, though they are not to be found elsewhere in the text.

2.6. Divination and business

An aspect likely to grow in importance in the future is the imitation of Western esotericism – which itself, after all, often relies on *the wisdom of the East*. A subcategory here, and one

with a quite long tradition, consists of the use of *Eastern wisdom* in the area of management. Vgl. *KEMPA (Kriegskunst im Business, 2009)*. In this area, legitimization strategies are not exclusively based on the culturalist arguments already noted, but are also based on explicitly utilitarian legitimations.

A book by Zhang Jianzhi 张建智 entitled *Yuce weilai: Yijing yu jingying zhi dao* 预测未来：易经与经营之道 (Predicting the Future: Business and The Tao of the I Ching) advertises itself with huge, bold printed characters for “forecasting the future” (*yuce* 预测). However, this is not a work that introduces oracle techniques or how to interpret them. Rather, pieces of worldly wisdom that the individual oracles contain are applied to situations in the business world – in a manner well-known from similar kinds of books in the West.

Ge Jianxiong 葛剑雄, a noted scholar from Fudan University, was asked to write a foreword to this work in 1997 (that is, 11 years before it finally appeared in print!), which

created some difficulties for me [i.e. Ge Jianxiong], because I neither understand the I Ching, nor have I researched this work. To this can be added that I have reservations about certain “research methods” as well as against the resulting publications. This does not mean I reject the I Ching or fail to appreciate its scientific value or cultural significance. Rather, I am against two false tendencies. One is that the agency of the I Ching is exaggerated beyond all measure. This work then becomes a magic formula encompassing all phenomena, a work that can solve any problem in modern science and in contemporary

society. The other is that the I Ching is used as a means for divination, to ask about well-being or calamity, to divine fortune or misfortune, and to predict the future. (p. 1 f.)

Nevertheless, Ge acceded to the request to write a preface, because he discovered that Zhang's research was different:

From the way life, nature and destiny are regarded, he tries to discern a Chinese way of doing business. From this perspective, he tries to tie the I Ching organically to business practices, seeking "large ideas" or "small inspirations", to craft "The Way of Business" [...] What the book tries to tell us is not [...] which results one would reap but rather what the qualities (*suzhi* 素质) are that such a successful businessman needs to have, what attitudes and orientations he needs to bring to all his business activities, what strategies he uses and which goals he pursues. The book, beyond this, is also about synthesizing experiences and cultivating the self outside of the context of conducting business. (p. 2)

Then Ge comes to a conclusion about the I Ching that despite his initial skepticism is actually quite positive:

Though the I Ching does not contain any specific passages that relate directly to business, and its authors also lived in a completely different epoch, and would thus not be in the position to predict the future activities of business, it is nevertheless useful for today's businessmen [...]. They must learn

to be human beings (*zuo ren* 做人) and to adopt the basic qualities of being human, and they must also constantly seek to improve themselves and become more complete. The Tao of being human is the starting point for the Tao of business [...]. As for the “Prediction of Success or Calamity” in Zhang’s sense, I understand this to mean the recognition of regularity in the way things develop. (p. 2 f.)

It is quite clear that this foreword tries to make the I Ching into a book of wisdom that can convert people into “proper” or correctly-behaving human beings. Disregarding the fact that “quality” has become an omnipresent and highly fashionable term in China since the 1990s, applicable to individuals and collectives alike,²⁶ Ge’s arguments rest on a notion developed already during the Song era (esp. between the 11th and 13th centuries). Gaining insights into the cosmic course of events that is provided by study of the I Ching, this notion held, transforms the reader by definition into a better person.²⁷

2.7. Divination as substitute culture?

Use of the term “culture,” as already noted, has been inflationary. First there was “eating culture”, for which

²⁶ See KIPNIS, Andrew: “Suzhi: a keyword approach”, in: *The China Quarterly*, No. 186 (June 2006).

²⁷ See, for example, the 1162 preface of ZHU Xi 朱熹 (“Zeng Xu Duanshu ming xu”, p. 3920) as a recommendation for the manual of a soothsayer he personally knew.

English-speakers would use “cuisine”, as that refers to eating habits, cooking methods, foods used, and many other features. Then this was followed by “wine culture”, “chopstick culture”, “canal culture”, and by now we also have “dream (interpretation) culture”. A newer work published in 2009 deserves particular attention in this context, the *Meng yu Dao: Zhonghua chuantong meng wenhua yanjiu* 梦与道：中华传统梦文化研究 (Dream and Tao: Investigations of Traditional Chinese Dream Culture) by Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗.

