# 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

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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 *poàh-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 horoscopy techniques under the label *yucexue* (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":[4] *shushu* for heavenly sciences, calendar arts, and divination;[5] *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,[6] 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*),[7] 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.[8] 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

1997, 251).[9] 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."[11] 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*

*re*), imbued with cultural nationalism, and "*Book of Changes* fever" (*yixue re*). 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.[12] 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.[13]

### *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). Corpuses 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]

The few existing studies on Chinese astrology and horoscopy relate almost exclusively to the eight signs (*bazi*) method (Chao 1946; Lo 1996; Ho 2003b). Berthelet (2002) describes the so-called *ziping* method alongside consultation case studies. Manfred Kubny (2000), a researcher and practitioner who trained with a Taiwanese master, published a comprehensive study detailing the history, concepts, methods, and numerous practical examples of the *bazi* method. Meanwhile, Jean-Michel de Kermadec (1995), a French practitioner who trained in China, wrote a popular reference work on the *bazi* method entitled *Les piliers du destin: la chronomancie, expression de la vision chinoise du monde* (Pillars of Destiny: Chronomancy, a Manifestation of the Chinese Worldview).

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[16] 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.[17] 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.[18] 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).[19] Although working on contemporary divinatory practices remains a sensitive issue for mainland sociologists

and anthropologists,[20] 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,[21] 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 fortune-telling 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 (*bazi*, *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."[22] 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

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.[23] 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.[24] 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,[25] 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 horoscopy. 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.[26] Only gradually, by meeting practitioners, building a vocabulary, reading, and practicing horoscopy 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,[27] 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.[28]

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

Republican eras: spirit-writing, written-character analysis, astrology, physiognomy, and palmistry (Yang C.K. 1967, 259–61).

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]).
18. Liu Dajun's interpretations and commentaries on the *Book of Changes* are presented in Wang Dongliang's *Les signes et les mutations: une approche nouvelle du "Yi King": histoire, pratique et texte* (1995).
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 "worldview" (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).