1 Introduction

> Now I am aware of no people, however refined and learned or however savage and ignorant, which does not think that signs are given of future events, and that certain persons can recognize those signs and foretell events before they occur.
>
> Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.2

We live today in an intellectual climate of particularism. In an effort to focus on the unique features of individual cultures, we tend to reject the idea of cultural universals as products of an imperialistic age, in which hegemonic cultures painted the canvas of the world with their own values in the guise of universalism. Nonetheless, one of the few things that can still stand as a human universal is concern about the future (however understood), as Cicero put it two millennia ago. And divination has been an important manifestation of that concern from the earliest times to the present day. Divination is a deliberate search for understanding of the *hidden* significance of events in the future, present, or past. (If it were obvious, there would be no need to divine.) In some cases it involves two parties: a diviner (with particular gifts, training, or even lack of training) and some kind of extra-human contact that makes divination possible. This may be a god, spirit, or ancestor, or (and there is argument about this point) a cosmic pattern without deliberative divine agency. The contact might be indirect, mediated by a system of signs requiring interpretation, for example when questions are put to signs present in nature, but perceptible only to those with appropriate gifts.

Scholars use the term "divination" in different ways, to refer to a range of interpretive activities. At one end are deliberate queries; at the other end are spontaneous natural phenomena that are visible to all. Some such events, eclipses for example, are so visible and unusual as to demand explanation. Others are unremarkable, save for those who can "read" their hidden significance. But whether predicting the future or interpreting events or signs in the past or present, divination purports to interpret the hidden significance of events.

Some scholars restrict the term "divination" to deliberate activities. Divination can be characterized as a deliberate search for answers, and linked to the production of artificial signs. In this sense it contrasts with oracles that refer to signs already inherent in nature (and interpreted by specialists). It also contrasts with omens: natural phenomena that are visible to all and significant enough to demand explanation.[1] I use the terms divination and mantic activity inclusively to refer to activities seeking to find the meaning of hidden phenomena, objects or events in the past, present, or future, whether or not divinatory signs are understood as direct or indirect communications by a divine entity directly addressed. Divination thus overlaps with prognostication, which also is concerned with predicting both future events and good and ill auspice. Some modes of divination presuppose a diviner and a topic of inquiry. It may, but need not, involve interaction with a god or other extra-human contact. Or divination may rely entirely on a hermeneutic system of signs, with no divine agency implied. It is also necessary to consider a range of textual genres that deal with divination in very different ways.[2] Divination thus may, but need not, involve prediction. Depending on its predictive methods – its use of observation, search for regularity, etc. – it may or may not be science or proto-science.

Because the term "divination" may be culturally specific, I prefer the term "mantic activity" in a comparative context and prognostication (*zhanbu* 占卜) in a specifically Chinese context (of activities concerned with prediction).[3] Nonetheless, at times I use "divination" for ease of expression, familiarity, or for consistency with other scholarship. The term "oracle" is sometimes used to refer to all mantic practice, but I use it in the specific sense of a shrine of one or more deities who spoke "through" an oracle. I use the term "spirit medium" for practitioners who are possessed by gods or spirits, as distinct from shamans, who actively engage in spirit journeys in order to encounter gods and spirits. In a Greek context I use the term primarily to refer to the seer or *mantis* (plural *manteis*), but also for oracles, temples (primarily of Zeus, Apollo, and Asclepius) which provided divinatory information to local and sometimes non-local consultors.

[1] This is the distinction used in Michael Loewe's pioneering study (1981: 38–39).

[2] For recent uses of the term "divination" that focus on its hermeneutic aspects, rather than explicit interactions with a "divinity," see Flad 2008: 403–37. For approaches to divination as a form of risk management, see Fiskesjö 2001: 154–57 and Eidinow 2007a.

[3] In its earliest uses, the term *bu* 卜 referred specifically to pyromantic "cracking," but the term later came to be used of all mantic activity.

Where do the signs come from? They have been variously understood as the will of the gods, fate, and patterns of nature or cosmic principles. In contexts where divination took the form of communication with divine agencies, there is a fine line between asking about a future outcome ("Will it rain on Tuesday?") and requesting it ("May it rain on Tuesday!").

Mantic activity concerns the future, either as direct prediction or because patterns in the past and present have future ramifications. To what extent does the notion of predictability imply that events are necessary, inevitable, or predetermined? Reflection on this implication became an important element in debates about divination.[4] For example, knowledge of our individual genetic predispositions does not predetermine our futures or life spans. It does tell us governing tendencies we may choose to encourage or minimize.

