Which Gods if Any
Gods, Cosmologies, and Their Implications for Chinese and Greek Divination
Lisa Raphals

Until quite recently, most of the comparisons used by Classicists to understand oracular divination have focused on African oracles, and especially on their social roles. With few exceptions, this comparative turn has not extended to China, and this is a lost opportunity.¹ A diverse and rich textual and material history and the existence of ongoing traditions of Chinese divination offer a nuanced comparative context. For example, Lisa Maurizio argues that Plato’s distinction between inspired divination and spirit possession cannot be applied to cultures in which diviners combine spirit possession with technical methods such as bird divination (ornithomancy) or casting lots (kleromancy).² She uses contemporary Chinese practices to offer alternatives such as Emily Ahern’s focus on the distinction between interpersonal and non-interpersonal divination: the presence or absence of communication within the divination process. In this system, non-interpersonal mantic systems include physiognomy and horoscopes, among others.³ It is noteworthy that early Chinese mantic practices present a wide range of techniques, most of which are non-interpersonal, and do not involve spirit possession.

Another example of the kind of alternatives offered by the Chinese materials is the relative absence of ‘gods’ in Chinese mantic practices, which, I have argued in a recent book, had significant consequences for both cosmology and mantic practice.⁴ Here I pursue that topic by a closer examination of ways in which Chinese ‘spirits’ (shen 神, a category that importantly includes both gods and ancestors) are addressees of mantic practice, despite a ‘cosmological turn’ in the conceptualization of Chinese mantic practices. By this, I mean that most Chinese divination was based on

¹ Exceptions are Maurizio 1995; Lloyd 1999 and 2002; Lloyd and Sivin 2002.
⁴ Raphals 2013.
the assumption of some kind of comprehensive cosmological system, though it is easy to overstate this by anachronistically applying Han dynasty systematic cosmologies to earlier periods.

Here, I propose to revisit two problems. The first is the ‘“question” question’: namely whether we should understand ‘mantic questions’ as genuine questions (e.g. ‘will it rain within the next ten days?’) or requests (‘let/make it rain within the next ten days’). This issue has been a matter of some controversy in the study of Shang dynasty oracle bone inscriptions. The second is the issue of how Greek oracular responses were used by consultor states, namely the argument that the most important functions of oracles were political and rhetorical. I argue here that Chinese sources have much to contribute to the issue of whether divination sought human consensus or divine sanction. In some cases, the Chinese mantic records differ from their Greek counterparts in a more cosmologically abstract orientation and a greater distance from direct interaction with gods and spirits. In other cases, we see what may be direct attempts to influence higher powers in order to realize the consultors’ desires.

Three methodological notes are appropriate. First, many of my observations start from a Chinese perspective on what I call mantic practices. In a comparative context, I usually avoid the term ‘divination’ precisely because many Chinese practices did not centre on gods and, as Cicero remarked, for there to be divination there must be gods.⁵ Second, this is not an even-handed comparison (even though I usually argue for them) in that it is explicitly China-centred. An even-handed comparison would pursue both sets of evidence independently, and only then attempt comparison. Finally, we see the importance of early Chinese texts, including texts recently excavated from tombs, as distinct from studies based on evidence from contemporary or late imperial China. The excavated materials contain information that does not have direct equivalents in the received tradition.

1. Both-And: A Chinese Perspective on the Sociology of Greek Divination

I now turn to the broadly sociological argument that the most important functions of oracles were political and rhetorical: oracles could sanction decisions already taken by community leaders, provide legitimacy and

⁵ Cic. Div. 1.6.10.
authority, confer consensus, mollify the powerful, and deflect potential blame. On this view, oracles were sources of consensus whose function was neither to predict future events nor to bestow divine authority on rulers or elites. Their function was to resolve doubt, mediate disputes, establish consensus, and legitimize difficult group decisions that had been made before consultation occurred.⁶

This view was challenged by Hugh Bowden in his study of the role of divination in Athenian democracy. He argued that concern to understand and follow the will of the gods was an important factor in Athenian decisions, and that consultations of the oracle were genuine attempts to ascertain the will of the gods, rather than mere sanctions for human political decisions. He thus took issue with a modern tendency to downplay the effects of oracles on Greek communities, and argued that Greek states consulted oracles on matters of major import that they could not resolve by debate, and made every effort to get, and follow, unambiguous advice.⁷ Like Bowden, I argue for the importance that the early Chinese interlocutors placed on mantic responses, whether direct responses from gods and spirits, or less direct indications of good or ill auspice.

One area of apparent support for a ‘sociological’ view of oracles comes from the study of African divination. To put this in historical perspective, Jean-Pierre Vernant’s key insight that divination must be studied through the dual aspects of intellectual and social operations arose through the study of African divination.⁸ From the evidence of African oracles, it was argued that divination was used to support authority. Community authorities typically formulated desirable solutions before consulting an oracle, which in turn approved their decisions, with social or divine sanctions to preclude improper subjects or modes of inquiry. These comparisons have focused on spirit mediums and ‘ordeal’ oracles, almost all oral. Comparison between the Delphic oracle and the Azande poison oracle was used to show similar attitudes towards divination and common topics of consultation such as illness, warfare, matters of state, and issues of family welfare.

