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Workshop:

Divination in Chinese Religions

Collection of Abstracts

(following the order of the presentations)

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Edward L. Shaughnessy (The University of Chicago):

State, Religion, and Divination in Pre-Modern China

My assigned topic, “State, Religion, and Divination in Pre-Modern China,” might otherwise be stated as “God and Man through the Ages.” As such, it is impossible to present in all of its almost infinite varieties. Instead, I will explore just two of the major forms of divination in ancient China (from the Shang through the Han, c. 1200 B.C.-A.D. 200): turtle-shell (pyromancy) and milfoil (sortilege) divination. Through records of divination in both received and unearthed sources, I will show that these two forms of divination shared both their fundamental conceptions and also many of the same procedures. Finally, I will also suggest that divination was not considered as an open-ended questioning about future events, but rather was a form of prayer intended to influence those events; in other words, a means to determine the future.

Elena Valussi (Loyola University Chicago):

Women and Divination in China

This paper discusses ‘Women and divination in China’. I have consciously decided to look at this topic from as wide a perspective as possible for two reasons, first because I was asked to provide a general introduction to the subject, and second, because I believe that this approach better enables me to discuss practices of and surrounding women.

Several scholars, especially in early China studies, define divination as a very specific technical skill. Kory calls it a ‘spiritual way of knowing’, with the diviner having specific skills as both an encoder and decoder, a technician and an interpreter, a person who divines (*bu* 卜 - cracks) and a person who interprets (*zhan* 占 – elaborate on the cracks). This then indicates that divining is very different from mediumism (*wu* 巫), which includes invocation, prayer, and magic, or ‘visionary divination and inspired prophecy’. The distinction here is between a ‘proto-scientific’ interpretations of omens, and different forms of spirit possession, where there is no real ‘technique of interpretation’.

While it is undoubtedly true that, especially in early China, these are distinct skills, it is also true that, according to Harper, early Chinese texts attest to a wider variety of practices that see different kinds of religious specialists, astrologers, calendar makers, as well as healers, practicing side by side.

Further, if we want to focus on women, then a narrow definition of divination as a technical skill related to interpreting omens through *zhan* and *bu* may result in a very short paper, given that women were rarely, according to the texts we have received, part of the community of practitioners with these skills. Also, as divination develops from an elite practice in early China to more widespread and accessible practices, we see a wider variety of possibilities as well as interactions. Kory describes how, through the medieval period, healers have a lot in common with both diviners and spirit mediums. Describing the late imperial period, Smith has a much more expansive working definition and understanding of divination, as he discusses techniques like palm reading, physiognomy, horoscopes, spirit writing, and spirit medium possession.



While women were generally excluded from spirit writing, they definitely engaged in mediumistic activities; they continued to do so in the Republican period, as is evidenced in copious gazetteer references to *nüwu* 女巫, as well as in mainland China today (Yang).

A second explicit approach I take in this paper is that of looking not only to women as diviners, but also to women who request the services of diviners (male or female), as well as divination about events that involve women (marriage, pregnancy, childbirth...). If we expand the approach, we find a lot more information about ‘Women and divination’ than previously reported.

Thus the simple approach I take in this paper is expansive and inclusive, detailing the different practices of prognostication that relate to women across a vast historical expanse. Of course the challenge of this paper lies in the same expansiveness and inclusivity, since the diversity of sources and historical periods, the variety of practices and the change in significance of these practices over time has to be carefully considered.

Finally, because I am not an expert in the field, I will draw mostly from secondary materials on the subject, but I will also provide my own research in the historical areas of late imperial and especially Republican China.

Stéphanie Homola (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg):

State, Religion, and Divination in Modern China

This paper will analyze how the Chinese State, in particular through its religious policy, shaped the definition and status of divinatory knowledge and the social status of mantic arts practitioners in 20th century China. It will cover the period from the early Republican Era to the present and will (probably) follow a chronological/geographical outline in four parts: 1. The Republican Period (1911-1949), 2. Communist China (1949-1978), 3. Taiwan (1949-present), 3. Communist China after the reforms (1978-present).