Another view is that the codes of divination are direct communications from benevolent gods, and are best understood as straightforward, useful instructions, like a railway timetable or a cookbook, which we read for limited and useful purposes, to optimize our behavior to conform to the way the world works. A railway timetable does not make the train arrive (and has nothing to do with causation); it does allow one to be on the platform on time.[5] We do not consult the *Joy of Cooking* to change the cooking time of bread or rice, but to make sure it will be ready in time for supper.

Divination, rationality, and modernity

As a mode of prediction, divination has typically been regarded as primitive superstition (religious or otherwise) or as a pseudoscience to be disparaged and debunked. That situation changed with the work of Bronislav Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who in very different ways explored the rationality of magic and myth.[6] A series of studies over the past two decades have focused on important sociological and epistemological dimensions of divination, both in antiquity and in the present. It emerges as a set of coherent technologies for predicting (and potentially controlling) the future, and as a set of social practices whose importance extended far beyond telling the future.

Several studies of divination in Greco-Roman antiquity (or "Classical antiquity," usually meaning the ancient Mediterranean) have examined the

[4] This issue is discussed in Chapter 9. [5] I take this example from Denyer 1985: 4.
[6] E.g. Malinowski 1954, Lévi-Strauss 1963.

mutual influences of divination practices in Greece, Rome, and Etruria, with some attention to possible Egyptian and Babylonian influences. The first of these was Auguste Bouché-Leclercq's (1842–1923) *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*, a monumental study of divination in the Hellenic, Etrurian, and Roman worlds. Meanwhile, the study of mantic practices in China has been transformed over the course of the twentieth century: first by the recognition of the true nature of the so-called "oracle bone" inscriptions of the Shang dynasty and more recently by the ongoing excavation of a wide variety of texts, instruments, and other material evidence of Chinese divination practices. (Dates of dynasties and important figures are given in the Reference Tables.)

The entire problem of divination was reconsidered in Jean-Pierre Vernant's landmark volume, *Divination et rationalité* (1974), which focused on the rationality and coherence of divination and its significance in the formation of social institutions. Vernant approached divination in its dual role as both a set of mental attitudes and a set of social institutions.[7] The project of *Divination et rationalité* was to show how the symbolic operations of diviners and the rational system behind them imposed their rationality and legitimacy on the intellectual and social fabric of those societies. What kind of rationality expresses itself in the play of divinatory procedures, oracular symbolisms, and the classificatory systems they employ to manipulate and interpret information? What is the place and function of this oracular knowledge in a given society? Recognition of the importance of the social role of divination invites many other questions. What domains of society were under the authority of divination, and where were diviners in the hierarchy of members of a society who wield the power of decision, such as kings, priests, or judges? The possibility and act of prophecy themselves created important choices that determined decisions on both public and private matters. In the Homeric world, divination was a craft or metier; the diviner was a worker for the public good (*demiourgos*) like the carpenter or physician.[8] Vernant emphasized the "normalcy" of both aspects of divination in civilizations where it was central. It was not an isolated mentality, opposed to such "ordinary" social practices as law, medicine, or administration, but rather a coherent part of social thought (like consulting a physician or a stockbroker). By contrast, despite its actual popularity, divination has the character of a marginal aberrance in societies where it is not prominent (such as ours), and it could be argued that this marginality is a hallmark of modernity. Anthony Giddens adopts a similar perspective

[7] Vernant 1974b: 9. [8] Cf. *Od.* 17.382–85. See Vernant 1974b: 12.

in his distinction between "modern" notions of risk and earlier notions of fate, fortune, and divine intervention.[9]

Several collected studies have begun to address mantic activity in cross-cultural perspective. Two French collections, the third issue of the journal *Kernos* (1990; articles cited under their authors) and *Oracles et Prophéties dans l'Antiquité* (1997), addressed highly focused aspects of divination across Classical antiquity. Initial comparative studies, reflecting this focus on Classical antiquity, compared Greek oracular divination with oracles in several African societies without extensive written traditions of reflective thought that provided textual counterparts to the Greek textual record. André Caquot and Marcel Leibovici's more ambitious study, *La Divination: Études recueillies* (Divination: Collected Studies, 1968), published under the aegis of the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), surveyed divination in both the ancient and modern world: Pharaonic Egypt, Babylonia, and Israel; India and Iran; Greece, Etruria, and Rome; the Celts, Germans, and Slavs; ancient China, Peru, and North America; modern Mexico and the Maya; the Arctic, Central Asia, and the Turks; sub-Saharan and South Africa, Madagascar, and contemporary Afro-American and French practices, including thematic studies on psychoanalysis and geomancy. Michael Loewe and Carmen Blacker's edited volume *Oracles and Divination* (1981) provides greater Asian focus, with essays on divination in China, Japan, and Tibet. But because each volume assigns one chapter to a culture or civilization, the chapters are necessarily general. Leo Howe and Alan Wain's edited volume, *Predicting the Future* (1993), takes a different approach, and includes essays by contemporary practitioners of prediction, including scientists, economists, and physicians. These essays suggest that predictions are the products of elites. They are normative and reflect the worldviews and cultures from which they arise.[10]