This use of comparative evidence has been challenged on several fronts. Lisa Maurizio has argued that C. R. Whittaker’s initial comparative studies only turned to African evidence after addressing problems in the history of Delphi that had no comparative counterpart. As a result, his African

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evidence shed no new insight on Delphi; it merely supplied exotic parallels to conclusions already reached.⁹

Maurizio’s criticisms of Whittaker are apt. Whether or not Whittaker tried to use cross-cultural comparisons to address questions he could not solve, the problem remains that his comparisons are methodologically problematic for several reasons. They privilege the Greek comparanda, and never establish substantial contexts or bases for comparison. The failure to establish contexts for comparison has consequences. For example, Esther Eidinow has noted that comparisons with the Azande poison oracle fail to address equivalent uses of oracles across cultures because Delphic state consultations are not equivalent to oracles used by individuals.¹⁰

I propose to use Chinese evidence in support of what I might call a ‘both-and’ rather than an ‘either-or’ argument about the relations of predetermined desires and divine sanction in matters of mantic consultation. The Chinese evidence suggests that it was considered important to formulate one’s own intentions before initiating mantic procedures. On this view, divination was not undertaken to resolve doubt or conflict, but rather to seek divine sanction for goals and desires already formulated. In this sense, such procedures sought both divine sanction and social consensus. However, on this view, divination was not used to resolve doubt or mediate social conflict. Importantly, evidence for this view comes from both state and private consultations.


Some twenty-five years ago, in a forum on whether oracle bone inscriptions were questions or charges, the great Chinese scholar Jao Tsung-i [Rao Zongyi] 饒宗頤 emphasized the volitional aspect of Chinese mantic practice.¹¹ The context is a debate about whether statements in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions (jiaguwen 甲骨文) should be understood as questions, statements, or requests. David S. Nivison has aptly called this debate ‘the “Question” Question’ in his account of a roundtable of several prominent

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¹¹ Transliterations of Chinese use the pinyin system, except for proper names of authors who do not do so. In these cases, pinyin equivalents to their names are given in square brackets. Chinese names are cited according to the Chinese usage of surname followed by given name. For example, Jao Tsung-i’s surname is Jao, not Tsung-i.

As Nivison puts it:

The ‘question’ question is the question whether the ‘charge’ in a Shang oracle inscription — the sentence or sentences following the word *zhēn* 貞, if it is present, but not including the prognostication (i.e. *wāng zhān yuē* 王占曰…) if any, or the verification (i.e. … *yùn* 允…) if any — is to be construed grammatically as a question, or as a statement, or perhaps sometimes as something else.¹³

To understand this technical debate and its relevance to the present question, some explanation is necessary. The oracle bone inscriptions are the oldest writing in China. They were first discovered in 1898 in Xiaotun 小屯 near Anyang (Henan) in excavations carried out from 1928 through 1937. In 1936, a pit was discovered containing some 17,000 pieces of inscribed turtle plastrons. Excavation was interrupted in 1937 by the Japanese invasion of China. Since then, some 200,000 oracle bone inscriptions on bones and turtle shells have been reproduced and published.¹⁴ Most are from Anyang, and date from the reigns of the last nine kings of the Shang dynasty, but oracle bones have been unearthed throughout China.¹⁵ Figure 11.1, a turtle plastron from Anyang (c.1300–1086), is an example.

The inscriptions reflected the concerns of the courts of the Shang (c.1600–1050 BCE) and Western Zhou (c.1046–771 BCE) dynasties. Modern scholars classify them in five periods on the basis of preferred topics, styles of formulating questions, calligraphy, and other considerations.¹⁶ During divination procedures, the bones or shells were ‘cracked’ by the application of heat. Cracks were then interpreted. There is disagreement over whether the inscriptions associated with the cracks were statements, answers to a question, or requests for a desired result.

¹⁵ The last nine Shang kings were Wu Ding 武丁 (1324–1265 BCE) through Di Xin 帝辛 (d. c.1045 BCE). See Keightley 1997: 18 and Keightley 1999b: 240–1.
¹⁶ Periods: Period 1 (to 1180), Period 2 (1180–1151), Period 3 (1150–?), Period 4 (?–1106), Period 5 (1105–1045). For discussion of this periodization, see Keightley 1999b: 240–1, Table 4.1. The notes to the table contain additional references on periodization.
Figure 11.1 Turtle plastron from Anyang (c.1300–1046). Henan Provincial Museum, Zhengzhou.
Photo L. Raphals.
Inscriptions on the bones record the time, personnel, question, ‘charge’ (which can be a statement, question, or request), and, at times, verification of the prognostication.\(^\text{17}\)

