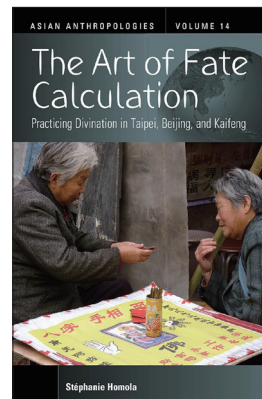


of cognitive framing that provides ‘a spatial and temporal bonding of a set of interactive messages’” (p. 10). In Chapter Seven, Liu introduces the funeral of a Protestant, where the promotion of “true self” disrupts the pluralistic framework of the ritual and the pluralistic subjectivity participating in it. Protestant rituals, in fact, mirror the singular-value ideals of socialism.

In this solid ethnography, Liu provides valuable material on how contemporary Chinese death rituals are conducted, significantly enriching our understanding of contemporary Chinese society. However, I think the book may also have some limitations. Firstly, Liu seems overly preoccupied by the cognitive framing (borrowing Bateson’s terminology) of mainstream American anthropology – such as the binary opposition between state-vertical and social-relational, individualisation, marketisation and neoliberalism, religious revival, plural values, etc. Problematisation based on her rich ethnographic material might lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of contemporary China. For instance, the transformation of the funeral industry may reflect how the state is imagined by diverse social actors and infiltrates their daily lives, rather than being a top-down monolithic entity. Secondly, although the book title mentions “making persons” and Liu repeatedly discusses the construction of subjects, the examination of rituals often occurs in isolation. The inclusion of longitudinal case studies that would delve into the ordinary lives of families around death might have deepened our understanding of how the citizens of contemporary Shanghai – a city that boasts of being the most civilised and modernised in China – forge their understanding of life and subjectivity through death. This book is recommended for readers interested in social changes in China, particularly how death rituals are shaped by state governance and marketisation.

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The Art of Fate Calculation: Practicing Divination in Taipei, Beijing, and Kaifeng.
New York: Berghahn Books.

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Divination is a classical topic in anthropological research. In contemporary China, as well as in many other societies, divination remains highly popular: it has not been thoroughly marginalised but is instead a very common and everyday behaviour. In this light, several ethnographic works in recent years have focused on the practices of divination in contemporary China (Li 2019; Matthews 2021). Homola’s book is the third in this vein to be published by Berghahn Books.

This book presents a comprehensive ethnographic study of the resurgence of divinatory customs, examining the practice of divination as a societal institution and an intellectual endeavour. The author puts together various elements that are typically examined in isolation: the role of divination experts, the behaviours of clients, the methods of divination, and the intellectual and political history of these practices. Homola’s ethnographic research, spanning 2007–2011, is presented through three field investigations in Taipei, Beijing, and Kaifeng, each revealing different aspects of divination: technological history, legal status of practitioners, and knowledge dissemination, respectively.

This review will focus on three key highlights of Homola’s work: the role of scepticism in divination, the dissemination of divinatory knowledge, and the social relationships reflected in divinatory practices.

First, a great part of the book consists in the demonstration of scepticism in divination. This scepticism may come from the customers towards the diviners, or from the diviners towards their peers. Homola reveals that the concepts of fate and confidence in divinatory practices are not prerequisites for engagement but rather outcomes of an ongoing reflective process. Citing Severi (2015), she takes belief as a link formed between a representation and the believer: she shows how the belief in fate derives from the manner in which fate-related information circulates in Taiwanese society, either in social conversations or in discussions with diviners. Through their experiences with divination, Homola’s informants communicated

to her the development of this connection: their evolving comprehension of it as a form of knowing and their discernment of what constitutes accuracy (*zhun* 準) or the lack thereof.

Research on the dissemination of knowledge in Chinese divination has always been lacking. Hence another significant contribution of Homola's work is her comparative discussion of two modes of knowledge production and dissemination in Chinese divination. The traditional method, primarily based on oral transmission and personal mentor-disciple relationships, is contrasted with the modern academic approach, which is public, standardised, and utilises handbooks aimed at the general public.

According to Homola, the elements characterising the "modern scientific model" (p. 123) are: organising and systematising information; eliminating superstitious or magical elements; and demystifying divinatory systems by articulating their underlying logic. In contrast, access to divinatory knowledge in traditional mode occurs primarily by word-of-mouth instruction via the master-student bond. Practitioners learn divinatory techniques through oral transmission and a pattern of "pre-determined affinity," initiation journey, and live exchange of knowledge and legends (p. 234). The quality of the skills learned matters less than the personal appropriation and effective application of these techniques in daily life.

Finally, another inspiring argument made by Homola concerns the social relationship reflected by divinatory theories and practices, and the connection she builds between this and Fei Xiaotong's concept of the "differential mode of association." Homola maintains that divinatory interpretations are neither amoral nor immoral but are shaped by the contextual morality attached to the differential mode of association, primarily based on self-cultivation. Further, she points out that horoscopy techniques are a tool that helps to fulfil the individual's most basic duty, that is, moral obligations towards oneself, on which the social order as a whole is based.

However, Homola argues in another place (p. 166) that personal perspectives or interests are the sole criterion for interpreting horoscopes. In this sense, she points out that the discourse of divination seems strangely amoral, that is, detached from any explicit value system. This contradiction indicates that Homola's definition of morality is ambiguous. Divination predictions that serve personal interests are both self-serving and egocentric, yet they are also rooted in a social value system. Therefore, it is difficult to categorically say whether divination is moral or morally indifferent.

Homola's ethnographic studies indicate that the understanding of fate calculation is spread across a spectrum of varied intermediary scenarios that are integral to learning processes and knowledge dissemination. The wide range of individuals encompassed by this spectrum could explain the pervasive diffusion of a shared lexicon concerning human fate throughout different strata of society and among various Chinese communities. Nonetheless, Homola argues, this does not equate to a homogenous, universally accepted perspective on life or an established, uniform body of knowledge.

Here, I am a little puzzled by Homola's argument that the divinatory knowledge resists uniformisation. Homola shows that Chinese people actually have many divergent views on fate. But does this complex view of fate lead to resistance against the uniformisation of divination? While Homola presents insightful observations, one aspect that could perhaps be further explored is the connection

between the great and small traditions, as they are considered somewhat separately in her analysis. There has been classic research on the standardisation of Chinese beliefs conducted by people like James Watson (1985). Similar to their views, I believe that divination is also facing standardisation and that this force comes from the "great tradition." People can find the principles of Confucian ethics between the lines of divination manuals. Some of the extrapolation rules of fortune-telling technology are also defined according to kinship relations in a patriarchal family, such as the relationship between father and son.

Taken as a whole, *The Art of Fate Calculation* is a very comprehensive ethnographic work on the practice of divination in contemporary Chinese societies. Its themes are rich, covering all aspects of divination, including history, legality, techniques, clients, institutions, social relations, and the transmission of knowledge. Moreover, it spans two different social contexts in Taiwan and Mainland China, with scenes ranging from the streets to the classroom, from divinatory texts to oral conversations. For researchers studying contemporary Chinese beliefs and the general practice of divination, this is a very good and timely reference book.

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