This work is about a place called Shizhushan 石竹山, located 10 km from Fuzhou in Fujian Province, and home to the “wonderful dream culture, whose core is based on belief in the Nine Immortals of Taoist thought” (p. 1). In the preface, this is made more precise:

Chinese culture can look back on a long tradition. The holy mountain of Shizhu brought dreams to the great Tao. The reciprocal contact of Taoism and dream culture began very early. The dream is at once a frequent experience in cultivating the Tao and a method of communicating with the spiritual world. Taoism and dream culture are closely linked [...] This book is being published in the hope it will give hints for investigating and recognizing the relationships between dream culture and Taoism from many perspectives. At the same time, and to a certain extent, it is also intended to elevate the investigation of traditional Chinese culture to a higher level. (no pagination)

One section is devoted to the “Cultural charm of ‘praying for dreams in Shizhu’” (*Shizhu qimeng de wenhua meili* 石竹祈梦的文化魅力):

In the past, ‘praying for dreams’ (*qimeng* 祈梦) was frequently stylized as “superstition” and thus became taboo to investigate. There was barely any research done on it. The odd part about it is that among some people, the activity of ‘soliciting dreams’ that was dismissed as “superstition” has not disappeared as a result of its various reverses, but has instead experienced a renaissance. This phenomenon alone gives reason enough to ponder. To dismiss the activity of ‘praying for dreams’ simply as “superstition” is harsh, in my view, and also contradicts the spirit of conducting a scientific analysis. The ‘praying for dreams in Shizhu’ is a folkloric phenomenon. The prolonged spread of this phenomenon among the people shows its cultural vitality, and it is therefore worthwhile to conduct far-reaching and profound research about it. (p. 7)

The breadth of the phenomenon to be investigated had been described in a prior passage:

What is striking about the culture of ‘praying for dreams in Shizhu’ is that while the praying for dreams is central, there is considerably variety in its overall contents [...] It includes psychology and medicine, the healing arts (*yangshengxue* 养生学), architecture, sociology and other areas.

The moral components include parental love, good-naturedness, piety, justice, fairness, or equity and trustworthiness. [...] The process of dream interpretation that is connected with praying for dreams, along with the ritual and the sacrificial ceremony connected to the 'Welcoming of Spring' in reality are a reflection on the self and a moral transformation. Because praying for dreams contains steps such as 'lighting the incense', 'mute statement', 'vow', 'relaxing the spirit', 'dream while sleeping', 'dream interpretation', as well as 'discharging the vow' [in other words, all the religious practices surrounding an incense sacrifice, vow and meditation, M.L.], and each step means a freeing of the soul, this is a communication of a particular kind. The 'praying for dreams in Shizhu' places great importance on the connection between "truthfulness and effect on the spirit" (*xin cheng ze ling* 心诚则灵). This imperceptibly encourages an expansion of trustworthiness and moral sensibility. 'Praying for dreams in Shizhu' therefore has the function of a moral doctrine. Dream interpretation begins with the supposition that good-naturedness is the basis of a person; therefore, this can take on an active role in a person's life conduct. (p. 6)

Then the author attempts to justify the special cultural charm of 'praying for dreams in Shizhu' (pp. 7-10):

1. 'Praying for dreams in Shizhu' is an irreplaceable form of China's original culture (*yuansheng wenhua* 原生文化).

2. 'Praying for dreams in Shizhu' is an effective means of keeping the folk healthy (*minjian yangsheng fangshi* 民间养生方式).
3. 'Praying for dreams in Shizhu' is a special means of keeping the society stable.
4. 'Praying for dreams in Shizhu' is a living form of traditional Chinese culture. Numerous spiritual contents are included within it.
5. 'Praying for dreams in Shizhu' makes cultural connections between ethnic groups (*zuqun* 族群) and has an identificatory function for Chinese culture.
6. 'Praying for dreams in Shizhu' is a special way of promoting and encouraging inspiration and artistic production.

Here, a practice that only a short time ago was quite decidedly judged to be superstition is now placed into a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture. Psychotherapeutic and societally therapeutic aspects are ascribed to it, as is the role it plays to encourage creativity. This is alongside an already well-known valuation of the "folkloric" character of the practice, which apparently implies a particular form of truth and authenticity, as well as the more general eulogizing of traditional Chinese culture.