They typically contain a preface, naming the date and diviner, a ‘charge’ (\textit{ming ci} 命辯), the subject of the prognostication, a formal prognostication (\textit{zhan ci} 占辯), and sometimes a ‘verification’ (\textit{yan ci} 驗辯) as to what occurred. The following example is an inscription that contains both positive and negative ‘charges’, that is, statements to be verified or falsified. The negative version (X will not happen) appears on the left side, the positive (X will happen) on the right:\(^\text{18}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative, left side (Bingbian 1.4)</th>
<th>Positive, right side (Bingbian 1.3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preface</strong></td>
<td>crack-making on \textit{guichou} 命丑 day (day 59), Zheng divined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>crack-making on \textit{guichou} 命丑 day (day 59), Zheng divined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Charge</strong></td>
<td>from today to \textit{dingsi} 丁巳 (day 54) we will not perhaps harm the Zhou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from today to \textit{dingsi} 丁巳 (day 54) we will harm the Zhou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prognostication</strong></td>
<td>The king, reading the cracks, said: ‘(Down to) \textit{dingsi} 丁巳 (day 54) we should not perhaps harm (them); on the coming \textit{jiazi} 甲子 (day 1) we will harm (them).’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On the eleventh day, \textit{guihai} 命亥 (day 60), (our) chariots did not harm (them); in the \textit{tou} period between that evening and \textit{jiazi} 甲子 (day 1), (we) really harmed (them).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{17}\) The largest collection is the \textit{Jiaguwen heji}, a thirteen-volume collection edited by Guo Moruo and Hu Houxuan (Guo Moruo and Hu Houxuan 1978–82). The other major collection is Yao Xiaosui and Xiao Ding’s \textit{Xiaotun nan di jiagu} (1985). Additional finds from the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s include uninscribed bones and shells and inscribed bones and shells from the Western and Eastern Zhou, discovered in Henan and Shandong.

\(^{18}\) Keightley 1978: 43; Zhang Bingquan 1965: plates 1.3 and 1.4. The days named here refer to the sexagenary cycle of the sixty combinations of the Ten Heaven Stems and Twelve Earth Branches.
The “‘question’ question’ is whether the charge is to be construed grammatically as: (1) a question, (2) a statement, or (3) something else, such as a request. For example, should the charge be construed grammatically as:

(1) a question: Will it rain?
(2) a statement: It will rain.
(3) a request: May it rain.

For many years, most scholars construed the charge as a question, with the notable exceptions of David Keightley and Paul Serruys.¹ The debate partly concerned the understanding of the term zhen 賢: whether it meant ‘to ask’, whether it referred to a prognostication that was ‘true’ or ‘false’, or whether it referred to a result that was ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable’.²

By contrast, Jao Tsung-i argued that it was crucial that the consultors formulated their intent before oracle-bone, or subsequent methods of, prognostication. To make this argument, Jao Tsung-i turned to the evidence of later texts from the received tradition, noting that oracle bone specialists tend not to look at texts of later provenance than their own period of interest. He went on to give examples of consultors who clearly formulated their intent before engaging in prognostication. His examples come from both the received tradition and excavated texts. He begins with a passage from the ‘Council of Yu the Great’ (Da Yu mou 大禹謨) chapter of the Shang shu 商書 (Venerated Documents, also known as the Classic of Documents).

This passage introduces a potential conflict between the results of two mantic methods. Chinese sources often refer to the complementary consultation of two prognostication methods: ‘milfoil and turtle shells’ (Shigui 蓍龜). ‘Turtle shells’ refer to the method of crack-making, described above: a method of applying heat to the bones of deer, sheep, cattle and other animals, or to turtle plastrons.²¹ The result was a crack that provided a binary interpretation of an affirmative or negative response to a question.²² The other is ‘stalk casting’ by means of milfoil. ‘Milfoil’ or ‘stalks’ referred to a complex sortition of forty-nine stalks of yarrow (Achillea millifolium). The stalks are of uniform length and diameter with even surfaces. Yarrow stalks are thin enough to hold forty-nine easily in one hand, and tough enough not to break during repeated use. The joints or nodes between the branches are long enough to permit the

¹ Keightley 1972; Serruys 1974; Serruys 1986.
² Nivison 1989: 115–16.
²¹ This term appears in a bibliographic classification from the Han dynasty. See Raphals 2008–9 for detailed discussion of its contents.
cutting of stalks of adequate length (some eight to twelve inches in length), and the stalks are evenly round and of smooth texture.

In the oldest forms, these manipulations generated series of six numbers.²³ Over a long period, yarrow prognostication evolved into ‘Yi divination’, the association of sequences of six numbers or hexagrams with divination statements in the Book of Changes or Yi jing.²⁴

This passage advises that in selecting ministers one should first determine one’s own intentions and only then consult the turtle and milfoil methods of prognostication. Their agreement signifies the assent of ghosts and spirits; after this auspicious result, a question should not be repeated.

