

## INTRODUCTION

“Elite or popular, popular or elite?” So runs the plainchant nowadays in the choirs of sinology. It dimly echoes antiphonies sung by an earlier generation of European historians. There is comedy in this hot pursuit of virile popular culture by the academic elite. Twenty years ago, American sinologists began to struggle into a tweed straitjacket of “Great” and “Little” traditions woven (and subsequently discarded) by anthropologists long before. In its Chinese refitting, whatever appealed to the taste of these academic mandarins—Confucianism, the bureaucratic State—was Great. The rest (Buddhism, Taoism, “folk religion,” and “superstition” generally) was Little. Now a new wardrobe is being spun, and once-little traditions are in vogue. Yet slicing and segmenting are still of the essence, and sources must be accommodated to a narrow range of categories. Some American scholars have even produced rigid descending scales, from hyperelite to most utterly pop. On such Procrustes-machines for the splintering of Chinese culture and society, future generations of scholars are invited to martyrize their Chinese authors, texts, and audiences.

For these theoreticians, it is axiomatic that different social levels should be characterized by distinctive cultural traits. Despite their new jargon and brave show of statistics, this is only another variation on an old ditty. American academics used to identify Chinese authors as Confucian, Buddhist, or Taoist according to their phraseology, the texts they cited, the company they kept, or their political status. Religious affiliation was thought to have been a function of social class or official position; men were supposed to have been Confucian when in office, Taoist when unemployed. Every figure

in the Chinese historical landscape had to have some sectarian affiliation, and was packaged and labeled accordingly.

Such blatant projections of the Protestant conscience and the American suburban scene are no longer fashionable in Chinese studies. Nevertheless, certain recent emphases in transatlantic sinology can perhaps best be understood in the light of current American “liberal” manias, for example, agonized self-consciousness regarding minority groups. The American academic obsession with theories of oral versus written traditions, too, takes on color when we remember its setting, a country with compulsory education which is now being exposed to fearsome statistics confirming its prevailing illiteracy. No wonder if American professors attempt to resolve, for Imperial China, the very “problems” that threaten to engulf them in their own lecture halls.

Elite or popular society, written or oral culture? In the oracle texts presented here, we have a vast body of literature that belongs to both worlds. Such printed texts are often subjected to intensive oral exposition, as the medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman has shown. The dead letter and crabbed commentary come alive in the temple. And the written message itself often leads back into a vivid world of performance and entertainment. Some oracle sequences are shot through with allusions to characters and situations in historical tales, novels, and plays. They tacitly invite the person in quest of divine guidance to place himself or herself in the role of an historical or legendary exemplar and act accordingly. The solution to all one’s problems is found in a well-known precedent. Even as such-a-one long ago got out of *his* scrape, so now may *you*.

Wolfram Eberhard, a complete sinologist, was the first to recognize this aspect of modern Chinese oracles. Never daunted by bibliographic boundaries, Eberhard realized that this universally accessible form of divination mediated between Heaven and man by recourse to a full range of Chinese cultural properties. Its substance reflected the rich culture shared—not splintered—by all Chinese.

I have long believed that Chinese regional differences were always more significant than class distinctions. Yet how did “normative” Chinese culture spread so far, to be shared by so many? I suspect that our oracles may have much to reveal about this process. They are ubiquitous, and some have even crossed linguistic frontiers to bring a divinely inspired vision of Chinese culture to outsiders.

Rather than the New World ideal of perfection through segregation, we might instead think of the old centers of cities like Rome and Naples. There, different classes live in the same place, hear the same songs and the same noises, smell the same smells—but do so at different altitudes, from the *basso* upwards through the *piano nobile* and on into the garrets. Vertical stages, yes, according to ancestry, income, and social status. But also, a shared culture and countless references in common. Is this Italian cityscape closer to traditional East Asian realities? It is in any case a more pleasing picture.