The turmoil that practitioners of divination experienced during the 20th century, as well as their current social and legal status are, to a great extent, the consequence of the major political and intellectual shift that marked the end of the Imperial society. At the beginning of the 20th century, the revolutionary anti-traditionalist and anti-Confucian movement that launched the modernizing of Chinese society resulted in the introduction of the Western modern categories of science, religion and superstition. Because they were based on a cosmology that was considered a symbol and the root of Imperial power, divinatory practices were labelled “superstitions”, in opposition to state-sanctioned beliefs, rituals, and cults which were integrated in the new state-regulated official “religions”.

This paper will analyze the various state-policies that condemned and targeted practitioners. It will also examine how practitioners developed various strategies to defend their art by affiliating it to state-supported knowledge categories such as science and philosophy and by modernizing the transmission of knowledge. The paper will also assess the resulting complex and moving relationship between divination, state-sanctioned religions (Buddhism,



Taoism), Confucianism and “popular religion” (especially after the Confucianist and religious revival from the 1980s onward).

Whereas the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China are both inheritors of the modernizing and scientist ideology conveyed by the Chinese nationalist regime during the first half of the 20th century, the paper will also show how the specific political situation of the Republic of China in Taiwan and the historical development of a “Taiwanese identity” affected the status of divination in Taiwan. As Taiwan gradually set itself up as the protector of “Chinese traditional culture”, divination became a feature of Taiwanese culture through a long process in which the academia played an important role.

Barbara Hendrischke (University of Sydney):

The *Yijing* in Daoist Ritual Traditions

Daoist ritual is here, following Schipper (1986) understood as recreating cosmic cycles that are in time and space defined by cosmological models. When Daoist beliefs and practices took form the presentation of such models was dominated by scholars who read the *Yijing* as a book of wisdom that was expressed in images and numbers. Direct traces of the *Yijing* can therefore be found in the setting up of the Daoist altar, in the paces of Yu by which the officiant passes from one realm of time and space to another, in dances for exorcistic and therapeutic purposes (Robinet 2008), in the officiant’s vestment and in various numerological arrangements (Zhan 2001). While we may assume that these traces certify a Daoist commitment to the *Yijing*’s view of and methods for achieving universal order, early and medieval Daoists paid little attention to this point.

Beverley McGuire (University of North Carolina Wilmington):

The *Yijing* in Chinese Buddhism

Chinese Buddhists have found meaning in the *Yijing* and written commentaries on it beginning in the Six Dynasties and especially in the Tang dynasty with Buddhists including Li Tongxuan (635-730), Fazang (643-712), Yixing (673-727), Chengguan (738-839), Zongmi (780-841), Dongshan Liangjie (807-869), and Caoshan Benji (840-901). They have used the *Yijing* for various purposes—as evidence to persuade a Chinese elite audience, a means of drawing them into Buddhist teachings, a resource for resolving philosophical quandaries, or a way to “know fate.” This paper discusses the range of approaches that Chinese Buddhists have taken towards the *Yijing* and the ways scholars have analyzed Buddhist commentaries on the *Yijing*, such as that of Ouyi Zhixu (1599-1655).



Adeline Herrou (LESC, Paris):

Chinese Taoist Temple Divination

This article focuses on the divination practices observed in Taoist temples in China today, in light of the existing literature on the subject across various regions and eras. In addition to addressing the variety of divination techniques performed in temples, detailed attention is given to the consultations to which they give rise, notably those involving the reading of oracles through the drawing of oracular sheets using bamboo sticks (*chouqian* 抽签), requests to divinities via divinatory blocks (*wengua* 问卦) that resemble a pair of small wooden objects in the shape of horns, and queries from the faithful using what is called the six lines method (*liuyao* 六爻), which involves the throwing of three Ancient Chinese coins. These practices, widespread to this day, raise the question of the limits of what is commonly called divination, or *zhanbu* 占卜, in China. The research will show that for Taoist masters themselves, in particular Quanzhen monks, the boundary between this aspect of their practice and that of astrology or “fate calculation” (*suanming* 算命) and physiognomy (*mianxiang* 面相), as well as Taoist medicine (*daoyi* 道医) and even the art of self-cultivation refinement (*xiulian* 修炼) is neither clear, nor fixed. Moreover, these activities are considered as a whole, with the advancement in meditation or the clairvoyance of a practitioner, for example, having a direct impact on the efficacy of the ritual carried out. Lastly, this article shows how divination practices form the basis of the ordinary ritual activity of a large number of temples, and are a vantage point to view all of society, through the difficulties of all kinds of a varied public encountered in sessions that are dedicated to communication between the faithful and the gods, most often through the intermediary of officiants.