The emperor said: Yu, the officer of divination should first make up his mind, and only afterwards refer it to the great turtle shell. Now in this matter my mind was determined in the first place. I consulted and deliberated with all my ministers and people, and they were of one accord with me. The spirits signified their assent, the turtle-shell and milfoil concurred. Divination, when auspicious, should not be repeated.²⁵

This (probably late) passage also emphasizes the need to formulate one’s own intentions before engaging in prognostication.²⁶ Or, as the authors of the Zuo Transmissions (Zuo zhuan) put it, divination should be reserved for doubtful cases: ‘We divine to resolve doubts. Where we have no doubts, why divine?’²⁷ It is also important to note that this context is explicitly political. Jao Tsung-i emphasized that this passage underscores the need to formulate one’s own intentions before engaging in prognostication:

²³ Prognostications of this kind appear in texts excavated at Tianxingguan 天星觀 (Jiangling, Hubei, c.340), Baoshan 包山 (Jingmen, Hubei, c.316), and Wangshan 望山 (Hubei, c.309–278). See Baoshan Chu jian 1991; Jiangling Wangshan Shazhong Chu mu 1996; Jingzhou Tianxingguan er hao Chu mu 2003 and Wangshan Chu jian 1995. For translation of the Baoshan texts, see Cook 2006. For further study of the Chu bamboo texts, see Jao Tsung-i [Rao Zongyi] and Zeng Xiantong 1985.

²⁴ See Loewe 1994; Raphals 2013.

²⁵ Shang shu 4.11a (‘Da Yu Mo’ 大禹謨), translation slightly modified from Legge 1885a: 63.

²⁶ This ‘sedimented’ text purports to be from remotest antiquity, but is probably no earlier than the second century BCE, and possibly dates to the fourth century CE (which would be the earliest known version of the text). Nonetheless, it contains astronomical and other information that date at least some 1,400 years earlier. See Nylan 2001: 132–3.

²⁷ Zuo zhuan, 131 (Xuan 11.1, cf. Legge 1885b: 56–7). The Zuo zhuan abounds with accounts of divinations of all kinds, including divinations about battle, marriage and progeny, dreams, and portents. For dating of this and other pre-Han Chinese texts, see Loewe 1993.
The diviner had first to reach a decision and only thereafter would he make a charge to the great turtle. In performing divination, the ‘will’ was a very important prerequisite. One first had to have a definite idea and only then obtain compliance from the turtle and milfoil. From this it can be seen that in antiquity when the king divined he was not at all completely basing his decisions on the report of the turtle, but was charging the turtle after his own will was first determined. In other words, the human deliberation was primary. The importance of the ‘will’ can be seen in this.²⁸

Another explicitly political passage from the ‘Hongfan’ 洪範 (Great Pattern/Plan) chapter of the Shu jing provides more detail:

立時人作卜筮。三人占。則從二人之言。汝則有大疑。謀及乃心。謀及卿士。謀及庶人。謀及卜筮。

Set the time and have them prognosticate by milfoil and turtle shell. Let three people prognosticate; follow the words of two of them. If there is great divergence, take counsel with your own heart, with ministers and officers, with the people, and with turtle shell and milfoil.²⁹

I now turn to several additional examples, not discussed by Jao Tsung-i, that tend to confirm his point of view. These examples also suggest that the purpose of indirect communication with ancestors in Chinese mantic practice was to affirm the acceptability of decisions already taken.

The importance of first marshalling one’s own intention and then asking for confirmation from the ancestors also appears in the Zhou li 周禮 (Rites of Zhou).³⁰ The Zhou li describes the offices and officials of an idealized Zhou bureaucracy, including an extensive listing of officials concerned with prognostication and ritual. It provides the oldest known classification of these activities. The Zhou li locates three mantic offices in the Offices of Spring (Chun guan 春官), the bureaucracy concerned with ancestral sacrifice. The Director of Divination (Taibu 大卜), the Director of Incantation (Taizhu 大祝), and the Director of Astronomy (Taishi 大史) worked in conjunction. Diviners (bu 卜) prognosticated, incantators (zhu 祝) invoked the spirits, and recording officials (shi 史) recorded and preserved the

²⁹ Shang shu 12.16b–17a (‘Hongfan’ 洪範). For a different translation, see Legge 1885a: 334–5.
³⁰ Considerable controversy surrounds the dating of these three ritual texts. See Loewe 1993 and Raphals 2013: 34 n. 41.
results. Each had a large and complex staff of junior officers, scribes, and assistants.³¹

The Director of Divination was in charge of turtle shell diviners, milfoil specialists, and dream prognosticators. The *Zhou li* specifies eight types of state question that could be addressed by turtle shell divination: (1) military campaigns, (2) anomalies and strange phenomena, (3) conferring gifts, (4) major plans and policies, (5) the success of planned ventures, (6) the arrival of (expected) individuals, (7) rainfall, and (8) illness:³²