*Anyone* may consult a Chinese temple oracle and draw from it whatever he/she wishes. What are the clientele getting? Conjectural answers have varied according to the investigator's disciplinary affiliations. Medical anthropologists tend to view the consultation as a kind of home-grown psychotherapy, a talking-cure. (Their attention is chiefly focused on the interaction between the querent and the layman, stationed in the temple, who interprets the responses.) Explanations favored by social anthropologists, sociologists, and social historians usually center on power relationships, or on the imposition of ethical codes: this, of course, from the standpoint of the oracle-givers, the ruling class, or ecclesiastical authorities. From the perspective of the querent or consumer, the main function of such mantic systems is often said to be the justification of random behavior. Outside the Chinese sphere, similar materials have been used to advantage by an even wider range of authorities. Economic historians have drawn conclusions about social classes and institutions from the lists of fixed questions that some oracles imposed on their users. Remarkably similar European and Middle Eastern divination systems have been profitably studied by historians of science and technology, art historians, literary historians, specialists in church history, bibliographers, and authorities on folklore and children's games.

I owe fealty to none of these disciplines, though I shamelessly, gratefully plunder them all. My own current fascination is with ritual, with patterned, theoretically repeatable behavior and its cultural epiphenomena. I believe that the study of history will be transformed as it increasingly comes to focus on such compulsory acts, their art, literature and technology, their place in society, their changes over time, and the elaborate intellectual machinery assembled to justify them. Consulting an oracle is a ritual, albeit a comparatively simple one. If we study this form of divination in the context of ritual, we may discover fresh perspectives to add to those already mentioned.

Consulting an oracle obviously involves posing a question and receiving an answer. This might seem to set divination apart from other forms of ritual, as a personal, individualized act. Yet question-and-answer sequences figure in many other ritual contexts. Riddling and recitation of enigmas formed part of Vedic ritual, and Rolf Stein has shown the importance of enigmas (*lde'u*) in the ritual culture of Tibet.<sup>1</sup> In a monastic context, the stylized postures and gestures of Tibetan monastic “debate” are familiar exoticisms, and similar ritual interrogations are still found in Japanese Tantric Buddhism, as well. In Lhasa during the Scapegoat Ceremony at the end of the second lunar month, a “debate” between a lama and the scapegoat was resolved by casting loaded dice: again, a matter of set questions-and-answers with a predetermined outcome. Among the Tamang, Tibetan people of Eastern Nepal, both liturgical and poetic enigmas appear in numerous ritual contexts, as Brigitte Steinmann has demonstrated.<sup>2</sup>

Like mock combat, questioning seems to be an important feature of many rituals. It may have been frozen in texts like the early Chinese “Heaven’s Questions” (*T’ien-wen*), where the original ritual matrix has long since been lost, or in the many folktales that hinge upon a series of questions rightly answered or “riddles wisely expounded.” There is always a right answer, but even wrong answers may usually be remedied by prescribed means. In some cases, superficially “wrong” answers may even be the right ones—so paradoxical is the initiate’s knowledge, when set against worldly common sense. A perplexing question may evoke an even more enigmatic answer, and through wordplay, figures of speech, or even sheer homophony, the dialogue may be raised to another plane of understanding.

In contrast to such ritual word-jousts, mantric questioning might seem to be much more open-ended. But every one of the written oracles we will be discussing is limited. Some comprise only twenty-eight answers, others a hundred, but even the prodigious Taoist sequence that contains 365 responses is still finite. To what extent will regular users have known a particular sequence almost by heart? How stereotyped were these responses for those who sought them? We find many cases in which the simplest, most fatuous oracles are enhanced by the most complex numerical means of access.