Brigitte Bapandier (LESC, Paris):

‘Bitter Fate’ (*kuming* 苦命): Spirit Mediums and Divination in China

Much has been written on spirit mediums. They usually consider that they have a “bitter fate” due to the karma of their previous existences, and a short span of life that is extended through their transfer to the deity. All of them—be they “literary” and related to writing, or “martial”—have been chosen against their own will, by a god who borrows their body, to exorcize, heal, deliver oracles and practice divination, write talismans, or morality books. After having gone through periods of hardship, having calmed and cleared their mind, “oblivious of the self”, they become able to “penetrate numinosity”. They get to an intimate communion with their divine alter ego and, when getting in a trance, “deity and human become one”.

This paper will take into consideration these different points to question the nature of this training, this “elaboration” this meditation, this “souci de soi” or *epimelia*. The reasons for this asceticism—whose narrative may differ according to the gender—is always about conquering meaning. It sometimes leads the future medium to embarke on a story of one’s life.



Vincent Goossaert (EPHE, PSL):

Spirit-Writing and Postmortem Destiny

This paper will discuss the role of spirit-writing in self-divinization practices through history, from the Song to the contemporary period. It will argue that one of the reasons for the popularity of the spirit-writing practices was that they allowed for guarantee of the living practitioner's future salvation through promotion in the divine bureaucracy, and the postmortem confirmation of this promotion. It was therefore a powerful tool to deal with uncertainty with one's postmortem destiny. In the process it will discuss the connection between spirit-writing and Daoist ritual and theology, especially in the early stage of its development (12th-14th centuries).

Matthias Schumann (IKGF, Erlangen):

Spirit-Writing in 20th Century Redemptive Societies

The term redemptive societies refers to a number of new religious movements that arose during the Republican period (1911-1949). Combining a long-established tradition of self-cultivation and charity with new forms of social activism, these societies became the most vibrant sector within the Chinese religious sphere and claimed millions of members. The practice of spirit-writing played a vital role for their popularity and they were deeply implicated in the upsurge that this practiced experienced at the time. A number of redemptive societies emerged from local altars and transmitted their charters and religious scriptures through the practice. For the members, spirit-writing provided a sense of guidance and purpose, allowing them to question the deities on matters of personal importance. In special counselling sessions, they received information on deceased relatives, medical prescriptions, or messages of moral exhortation. The practice, however, also posed challenges. Usually, numerous altars co-existed within a society, making it difficult to impose ideological unity. This resulted in attempts to institutionalize spirit-writing and limit individual access. More fundamentally, the practice faced public scrutiny in a time of rising anti-superstition sentiments. Some societies therefore tried to reform the practice, promoting inquiries on matters of national interest and prohibiting divination on personal matters. However, with the takeover of the Nationalist Government, spirit-writing was prohibited as a "superstitious practice," which put many societies in legal jeopardy and forced them to go underground. This paper will explore these issues by focusing on a selected number of redemptive societies that have been comparatively well explored by scholars.



Grégoire Espeset (Groupe sociétés, religions, laïcités, Paris):

Temporality, Cognition and the Predictive Mode in Weft Confucian Discourse

An early tradition associates Confucius with the transmission of the “Classics” (in Chinese *jing*, literally the “warp” in woven fabric). But to the same figure another early tradition ascribes the writing of secret books to complement the Classics: the *wei* (literally the “weft” in woven fabric), called “Confucian Apocrypha”, “Han Apocrypha” or simply “Apocrypha” in Western publications. Due to repeated prohibition and physical destruction, this “Weft” corpus only partly survives today.