以八命者賛三兆 三易三夢之占以觀國家之吉凶以詔救政。凡國大貞卜立君卜大封則賦高作龜

In addressing the eight kinds of command [addressed to divination], he avails of the divinations provided by the three kinds of cracks, three kinds of change, and the three kinds of dreams, to prognosticate the good and ill auspices of states and lineages to announce to the ruler how to help the government of the state. Whenever he does so, whether he performs the great prognostication on behalf of the state, on the investiture of a prince, or on the creation of a feudatory principality, he considers the higher part and prepares the turtle shell.³³

According to the Han commentator Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (Zheng Sinong 鄭司農, 127–200 CE):

貞問也國有大疑問於蓍龜…玄謂貞之為問問於正者必先正之乃從問焉易曰師貞丈人吉

*Zhen*, to ask; when the state has great doubts, it asks of the milfoil and turtle…My saying that *zhen* is to ask is that one who asks about correctness must first make it correct and thereafter ask about it. The *Yi jing* says, ‘The captain *zhen*’s and the elder is auspicious.’³⁴

This passage refers to the *Yi jing* Hexagram 7, ䷘ The Army (*Shi* 師). The hexagram statement reads:

師貞丈人吉無咎

Determining for an elder is auspicious; there is no trouble.³⁵

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³¹ For these, see Raphals 2013: Appendix 4.1.

³² *Zhou li* 24: 10a–18a; Biot 1851 [1975]: 2.72; Loewe 1994: 175.


³⁵ For this translation, see Shaughnessy 2014: 79.
Jao Tsung-i’s point is that, before ‘asking’, the prognosticator must first ‘correct’ (zheng 正) or ‘rectify’. In his view, this means three things. First, the prognosticator ‘rectifies’ in the sense of correctly placing and physically orienting the turtle shell on the place of divination. Second, the diviner must ethically ‘correct’ himself by correcting his intentions. Finally, it refers to the correctness of the mantic inquiry, in the sense of divine approval denoted by an ‘auspicious’ result.³ In other words, the mantic practitioner must first clarify his intentions and desires and only then prognosticate divine approval, indicated by the ‘auspicious’ crack of the turtle shell. It is worth noting that all three ‘corrections’ take place before the divination, although the third, the ‘correctness’ of the mantic inquiry itself, is only verified after the fact.

3. Evidence from Excavated Texts

Jao Tsung-i also quotes a divination record from Tomb 1 Wangshan 望山 (Jiangling 江陵, Hubei), dating from the second half of the fourth century BCE:

志事吕乙元故, 攸之。己酉日之, 柄(可)冑(僃), 以(將)未又(侑)
 爵(爵) 爵(爵)立(莅), 尚速得事, 占之吉。 吾(亡)想(作), 又意(喜)於志, 意(喜)於事。

Take it up by will and affair according to its cause. On an jiyou day, it is proper to offer a horse-sacrifice, since one does not yet have noble rank. If the noble rank is obtained, yet one is still discontented about the affair; prognosticating: auspicious; there is no fault. One will have happiness in the will and happiness in the affair.³⁷

The source for this quotation is not cited, and it does not quite correspond to either of the two published versions of the Wangshan slips. (The differences are discussed in the Appendix.) According to the 1995 transcription of Shang Chengzuo, it reads:

31. [Broken] 己酉日之, 柄(可)冑(僃)未又(侑) 爵(爵) 爵(爵)立(莅), 尚速得事, 占之吉。吾(亡)想(作), 又意(喜)於志, 意(喜)於事 ...
33. [Broken] 志事, 以其故敗之

³⁷ Jao Tsung-i 1989: 137. I reconstruct his version from other published versions in the Appendix.
On a *jiyou* day Ke Ping divined about [Shao Gao’s] not yet having noble rank and whether he would quickly obtain the affair [according to his wishes]. He prognosticated: auspicious; There is no fault. There will be happiness in [his] will and happiness in the affair. Take it up by will and affair according to its cause.³⁸

This text is part of a record of mantic consultations performed on behalf of the tomb’s occupant, Shao Gu 邵固. It resembles other mantic records from Baoshan 包山 Tomb 2 (Jingmen 荊門, Hubei, c.316 BCE) and Tianxingguan 天星觀 Tomb 1 (Jiangling 江陵, Hubei, c.340 BCE).³⁹ Records of this kind have no equivalent in the received textual tradition. They used formulaic language and attempted to predict success over a given year, and also to address the illnesses that presumably killed the tombs’ occupants.⁴⁰ The Baoshan records are the most extensive and well preserved. The Wangshan bamboo slips cited by Jao Tsung-i in his discussion above were badly preserved, and most are fragmentary. They consist of 1,093 characters on 207 bamboo slips. The records were concerned with two kinds of prognostication: rank or other activities in official service to the king, and about a range of illnesses. The records also included instructions for sacrifice, including the names of divinities or ancestors and the exact sacrifices to be offered: in this case a jade pendant for the King of the East and a white dog, food and wine for the god of the Path.⁴¹ Despite difference in order and transcription, in both versions, the statement that there will be happiness in his will/ambitions and affair(s) (*you xi yu zhi xi yu shi* 又喜於志喜於事) makes it clear that ‘the will’ (*zhi* 志) is distinguished from ‘the affair’ (*shi* 事). The interest of this passage is that, unlike the possibly late passage from the *Shu jing*, this record from an excavated text is of undeniable fourth-century (BCE) provenance. Also, unlike the earlier examples, it is not a state prognostication. Rather, it is a mantic question by the tomb’s occupant Shao Gu 邵固, apparently about personal concerns.