With this, we quite clearly see the epitome of many strategies of legitimation already mentioned. The "lesser" tradition is no longer subordinated to, or associated with, the "lesser". Now the "greater," in fact, is even able to make the claim of being the more authentic of the two. There is a certain

justification for this, since the “greater” tradition, at least in its guise as “philosophy,” has long ceased to be seen only through lens of *Western* conceptualizations and disciplines. It does not have nearly the “vitality” ascribed to it that the “lesser” tradition now enjoys. For more than 20 years, there has been a much-invoked renaissance of Chinese culture, but that “culture” is still inadequately defined. Much as was the case in the 1920s, resorting to, or relying on an invocation of “folk culture,” can provide the necessary substance of the *authentic* and the *original* – at least better than an abstract “Confucianism” whose religious practice has been lost.

2.8. Giving names

Name-giving is a special aspect of Chinese divination, its significance mirrored even during the time of the Cultural Revolution by giving names such as “Love of the People”, “Love for the Party”, “Red Structure”, and so forth – though it hardly seems likely divinatory practices played a role in this. Meanwhile the selection of a name (*qiming* 起名) has again become the subject of such techniques, and has become one of the significant branches of business in the divinatory trade.

Still, one repeatedly gains the impression that authors of the corresponding works are, for now, still treading softly. The 2008 work by Xiao Xiangzi 潇湘子 (apparently a pseudonym) bears the title *Minjian qiming daquan* 民间起名大全 (Complete Collection of Name-giving among the People). It is remarkable enough that a book of this sort could be published by Xinhua, China’s official news agency. An introductory piece of wisdom given on the title page reads:

Names are connected with history, society and culture. A name accompanies a person a whole life long, and it influences that life. Life has a meaning, so the name that accompanies life also has a meaning.

One has the overall impression that this is a work covering all manner of contents somehow related to names. It contains, without commentary, a chapter about the number of strokes contained in the ideograms of various Chinese family names – only “traditional” (as opposed to “simplified Chinese”) characters are considered in this case – and their affinity with the Five Elements/Phases (*wuxing* 五行). However, despite the “do-it-yourself” (*bu qiu ren* 不求人) formulation that is repeatedly used in similar contexts, the reader is not really let in on what is to be done when he or she discovers, for example, that the family name of Xu 徐, with ten strokes, points to the element “gold”. The next step would probably be to call on a diviner or master in name-giving. He will then decide which of the Five Elements is missing in a particular case, and how one can compensate for this lack by giving a more favorable first name. This is followed, again without commentary, by a listing of the combinations of the lucky numbers of strokes, again only for the “traditional” characters. Thus, in family names with two strokes, for example, the combination of 2, 1, 10 or 2, 3, 20 and so forth are advantageous for selecting a personal name. No explanation of this number scheme is given.

Another work about name-giving, this one published in 2009 by Cheng Qianye 程千叶, gives the same impression of wanting to tread softly. In *Qiming gaiming. Po jie gujin mingren qiming zhi dao* 起名改名。破解古今名人起名之道 (The Com-

plete Book for Giving and Changing Names, based on famous people both past and present), one also finds a work that has a “do-it-yourself” motto: *Yishu zai shou, quming bu qiu ren* 一书在手，取名不求人 (If you have this book in hand, you can select a name without having to consult others). As for the topic of “changing names,” one reads

The most popular method, and the one most recommended by diviners, for giving names is *Wuge poxiang* (uncover the phenomenon using the Five Characteristics). In the following, we briefly provide some information on the topic in order to give the reader some insight into it. *Wuge poxiang* is strongly colored by superstition, and one should not rely on it (han you nonghou de mixin secai, bu zu wei ju 含有浓厚的迷信色彩，不足为据). I hope the reader will be able to differentiate. (pp. 3 f.)

What exactly is meant by this “differentiation” is not described further. It is probably some kind of caution to keep one from believing in the “superstition”. The author then describes the procedure:

Wuge poxiang is a method with whose help those who practice the study of interpreting destiny (*mingli xuejia* 命理学家) foretell fate, based on the number of strokes in the family and given names. This method, at its core, goes back to the dependence of yin and yang, the “mutual encouraging and retarding.” It also relies on the Five Elements/Phases, dividing a name into five areas – heaven, earth, man, the outer realm and

the entire realm – to explain the destiny of the one who bears the name. (p. 4)

Then Cheng Qianye, using the names of well-known personalities, tries to describe more fully how this method works:

