

"A Living Tradition": Tracing Chinese Character Divination from Imperial China to Contemporary Taiwan

Anne Schmiedl

Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg

Abstract

Humans have found different ways of dealing with uncertainties about the course of future developments. One way of dispelling these doubts is the invention and application of divinatory methods. Divination has been an important part of the religious life of many societies from early on – to understand the course of future events and the will of the gods, the Romans practiced divinatory observation of birds, augury, and the Greeks referred to the Oracle of Delphi to navigate insecurities in life. Indeed, examples are numerous and could be continued *ad infinitum*.

Similarly, a broad repertoire of methods to predict the future can be observed in Sinophone countries as well. Divination as a religious practice has played an important role in Sinophone societies from early on and its importance continues until today. Throughout Chinese imperial history, people from all walks of life trusted in these methods: emperors, statesmen, and commoners used them, in order to resolve doubts and fears regarding future developments. Most Chinese methods of divination have a long-standing history of a thousand or more years and are still in use today – the most famous example is prediction based on the Classic of divination, the Zhouyi 周易 (Changes of Zhou). The popularity of divinatory methods continues in Sinophone countries today: multiple popular publications for interested laypeople appear each year, numerous fortune-tellers practice their art, and the topic of divination is discussed excessively in internet forums and blogs.

But divination has also become a focus of scholarly research. Research Institutes that study divination in an academic context are receiving rising attention in recent years. Examples for such institutes include the “Centre for Zhouyi and Ancient Chinese Philosophy” (Yixue yu zhongguo gudai zhexue yanjiu zhongxin 易学与中国古代哲学研究中心) at Shandong University (Shandong daxue 山东大学) in Jinan 济南 or the “International Consortium for Research in the Humanities ‘Fate, Freedom and Prognostication’” at Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg. The formation of divination as its own field of research can probably be most clearly seen in the creation of the “International Society for the Critical Study of Divination” and the inauguration of the “International Journal of Divination and Prognostication” (published by Brill) later this year.

This paper contributes to the growing field of research on divination as a religious practice. It takes one method of divination, the “fathoming of Chinese characters”, *cezi* 測字, as an example to prove the continued significance of divination by tracing it from imperial Chinese sources to its contemporary application in Taiwan. In this divinatory method, Chinese characters are analysed and manipulated according to a number

of different techniques (often relying on the graphic structure or phonetic value of the characters) to obtain insights into the future. The knowledge gained from this analysis is then used as a basis to judge a specific situation in the material world.

The paper first gives an overview of the development of the method of Chinese character divination in imperial China and shows that its roots can be traced back to the Sui 隋 dynasty (581 – 618). The paper then describes the method and its specific techniques in imperial China by analysing manuals from the Ming 明 (1368 – 1644) and Qing 清 (1644 – 1911) dynasties. Finally, the paper juxtaposes these findings with the reality of Chinese character divination today. In order to do so, the paper relies on fieldwork carried out in 2014 and 2015 in Taiwan. During this time period, the author visited and consulted 15 practitioners of character divination in different parts of Taiwan, prompting each of them with the same Chinese character for a divinatory analysis. The paper presents the contemporary application of the method and shows that many techniques used today can be traced back to the sources from imperial China. The paper proves the continued significance of Chinese character divination as a living tradition and therefore contributes to the study of religion in Sinophone countries.