In summary, taken together, all these examples show a procedure in which determining one’s own intentions or will is an explicit prerequisite for a successful prognostication. In the Wangshan tomb records (as in the better-preserved Baoshan records), the tomb’s occupant prognosticates repeatedly

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³⁸ Shang Chengzuo 1995: 202–3 and 225–6, slips 31 and 33, translation my own. I have consulted Cook 2006: 253, but differ from her on several points. See the Appendix for more detail.
³⁹ See Baoshan Chu jian 1991 and Jingzhou Tianxingguan er hao Chu mu 2003.
⁴⁰ For a fuller account of this formulaic language, see Li Ling 1990.
on avoiding disasters for the ensuing year and on personal illness.\textsuperscript{42} In other words, here we find, in personal as well as in state divination, a clear statement of the consultors' fixed intentions and clear regard for divine response.

4. Which Gods if Any?

Elsewhere I have argued for a strong contrast between Greek and Chinese mantic practices and their relation to the gods.\textsuperscript{43} I have argued that Greek mantic practices were closely linked to the gods, and their caprices. By contrast, a Chinese tendency towards cosmological speculation and the use of numbers to create abstract models of change distanced the gods from the mantic encounter. I conclude by reviewing and expanding that argument.

Both Chinese and Greek metaphysics assumed the existence of gods or divine powers, and the possibility of communicating with them. Within both traditions, there is disagreement over whether those entities or powers had some benign interest in human affairs. Also in both traditions, there are examples of economies of human–divine relations based on prayer and sacrifice. The ancient practices of Greek bird- and weather-divination and Chinese oracle bone divination offered ways for diviners to negotiate effectively with the gods by means of repeated questions. Both traditions also included ethical frameworks for divination, based on presumed correlations between cosmic and human orders. In addition, both Chinese and Greek philosophers emphasized the ethical role of divination in defining divine concepts of justice and retribution.

But Chinese and Greek understandings of the nature of these interactions were very different. Chinese models of divine–human relations were primarily genetic (gods as royal ancestors) or bureaucratic (gods as hierarchies of rulers and officials). Some Chinese mantic techniques addressed particular gods responsible for specific time periods and modes of activity, but these techniques progressively de-emphasized direct communication or negotiation with divine powers.

By contrast, Greek divination was always closely linked to the gods, either through direct communication, as in oracular divination, or through an understanding of signs as direct communication from them.\textsuperscript{44} Greek texts

\textsuperscript{42} See Cook 2006 and Raphals 2013.

\textsuperscript{43} Raphals 2013.

\textsuperscript{44} For discussion of assumptions (ancient and modern) about the presence of the divine in ancient Greek divinatory practices, see Flower, this volume.
are explicit about the existence of gods who knew the future and might be persuaded to share their knowledge with humans. For example, several passages in the Homeric poems indicate that the gods know the future, starting with the claim that ‘the plan of Zeus was fulfilled’ in *Iliad* 1.5. In an extended passage at *Iliad* 15.56–77, Zeus outlines the events to come in the remainder of the *Iliad* and parts of the *Odyssey*, including Hektor’s rout of the Greeks, the entry and death of Patroklos, the death of Hektor, and the fall of Troy. In the *Odyssey*, Zeus prophesies the return of Odysseus (5.29–42). On the later view of Cicero (*Div.* 1.5), the gods were also assumed to have some benevolent interest in humanity, and to manifest their will (and eventually ethical notions of justice and retribution) through divination. Mantic communication was lubricated by economies of prayer and sacrifice managed through ritual.⁴⁵

Indeed, Nicholas Denyer argues that technical divination is ‘dotty’ as a science, but makes perfect sense if it is understood as a system of direct communication from the gods.⁴⁶ The same arbitrariness that makes such communications unsatisfactory as science makes them plausible as communications from divine powers. Yet the very characteristics that make them theologically robust make them intellectually unsatisfactory. They do not rely on empirical observation or systematic thought. Cicero emphasizes this point in his defence of divination in the first book of *De Divinatione*.⁴⁷ However, Greek assumptions about the benevolence and interest of the gods in humanity are equivocal. The gods of Greek myth were notoriously fickle; the arbitrariness of human fates and the indifference of the gods are recurring themes from Homeric epic to Attic tragedy.⁴⁸ Later Greek divinatory reflection shifted to the idea that the future was somehow predetermined and thence predictable. One result was a systematic and abstract reflection on problems of cause, necessity, and the logical preconditions that made divination possible and legitimate.⁴⁹

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⁴⁵ A pervasive example is the sacrifice of animals whose entrails were used in extispicy. More generally, in the *Phaedrus* (188c), the physician Eryximachos claims that divination, along with sacrifice, governs the association of gods and humans. Seers could also prophecy spontaneously, without ritual mantic consultation. For example, in the *Iliad* (1.62–130), Achilles requests that the Achaeans consult a *mantis* to determine the cause of the plague. Calchas answers directly and explains its cause and remedy.