Is there a mystical power, in the unknown, that guides destiny? Can humankind really predict later life by examining a name? Using this method, which on the one hand predicts the future and on the other hand is a method that cannot be substantiated, we will examine the life of past famous personalities [...] Predicting the future course of life is an ancient and yet at the same time a currently fashionable pursuit. From divination based on the cracks on a turtle's shell or breaking down and analyzing written characters, from the I Ching to works on interpreting physiognomy – people have been doing so untiringly for several thousand years. The behavior of predicting life is brought about in part by the mindset of the Chinese, and in part through mechanisms of cultural accommodation by the Chinese [...] Though the I Ching is profound, and the traditional images of yin and yang, as well as the Five Elements/Phases, possess reasonable aspects, these products of Eastern wisdom are only “science-imitating” (*ni kexue* 拟科学), with theories yet to be fully proven. The *Wuge poxiang* method provides a flexible explanation that remains uncommitted, with advance and retreat equally simple. This method also appears to be

able to provide scientific proof, but like divination, is based on the reception of sense impressions, representing something that can be controlled by the divination master. The readership should therefore regard this as a play with words (*wenzi youxi* 文字游戏) and under no circumstances believe in it. (p. 4)

Other works on divinatory techniques frequently pay no more than lip-service to the judgment they are “superstitions.” This work goes much further in its cautions than most, likely due to the fact that name selection is currently the most widespread of the techniques used in traditional Chinese divination. As a result, it finds itself in the most dangerous zone, the one most potentially exposed to attacks for being a “pseudoscience”. It is probably for that reason that the formulation “appears to be able to provide scientific proof” is so cautious; at most, one can assert that this technique might be ‘close’ to that of science. The function of the level of reference of these paratexts hence stands in direct relation to the degree to which the basic texts that follow it are perceived to be endangered.

2.9. Almanacs

The core of the *Zui xin shiyong wannian li* 最新实用万年历 (Newest Practical Almanac for Ten Thousand Years) is a calendar, though this book contains quite a colorful miscellany: Yin and yang along with the Eight Trigrams of the I Ching, calculations of destiny from the Eight Cyclical Signs, *Feng shui*

knowledge, popular recipes, collections of texts from ancient scholars and letter-writers. In other words, in this book one finds, along with the calendar, general cultural knowledge of the kind that has been included for centuries in Chinese almanacs.

The foreword justifies the appearance in print (works of this kind were long banned in the People's Republic) of such an almanac:

Both the Chinese Xia calendar as well as the globally used Gregorian calendar have, in their own realms, each played an unique role for all peoples in maintaining social harmony [...] China, too, now uses the Western calendar, the uniform calendar that is used worldwide. At the same time, we continue to use our farmer's calendar, one first created during the Xia Dynasty [a dynasty of legend that is supposed to have existed from around 2200 to around 1800 BCE, M.L.]. Nowadays, all Chinese around the globe continue to regard the Chinese Spring festival as a traditional Chinese festival. On that day, all those who are travelling come home and the family assembles. The fervor, not previously present, and this unparalleled and glorious festival draws attention from around the world [...] On every page in this almanac, one finds skills for life and practical knowledge, advice for the everyday life, sometimes bits of humor and interesting tidbits, [...] in addition to the elucidation of the celestial stems and the earthly branches, as well as information about the Eight Trigrams. (no

pagination)

The miscellany in this book is justified with the following assertion:

Taken together, this book can be called a practical and popular work for the people, one which is seldom available, for it transmits wisdom, has a practical orientation, and delights and entertains in equal measure upon reading it.²⁸ (ibid.)

3. A new module for cultural identity

This overview is meant as a snapshot. The preconditions for official approval of these published texts do not yet exist. As a result, all the works presented here remain for now in a grey area, neither officially approved nor officially censured, and therefore operate with a political level of reference. Their right to exist or be available is supposedly ensured by a glorification of Chinese culture that has gone on for more than 20 years.

The reliance on “folk culture” is historically not consistently justifiable, for it is precisely the Chinese elite that historically

²⁸ The introduction contains – quite in the style of the conveyance of general cultural knowledge, which was appertain to traditional chinese almanachs – remarks on the “three character classic” (*sanzijing* 三字经), on “family names” (*bajia xing* 百家姓), on Fengshui, on “popular recipes” (*minjian yaofang* 民间药房), letter writing guides for everyday life and authorities, and also calendar sheets, for example with the “short biography of the comrade Deng Xiaoping”, a joke about a catholic priest, big events of past years (the calendar covers the period from 1901 until 2100) as well as recipes against e.g. the urge to urinate.

engaged in divinatory practices when it needed to cope with fateful crises.²⁹ The invocation of the “popular” offers, for now, protection in the sense of the unofficial inherent in the term *minjian*. But it also has the potential of the genuine, the authentic, that can stand up over the long term to the largely abstract evocation of the “greater” tradition. It could even – as used to be the case for traditional Chinese medicine, which was also banned as “superstitious” during the time of the Republic – become an export item of *Chinese* culture. Works on divinatory practices and theories cannot yet appear as celebrated, constituent elements of the “greater” tradition in the same way that Confucianism or “National Studies” (*guoxue* 国学) have been able to for years. It is for this reason that most of the prefaces are so poor, and by no stretch of the imagination at the level of the texts they introduce.