There are several reasons for the choice of China and Greece as comparanda. They begin with comparability of intellectual productions and social institutions. By such measures as textual production, evidence of intellectual debate and self-reflection, state formation, or technological advancement, China was of comparable or greater sophistication to Greece, a point that was first argued by the Jesuit Matteo Ricci in his journals from his mission to China in the sixteenth century.[11] Comparison of China and Greece has an important twentieth-century history in the work of Vernant,

[9] Giddens 1990: 29–31. [10] For further discussion see Morrison 1993.
[11] Ricci (1910–13), 1.5.22 and 1.10.85–86.

Finley, and Detienne; and several contemporary scholars engage in comparison of this kind.[12] The study of Classical antiquity is also beginning to emerge as a discipline in China.[13] Second, an important intellectual advantage of such comparison is that one historical and philosophical context effectively "parochializes" the other.[14] Third, comparison can show what elements are constant across divination methods and cultures. Comparative studies of divination by Classicists have focused on African oracles, with little attention to the Chinese evidence, which is textually and materially rich. Chinese material may shed light on phenomena that in the Greek context are fragmented or that only appear in literary sources. Fourth, Greek classifications have been constitutive of understandings of what divination is and how it should be classified. (This point is discussed at length in Chapter 3.) Fifth, both the Chinese and Greek materials present the problem of reconciling the received textual tradition with the evidence of archaeology. In summary, scholars of Chinese and Greek divination have much to learn from each other.

Systematic studies of Chinese mantic activity are far fewer than for Greco-Roman antiquity. An exception is Richard J. Smith's *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers* (1991), which demonstrates both the antiquity and pervasiveness of mantic practices in Chinese culture, and argues that its continuing popularity and prevalence is in part due to its links with the past, and with fundamental elements in Chinese culture. In the brief comparative reflections that conclude the book, he notes that modern Western comparative works on divination tend to focus on "dead" divinations such as ancient Greece or Mesopotamia, or on "primitive" or "occult" marginalized countercultures.[15] An eponymous successor to *Divination et rationalité* applies the agenda of Vernant's original volume to early China.[16]

Both the universality of the problem of the future and the diversity of ways of gauging it invite comparison of Chinese and Greek mantic practices and theories, which emerge early in the extensive textual traditions of both societies. Both societies present a wide range of evidence of the origins, techniques, and social and intellectual contexts of mantic activity. Their differences partake of broad problems of cultural commensurability that are

[12] See Finley 1975, Vernant 1974a, and Detienne 2000, 2001, and 2002, all discussed in Chapter 3. The work of Geoffrey Lloyd (1996, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2007; Lloyd and Sivin 2002) is also especially important. For a recent review of comparative studies of Greece and China see Tanner 2009.

[13] Peking University inaugurated a Center for [Greco-Roman] Classical Studies in November 2011, the first institution of its kind in China.

[14] For this point see Lloyd 1996.

[15] R. J. Smith 1991: 271–81.

[16] Chemla, Harper, and Kalinowski 1999.

matters of heated debate across several scholarly disciplines. All these add to the challenge, and interest, of finding a framework within which to consider divination across cultures.

Nor has our rationalist age made divination obsolete. Even if it is not quite respectable, it is immensely popular. Horoscopes appear on the pages of many, but not all, newspapers and magazines. We find them in the *New York* or *Los Angeles Times*, but not in the *Wall Street Journal*; in magazines aimed at women and young people, but not in *Nature* or *Scientific American*.[17] A variety of polls attest to the ongoing popularity of astrology. During the real-estate boom of the past years, some knowledge of the Chinese geomantic techniques of *feng shui* 風水 (literally "wind and water") became a practical necessity for real-estate brokers in major American cities. And in the current financial decline, fortune-tellers of various kinds continue to do a brisk business. The methods used today may differ from those used in antiquity, but divination is alive and well.

The apparatus of mantic practice is equally visible in Asian cosmopolitan cities. In Hong Kong, fortune-tellers are to be found near any temple. Mantic texts are for sale in street markets, in both modern paperbacks and real or pseudo-antique editions. Divination software sits side by side with Microsoft (and may be equally reliable). Marriages may be made, prevented, or ruined by it, even among young urban professionals. Science fiction and popular cinema abound with images of destiny and attempts to foreknow or forestall it.