Many oracle texts seem so utterly vapid or inane that we must assume that procedure, or ritual context, takes precedence over content and substance. This can be seen, I think, even when divination has been built into the structure of larger rituals. The two major Tantric examples are Consecration

(*abhiṣeka*) and Oblation (*homa*). In both, dream-omens must be taken. Further, in Consecration, presages are drawn from sticks that the neophytes bite and then cast before them, while in Homa the officiant must scrutinize the flames and smoke. In theory, at least, these rituals could come grinding to a halt if the wrong signs turned up (as they often do, in literary accounts). But the prescriptive texts followed by all officiants not only list all the anticipated good and evil omens, but provide means for reversing unfavorable portents, as well.<sup>3</sup> As in all the other cases, the spectrum of responses is first severely limited by listing, then (in effect) made all but meaningless by ritual remedies. Such questioning is necessary, a bow to the will of the gods, but also somehow perfunctory: “ritual” in the weak sense of the term. The entire ritual sequence is compulsory—and asking questions about it in the middle may be an essential feature, a reaffirmation of divine complicity. The questions demand answers, but whether anything hangs on the response (or if any meaningful variation in response is permitted) is another matter. The question is asked, the answer is given, and the ritual goes on.

Sheer compulsion may help account for our oracles’ astounding ubiquity. Not only are they everywhere in China and Japan. As soon as we raise our eyes from the Chinese sources, we begin to discover similar systems of two-step divination all across Eurasia and in Africa. Literate societies abound in books of printed or written oracular responses, generally in verse. In nonliterate cultures, the same sort of operations go forward without a tangible text, yet the various bodies of memorized answers are apparently no less stable (or variable) than their written counterparts. Most of these systems are “two-step” in that they begin with some randomizing procedure for selecting one of the numbered responses, which must then be pondered and interpreted. Access to the encoded treasuries of divine wisdom is granted through a variety of means: drawing or casting lots (or dice, or cards, or coins), making marks in the sand, spinning wheels or tops, or sometimes even direct drawing from among the written answers themselves: single-step divination.

Some of the numeromantic methods of selection are so technologically idiosyncratic that they reveal genetic links among widely scattered mantric systems. The most remarkable example is *al-raml*, Islamic geomancy (also known as *Ars notoria*, *Sandkunst*, or *Punktierkunst*). Found throughout Islam from around the ninth century on, by the twelfth century it had

conquered Western Europe. In time this Islamic scribal magic, which greatly exercised the ingenuity of the learned, also exerted a powerful influence upon nonliterate societies in Africa and Madagascar. The tradition lives on in Islam and among European occultists too. It is this “geomantic” system of access that was used to unlock many of the oracles that we will be discussing.

Still, it is vital to remember (as T. C. Skeat has stressed) that the various means of access are essentially interchangeable, hence arbitrary. The triumphs of *al-raml* and its historians are impressive, but it should prove even more challenging to compare the oracles themselves. Effective cross-cultural approaches will have to be devised. One immediately thinks of analyzing that important subspecies of oracle which limits inquiries to a set list of questions. As T. C. Skeat and G. M. Browne have shown, such works are so structured, crafted with such premeditation, that once they have all been identified and compared, it should be possible to make meaningful statements about their affiliations.<sup>4</sup>

Study of mantic imagery, or thematics, is another attractive possibility. Birds, for example, make significant appearances in oracles everywhere, and not merely as poetic “symbols.” Different species preside over certain mantic sequences, which are organized under the aegis of “Twelve Birds” or “Thirty-Six Birds” (Kings, Judges, Prophets, or Apostles can also serve in this capacity). This naturally recalls a rich ornithomantic background: auspices from the flight or the song of birds, birds as messengers between the gods and men, the secret language of the birds (and the uncanny phenomenon of “talking” birds), egg-divination, and the origin of writing (according to Chinese tradition)—in the observation of bird-tracks. Living birds are still used to pluck forth oracle texts today (cf. p. 147, n. 14 of Chapter 1). This avian presence is also connected with the primordial role of arrows in divination. Arrows were once universally important—economically and politically—and underlie many games as well as mantic procedures. Though they have been outstripped in most technological applications, they still hold their own in Tibetan divination. Apart from birds and their analogues, the study of oracular animal-imagery in general could prove fruitful. It might well begin with those Central Asian systems in which animals seem to have played a primary role, but many other oracles abound in portentous fauna, from ancient Greece to modern China.