One can observe a steady increase in engagement with “Chinese national culture” since the end of the 1980s. Marxist historiography continues to remain largely unchallenged, but one suspects the massive glorification of this “culture”, officially encouraged and carried out by academics, is meant as a cultural Other, both with respect to the Marxist interpretation of history as well as a statement – in the sense of a national self-assertion – meant to contrast with “the West”. Initially, aspects of the “greater” tradition, primarily Confucianism, stood at the forefront of these revitalization efforts. But since the end of the 1990s, it has increasingly been elements of “folk culture” that have been taken up into

²⁹ See the explanations on the recourse of divination practices of examination candidates by ELMAN, Benjamin: *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press 2000).

the canon of national culture. Divinatory theories, techniques and practices without doubt represent an escalation in cultural alterity: they are resistant and oppositional, and far harder to reconcile with the notion of modernity dominant in China than is, for example, Confucianism. Their partitioning-off into the category of “folk culture” waters down or minimizes this alterity and, for the moment, minimizes its subversive potential. But it is thinkable that in the future it will take a significant place in the context of cultural identity formation. If so, then the “traditional sciences of China” could transmogrify from a “pseudoscience” to an export article, one that would be able to substantially underscore the sense of China’s cultural ‘otherness’ vis-à-vis the West.

The legitimization strategies of the forewords that have been presented can be summarized as follows. They refer almost in one voice to “traditional Chinese culture”, though they sometimes also make reference to “proto-scholarship”. Sometimes they emphasize the pastoral or psychotherapeutic aspects a little more fully. In a few cases, as with name-giving, they advise not taking the matter all that seriously, and to a certain extent they thereby encourage a degree of playing around with the culture.

As a rule, they exercise caution and appear under the label of “folk culture”, an unofficial category. This happens not without reason, for the resistance against absorbing the manifold divinatory practices into the category of “traditional Chinese culture”, heavily officially promoted since the early 1990s, can be felt everywhere. Official organs such as *Organized Propaganda*, *Science and Atheism*, and many others do not tire in attacking “superstitions”, and the number of articles in this vein are legion. In such publications (as well as in

monographs, though they are far more seldom to be found), divination is consistently labeled as a “pseudo-science”.

Yet by the same token, there has been a marked increase in references to mantic topics in internet blogs. One example was the angry protest that erupted in April of 2010 against plans by a Japanese company to build a high-rise complex immediately next to (what had to that point been) Shanghai's tallest building. All the pieces on the topic objected to how this complex clashed with the existing building, using relatively precise and technical *Feng shui* knowledge, most also employing a strong anti-Japanese undertone.³⁰ Websites of soothsayers promoting their services (often with reference to their “scientific basis in traditional Chinese Culture”) are also legion.

Legion against legion – how will this continue to develop in the coming years? On the one hand, the Party has opened a Pandora's Box by its intense promoting of “traditional Chinese culture” over the last two decades. That box will not be easy to close again, as the example of the Falun Gong sect (the movement also draws both on “cultural tradition” and on “traditional Chinese science”) shows. On the other hand, there is a question whether divination is wholly incompatible with “atheism”. For if one can, in the broadest sense, ascribe the efficaciousness and power of divination to “natural forces” (and this, with certain reservations, might even be applied to the ancestors), then it is conceivable that over the long term, a formula could be found that would permit certain forms of interpreting fate and ‘life-coping strategies’ could

³⁰ See, as an example among many others: http://club.china.com/data/thread/1011/2717/61/17/9_1.html (accessed 2.1.2011).

be fashioned into an export article that even the Chinese government could support.

There are already examples that show how such an initiative could proceed – “traditional Chinese medicine”, various forms of martial arts, as well as the wide acceptance enjoyed by *Feng shui*, not to speak of the Chinese horoscope, in Western circles that are interested in esotericism. All these phenomena can be found subsumed under the category of “folk culture”. Without doubt for many Chinese, divination has long since become a new component of national identity. Should these practices enjoy greater recognition and acknowledgment, then it is not difficult to imagine that what is still regarded as unofficial culture might become elevated to the level of officially promoted and sanctioned culture.