Brief introductory remarks will delineate the meaning of “prophecy” and “prophet” as European-language terms expressing a Western analytical category—a terminology that Sinologists using these terms usually neglect to clarify.

The core of the paper will focus on a selection of excerpts from the Weft corpus. These excerpts present narrative or discursive elements involving the various cognitive processes that enable Confucius to acquire knowledge and foreknowledge otherwise unobtainable: manipulative techniques, phenomenal observation, historical learning and dream interpretation.

In the light of the materials surveyed, concluding remarks will discuss the validity of Western representations of the Apocryphal Confucius as a “prophet” and of some Weft Confucian discourse as “prophecy”.

Dominic Steavu (University of California Santa Barbara):

Prophecy in Daoism

This paper surveys the role of prophecy in the history of Daoism. Following a chronological trajectory, it first examines the notional precursors and background against which prophecy came to occupy a crucial position in institutional Daoism. Building on the pre-existing ideal of the Great Peace and the figure of a divinized messianic Laozi, the early Daoist church of the Celestial Masters placed prophecy at the center of their soteriology. They relied on it as a source of unquestionable moral and spiritual authority, either buttressing the legitimacy of the state or--depending on which side of the ruling administration they fell on, more perilously--challenging it. Subsequent corpora of Six-Dynasties institutional Daoism, from the Three Sovereigns to Supreme Clarity and the Numinous Treasure elaborated on and modified the prophetic themes that constituted the Celestial Masters’ bread and butter. The medieval eschatological milieu in which Daoist prophecy flourished was one which also afforded space to Buddhist millenarianism. As a result, there was substantial cross-fertilization across sectarian lines. The popularity of apocalyptic soteriological prophecies (as well as their impact on political life) continued into the Tang, although their allure somewhat diminished towards the end of the dynasty. From the Song onward, the cultural relevance of Daoist prophecies has gradually waned in favor of omen lore or active divination methods that emphasize individual destiny rather than a shared collective fate.



Mario Poceski (University of Florida/IKGF):

Prophecy in Chinese Buddhism

The paper surveys the nature, scope, and function of major prophecies featured in Chinese Buddhist literature. It covers a wide range of sources, including prominent Mahayana scriptures, hagiographies of eminent monks, and Chan records. That includes narratives about the forthcoming appearance of Maitreya Buddha, the long-term decline of the Dharma, and the future unfolding of specific events such as the attainment of spiritual awakening, as well as premonitions about impending death and the afterlife. The paper also makes an effort to situate the provenance and diffusion of these tropes and storylines in relation to the pertinent historical contexts, and arrive at a preliminary assessment of their impact within and beyond Buddhism in China.

Jeffrey Kotyk (McMaster University):

Astrology and the Astral Pantheon in Medieval China

This paper will explore the introduction of foreign systems of astrology in addition to the astral pantheon (planets, zodiacs, lunar mansions, etc.) throughout medieval and middle-period Chinese history (fourth to sixteenth centuries). Indian astrology, based upon the *nakṣatras* or lunar mansions, was first introduced via translations of Buddhist texts. During the Tang period, particularly around the year 800, the art of horoscopy (the casting of natal charts) is first attested in China. We also see during this period the reconceptualization of the planets in Daoism as sentient gods to whom petitions and offerings could be made, in contrast to the earlier Chinese metaphysical system that interpreted the planets as insentient and elemental in nature. At the same time, we must recognize the parallel system of ancient celestial omenology that existed alongside foreign systems of astrology, particularly at the court in China. The present study will examine the interaction between these two systems with reference to Buddhist and Daoist texts, and the accounts of astrology and calendars presented in the dynastic histories. We will also discuss the mutable nature of fate in Chinese religious texts that deal with astrology, demonstrating that hard determinism was avoided in favor of a flexible concept of fate.