By contrast, the People's Republic of China has tried to suppress divination under the rubric of "superstition" (*mi xin* 迷信). Although the Chinese Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, this protection is limited to the five officially recognized religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Protestantism, and Islam). In some cases, divination is specifically prohibited, for example in a Shanghai ordinance against divination, fortune-telling, and other similar practices in places of religious worship.[18] Campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s and most recently in 1991 attacked the use of the *Yi jing* for divination.[19] Nevertheless, fortune-telling is widely practiced in contemporary China. Diviners are found on the streets and, as in Western cities, take advantage of popular tourist sites (Figures 1.1–1.3).

[17] For an excellent treatment of the broad history of astrology, with focus on Greco-Roman antiquity, see Barton 1994a and 1994b.

[18] Article 28, Regulations from the Shanghai Religious Affairs Bureau, Standing Committee of the 10th People's Congress of Shanghai, December 1995 (Spiegel 1997 and Human Rights Watch Asia 1997: 94). According to Human Rights Watch, the government is more tolerant of geomancy and fortune-telling than of divination, palm-reading, or casting lots, but the degree of censure varies by locale. For more on "feudal superstition" in China see Feuchtwang 1989.

[19] Foreign Broadcast Information Service (China), 9 Oct. 1991 and 22 Dec. 1995.

Figure 1.1 Mantic practitioners: Mount Song (Henan, 2010).

Figure 1.2 Mantic practitioners: Shanghai, 2010.

Figure 1.3 Mantic practitioners: Paris, 2009.

Bookstores abound with mantic texts. Even venues with limited shelf space, such as airport book stalls, sell them in abundance.

Intellectual contexts

What were the key intellectual contexts for the mantic arts of early China and Greece? What beliefs about the world made it possible? Cross-cultural study reveals the extent to which divination is an artificial category. The diversity of mantic practice and belief in both cultures makes it difficult to introduce one definition, because divination simply was not a unified concept in either culture.

What major principles and beliefs governed Chinese and Greek divination practices? One aspect of this question is the changing religious, philosophical, or cosmological principles that informed mantic practices during different historical periods. Another is the nature and degree of self-conscious reflection about mantic activity and its preconditions. A third is how the Greeks and Chinese themselves classified, discussed, or debated their own mantic beliefs. Assumptions about epistemological and ethical aspects of divination reflect their views on such questions as: the extent to which the future is determined, the possibility of foreknowledge, the transparency of the cosmos, the nature of the gods (or ancestors), their degree of interest in human affairs, and their accessibility to human intercession.

Several beliefs and assumptions informed the history of Chinese divination.

(1) Auspicious Times. The notion of good and ill auspice (*ji xiong* 吉凶), that certain times were propitious or inauspicious for certain activities, was central to Chinese mantic and ritual practice. Techniques to identify the best time for important activities remain in use in the present day. Textual records attest to the importance attached to the selection of auspicious times for both state and private activities. Calendric texts were used to determine auspicious days for state ritual activities such as sacrifice, warfare, royal marriages, and beginning the construction of a new palace or capital. Archaeological evidence from recently discovered manuscripts excavated from tombs underscores the ritual character of a wide variety of governmental activity, including the daily functioning of court, law cases, and administration. An important aspect of all these activities was the determination of auspicious times to conduct them. Similarly, warfare was considered a ritual activity, and divination was used both to select an auspicious time to initiate military activity and to gauge its chances of success. As mantic techniques proliferated among the broader population, almanac texts, in the form of daybooks and calendric tables, were used to select auspicious times for marriage, construction, travel, or beginning medical treatment. (The importance of selecting an auspicious day for a high religious or political occasion is by no means unique to the Chinese mantic traditions. The first Queen Elizabeth is said to have consulted the astrologer and polymath John Dee to determine an auspicious date for her coronation.)

(2) Systematic Thought and Cosmology. Another aspect of Chinese mantic thinking was the possibility that a sage "reader" could perceive pervasive connections and systematic correspondences between aspects of a cosmos in constant change.[20] Several concepts are important here. First is the idea of interactions of time and space (*yu zhou* 宇宙), especially the correlation of areas of the world to the seasons of the year and periods of time such as the sexagenary cycle (*ganzhi* 干支, the combinations of Ten Heaven Stems and Twelve Earth Branches). Second is the idea of a cosmos composed of *qi* 氣. Third is an understanding of cosmic change, based on the interactions of *yin* and *yang* 陰陽 and the Five Agents (*wuxing* 五行), and interactions between

[20] Kaltenmark and Ngo Van Xuyet 1966: 334–37.