Most of our Chinese examples are offered to the public in religious establishments of one sort or another, and so belong to the genre commonly

known as temple oracles. Some of the same texts are also conveniently available in printed scriptures and almanacs, and each oracle normally stands under the patronage of a deity, whose words it represents. Obviously, religion plays a role in the origin and dissemination of these works. But which religion?

A small number of oracle texts were produced under explicitly Buddhist auspices. A few others were evidently created or diffused by Taoists. But very few indeed display, in their contents, any consistent ideological association with either of these two organized religions. Many oracles voice the conventional morality that formed part of ordinary Chinese official doctrine and education, but there are other sequences whose ethics, if any, must be deeply implicit or subliminal. Generally speaking, though found in temples, the oracles are not at all “religious” in tone. Nor are their divine patrons necessarily permanent fixtures. Some texts exhibit relative faithfulness to a single deity, but the same oracle may turn up with different patrons in different temples. Divine sponsorship may certainly illuminate some of the pathways of diffusion, but it is not an infallible guide. Most Chinese temples are owned not by a religion, but by the community. Temple affairs are in the hands of a committee of laymen, who invite ritual specialists in to officiate as needed. Function is foremost, “sectarianism” an afterthought. Our oracles are delivered in an entirely pragmatic world of ritual.

Mantic texts from medieval Central Asia suggest a similar state of affairs. Turks, Sogdians, Tibetans, and Chinese, all in their several tongues, had recourse to closely related, if not identical, oracle texts. The authorizing agencies were variously Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, and possibly Manichaean, and content was largely nondenominational. Some of these Central Asian oracles represent developments of Chinese models. But others ultimately derive, through India, from the Hellenistic world. At Tun-huang, Greek divination entered the realm of the *I-ching*, and all for the greater glory of a most diverse pantheon. The oracles furnish a clear example of ritual transcending any particular “religious” context: they are sponsored by all religions, but unique to none. Such facts of Asian life may contradict all our ideas about religion, and the “secular” nature of most oracle texts may seem grotesquely at odds with their “sacred” setting. But this tells us more about our own hackneyed categories than about oracles. Religion in traditional societies is no less (nor more) a matter of table, bed, or toilet than of temple. The alleged

dichotomy of Sacred and Secular is a romantic academic invention; the Idea of the Holy is a modern German myth.

This study obviously falls far short of completeness. As Norman Douglas was fond of quoting, "As we know a little more, we know a little less." As I followed up references and found unsuspected connections, I began to realize that for satisfactory results one would have to establish the history and genealogy of every extant oracle or oracle family. Before that, each text would need to be closely studied in its own cultural setting. To accomplish this even for the Chinese specimens was beyond my powers. To mask this impotence, I have indulged in a cross-cultural mantic orgy.

The full task before us involves more than genealogy, textual history, and literary analysis. Even though divination is a genre of ritual and works (or so I believe), according to special, compulsive rules, its social function must also be investigated in every historical context that fosters it. So far, the explanation advanced by scholars of China seems partial and incomplete. Despite recent attempts at rapprochement, the matter and methods of anthropology and history remain distinct. The paradox of temple oracles is particularly instructive. They represent a "popular" phenomenon within a living oral tradition, and thus call for fieldwork and direct observation. Yet they also embody a written tradition, with a venerable, complex, and copious documentation in Classical Chinese. Neither pure history nor pure anthropology can adequately account for them, and though philology, too, may have a role to play, it is even more limited. Historians who forget that oracles are still alive will miss precisely that "oral" element which they now crave. But even those anthropologists of China who cogently defend studies grounded in the present tense are not necessarily working in the light of the best examples.

In the past several decades, the most extensive anthropological research on divination has been carried out by Africanists. I will take a single outstanding study: Alfred Adler and Andras Zempléni, *Le Bâton de l'aveugle; divination, maladie et pouvoir chez les Moundang du Tchad*.<sup>5</sup> First, the authors deal with divination proper: the Mundangs' *kindani* system and its technique, the relevant deities, and the diviners themselves. Their second section addresses the relations of divination with disease, and sets oracle-consultation in the context of traditional medicine. The third part of the book discusses divination and power, and analyzes the role of oracles in the social hierarchy and the diviner's function in the rain-magic that is vital to political control.