⁴⁶ Denyer 1985.


⁴⁸ For example the Homeric phrase, ‘it lies on the knees of the gods’ (*Il.* 17.514; 20.435; *Od*. 1.267, 400; 16.129). Examples from tragedy include Eur. *Hipp.* 1104–10; *Hecc.* 163f. and 935f.; *Tro.* 1201–6. For discussion, see Greene 1935; Onians 1924; Segal 1989. For a comprehensive listing of relevant passages in Homer, see Nägelsbach 1884: 116–41.

⁴⁹ For some of these arguments, see Bobzien 1998: 87–96; Hankinson 1998; Raphals 2013: 356–9, and Sorabji 1980.
By contrast, a great deal of Chinese mantic practices sought to determine and nuance human place in a cosmos governed by patterns of change, the transformation of qi 氣 especially, expressed in complex interactions of yin and yang 陰陽 and the ‘five powers’ (wu xing 五行, sometimes mistakenly referred to as ‘elements’) of earth, water, fire, metal, and wood, themselves another system of the yin-yang modulations of qi. These patterns were also affected by strong notions of ‘good and ill auspice’ (ji xiong 吉凶), governed by the calendar and often expressed in hemerological terms.

Starting in the late Warring States period (475–221 BCE), competing schemata began to link yin and yang (variously described) to phenomena in space (the directions), time (the calendar), notions of good and ill auspice, and the body. Much Chinese divination was based on the assumption of a cosmological system, though it is easy to overstate this by anachronistically applying Han dynasty systematic cosmologies to earlier periods.

Pre-Han ‘systematic’ elements include: (1) the early articulation of a cosmic yin-yang polarity; (2) the abstraction of patterns of change into a discrete number of types, represented by numbers; and (3) the early articulation of the sixty-four hexagrams as a complex and nuanced model of cosmic change, based on the combinatorics of yin and yang. Greek mantic hermeneutics focused, by contrast, on divination as a communication from the gods, with implications for both morality and ritual. The important role of divination as the impetus for Hellenistic debates about causality also arose out of a moral problem: the issue of choice and responsibility.⁵⁰

By the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) a system known as ‘correlative cosmology’ focused on elaborate microcosm-macrocosm correspondences between the three realms of Heaven, Earth, and humanity, and used numbers to express these symbolic correlations. Correlative cosmology also provided ‘natural’ explanations for the establishment and expansion of the Han dynasty. Scholar officials also used correlative cosmology and discourses on omens to define (and circumscribe) royal power through admonition.⁵¹

5. Conclusion

In summary, Greek and Chinese interlocutors addressed mantic queries to divine powers, understood as gods, heroes, and ancestors, among others.

However, we can identify two important factors that led to differences in these interactions.

The first was different beliefs about the degree of direct divine involvement. Greek mantic practices consistently address gods directly. Some Chinese mantic methods do so as well, but others are grounded in what can be called cosmological calculation, whether based on the yin-yang cycles of the *Yi jing* or astrocalendric calculations of auspicious days and times for specific activity. Gods were part of those cosmic cycles but they did not control them and could not change them at will. These different Chinese and Greek attitudes towards divine powers had important consequences for several areas of mantic activity, including the classifications of mantic arts, understandings of the nature and origin of mantic gifts, mantic methods, the formulation of mantic questions, and the very different dynamics of the interactions between consultors and practitioners. Finally, they led to very different accounts of divination as a hermeneutic system, with correspondingly different effects of mantic activity and theory on the development of systematic thought.

A second key difference was the Chinese belief in a systematic cosmos, as evidenced by early and ongoing interest in stars and other celestial phenomena, including: (1) systematic empirical observation and record-keeping; (2) early theoretical accounts of the heavens; and (3) hermeneutic correlation with terrestrial geography and events. But that interest did not significantly involve relations with gods, even though spirits were associated with quadrants of the heavens. These Chinese attitudes towards the heavens have significant Mesopotamian, but no Greek, parallels.⁵²

Because of these differences, the question (introduced at the beginning of this essay) of how consultors used mantic responses, and whether mantic inquiry sought human consensus or divine sanction, takes a different form in a Chinese context than in a Greek.