The materials, methods and personnel of divination, its associations with healing, and its place in society generally (occult knowledge as a fulcrum of power) all these exactly correspond to the three classes of information which we should seek to draw from our oral and written Chinese sources. Adler and Zempléni have demonstrated the autonomy of oracles in the treatment of disease. Healing is the principal focus of divination, but the inquiry is normally carried out in the patient's absence. The oracles explain the illness and reveal directions for carrying out the possession rituals that serve as treatment. Among the Mundang, divination first generates a diagnosis, then produces specific ritual instructions. Adler and Zempléni speculate that the role of oracles in directing the "colleges of possessed women" who perform the cures is related to the ambiguous social status of such feminine institutions. Divine authority acquired by mantic means protects women officiants from potential censure and other negative consequences of their uncertain position in the hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> In illustrating the function of oracles as mediators between groups of differing status and authority, these anthropologists have shown divination to be a major force in social history.

On the face of it, one could hardly find a setting more remote from traditional China than among the Mundang of Chad. But the interest of *kindani* divination for the sinologist is enhanced by a quirk of cultural history. The Mundangs' oracle belongs to the vast family of mantic procedures derived from geomancy, and Adler and Zempléni devote one chapter to a systematic comparison of *kindani* and classical Islamic geomancy, *al-raml*. Of course this has nothing to do with the Chinese topology (*feng-shui*), which is often called "geomancy" in the West. Yet some scholars have suggested that *al-raml*, the most widespread and prestigious mantic method of the Middle Ages, was originally inspired by the *I-ching*. Whatever one may think of the genetic hypothesis, there are certainly remarkable structural parallels between the two systems.

In the end, even the unwritten African oracles testify to the extraordinary potency of writing. The scribal tradition of Islam (a "Religion of the Book"), with its superior magic, generated a profusion of related mantic systems among nonliterate Africans. The written oracle is obviously not hindered by cultural and linguistic frontiers, and can even create oral tradition. And if written oracles work these wonders across such vast distances, imagine how much more powerful they must be within the confines of Chinese society, where writing is sacred even among the illiterate (ingested, it is a panacea).

Our Chinese oracles have been borne upon most of the materials that have carried Chinese script. Ancient texts were written on bamboo strips—like tally-sticks or lots—which were then bound into bundles to form a consecutive text. With the invention of paper, paper became their medium, though in the fifth century, the first Chinese Buddhist oracle was meant to be written on strips of silk. We do not know when they began to be printed, but a thirteenth-century Buddhist incunabulum survives. Apart from the *Book of Changes*, was any Chinese oracle ever graven in stone (like their distant Greek analogues in Asia Minor)? Printed paper is their chosen vehicle throughout East Asia today.

Clearly, writing was vital to the genesis of this form of divination. Such oracles developed at a time when ultimate spiritual and political authority had come to be identified with the written word. Whether embodied in the venerable *Book of Changes* (which opens the canon of Confucian scriptures) or in flimsy printed divination-slips at a friendly neighborhood temple, the written oracle is intrinsic to Chinese culture. Léon Vandermeersch has even suggested that the parallel style which dominates all Classical Chinese literature may derive from ancient mantic texts.<sup>7</sup> In medieval China we can trace the subsequent progress of script as, like a possessed medium, it transforms itself into a god. This study of written oracles is presented as a tentative chapter in the greater history of the apotheosis of writing and the cult of the book.

That I have been able to get even this far in mantic studies is due to the prior work and current help of others. This book's dedication to the memory of Wolfram Eberhard is entirely fitting. Eberhard's studies of temple oracles are fundamental, and represent only a small portion of his pioneering research in every area of Chinese social and cultural history. Eberhard was also a valued friend during long years of struggle in what was then the Department of Oriental Languages at Berkeley.

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