The Chinese evidence supports a ‘both-and’ view of relations of pre-determined desires and divine sanction because it presents a clear link between them that can also be applied to Greek divination. The Chinese evidence presents an alternative, which nuances the ‘human consensus vs. divine will’ debate in new ways. In *Yi jing* and astrocalendric divination, divine powers act at a distance through the operation of the abstract cosmic patterns, and without explicitly interpersonal interaction or exchange. But even here,

correct interpretation requires the fine balance of several elements. One is the ‘human consensus’ factor: a clear desire and intention on the part of the questioner. But a successful inquiry also requires divine ‘assent’, expressed as a result of ‘good auspice’ (ji 吉), indicating conformity to cosmic patterns and the approbation of the divine ‘powers’ (shen 神) of gods and ancestors.

Importantly, the Chinese evidence suggests that it was considered important to formulate one’s own intentions before initiating mantic procedures. On this view, the primary purpose of divination was not to resolve doubt or conflict. Ideally consensus preceded divination, and even in cases where it did not (such as the ‘Council of Yu the Great’ example discussed by Jao Tsung-i in section 2), its purpose was to seek divine sanction for goals and desires already formulated. In this sense, such procedures sought both divine sanction and social consensus. However, on this view, divination was not used to resolve doubt or mediate social conflict. Importantly, evidence for this view comes from both state and private consultations.

The latter point is especially relevant to Greek divination. The Chinese context presents a view of mantic questions in which social consensus is a prerequisite to divination and the divine sanction it appeared to seek. This ‘both-and’ view precludes the use of divination as a means to address social conflict because divination would not ‘work’ unless or until social conflicts had been resolved before the fact. This view of divination is very different than the conclusions drawn by some Classicists from African oracles, because it allows social consensus and divine sanction to co-exist seamlessly. It accounts for the problem of social consensus without requiring the perhaps arbitrary view that Greek consultor states did not consider divine sanction important.

Appendix: The Wangshan text

The Wangshan slips were in very bad condition, and most were quite short. Due to these epigraphical problems, there are differences among published transcriptions. Jao Tsung-i’s quotation from the Wangshan slips (section 2.4) can be correlated to the two published versions of Shang Chengzuo (1995) and the Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology (1996, henceforward HWKY) as follows:⁵³

See Jao Tsung-i 1989: 137; Shang Chengzuo 1995: 202–3 and 225–6, slips 31–3; and Hubeisheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 1996, slips 11, 23, 27–8. I have subdivided Jao’s text into sections (a)–(d) for purposes of comparison. Translations of Jao’s text are his own. The others are mine, with consultation of Cook 2006. Characters in parenthesis are modern transcriptions of the characters to their left, supplied by the editors of each edition. See also Jao Tsung-i 1997.
Jao Tsung-i: (b) 己酉之日，苛(可)馬(駑)以牲(將)
On a jiyou day, it is proper to offer a horse sacrifice.

Shang Chengzuo: (31) [Broken] 己酉之日，苛(可)
HWKY: (11) [Broken] 己酉(酉)之日，苛(可)
[Broken] On a jiyou day, Ke Ping divined about

Jao Tsung-i: (c) 未又(侑)爵(爵)立(莅)，尚速得事。占之吉。亡(亡)怎(作)。
[he] does not yet have noble rank. If the noble rank is obtained, yet one is still discontented about the affair; prognosticating: auspicious; there is no fault.

Shang Chengzuo: (31) 未又立，尚速得事，占之吉。

HWKY (23) [Broken] 未又(有)立。尚速得事。占之吉，簋(簋)得(事)事
[he] does not yet have noble rank, (asking) shall he speedily achieve the affair.
Prognosticating: auspicious, he shall speedily achieve the affair.

Jao Tsung-i: (d) 又憙(喜)於志，憙(喜)於事。

Shang Chengzuo: (33) [Broken] 志事，以其故攖之，
HWKY (28) [Broken] 志事，呂(以)亓(其)故，攖之，
Take it up by will and affair according to its cause [He performed an exorcism to get at its source.]

Aside from slight differences of order and transcription, there are two main areas of difference. One is the reading of the phrase 可(可)馬(駑) or 可(可) (Jao Tsung-i (b); Shang Chengzuo (31)). Jao Tsung-i understands this as ke ma 可駑, 'it is permissible to perform a horse sacrifice.' By contrast, Constance Cook reads it as the name of the diviner, Ke Ping 可, prognosticating for the tomb’s occupant.

A second issue is whether the graph 瓠 (Jao Tsung-i (c); Shang Chengzuo (31)) should be read as one character or two, and whether the upper character is wang 亡 or ji 己. Read as one character, 瓠 or 瓠, in Shang and Jao’s transcription, respectively, it is the negative in the phrase ‘no fault’ (亡)怎 (作) in Jao’s transcription, 瓠 in Shang’s). By contrast, Cook transcribes it as the two characters ji 己 and ri 日, one above the other: ‘on a Ji day’ (ji ri 己日).

References


Baoshan Chu jian 包山楚簡 [The Chu Inscribed Bamboo Slips from Baoshan].
Jiangling Wangshan Shazhong Chu mu 江陵望山沙塚楚墓. See Hubeisheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 1996.


Rao Zongyi. See Jao Tsung-i.


