

Li, Geng. 2019. *Fate Calculation Experts: Diviners Seeking Legitimation in Contemporary China*. London, New York: Berghahn. 158 pp. Hb.: \$110.00/£78.00. ISBN: 9781785339943.

Book review by

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In *Fate Calculation Experts: Diviners Seeking Legitimation in Contemporary China*, Geng Li shows that divination practices, long stigmatised in Chinese state discourse as culturally backwards, are experiencing a revival in China. Set in the author's hometown of "L City" (a pseudonym), this excellent and concise ethnography explores a range of meanings that diviners and their clients attribute to divinatory practices. As the title implies, the book focuses primarily on diviners' strategies for presenting divination as socially and politically legitimate. Li demonstrates diviners positioning themselves as moral teachers aligned with the grand traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism, as agents of cultural nationalism in China's "national learning craze" (*guoxue re* 国学热), and as "professional experts" (*zhuanjia* 专家) credentialed with certificates and awards issued (meaning sold) by academic societies. Among clients, Li focuses on how divinatory practices guide them in their lives as entrepreneurs, civil servants, and singles seeking spouses. The book pulses with clients' anxieties about their careers' dependence on ever-changing social networks and government policies. This highly readable book should appeal to anyone interested in contemporary divination practices in China and in China's ongoing attempts to establish a cultural identity consistent with the state's modern scientism.

The first two chapters establish basic historical and cosmological contexts underlying contemporary divination practices. Chapter One examines the status of divination in

politics and society from ancient times to the present, from the standpoints of the state, intellectual elites, and ordinary people. Going back to the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BCE), Li shows that divination has always had an intimate relationship with the political order, being regularly deployed to legitimate and subvert the rule of governing officials. Non-elites were practising divination by the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), and divination practices were highly normative, if often controversial, until the first movements towards modernisation and scientism in the late 19th century. The post-reform Chinese state has generally taken a *laissez-faire* attitude towards divination practice while still officially regarding it as “superstitious”, and crackdowns can still be arbitrarily launched at any time. Chapter Two introduces specific divination practices. Li focuses here on symbolic divination and, in particular, the numerical techniques and interpretive systems associated with the four pillars (*sizhu* 四柱), the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经), and *fengshui* (风水) geomancy.

Chapter Three uses three case studies to illustrate typical divination customers. There is Yan, a young businesswoman whose initial failures lead her to seek guidance from a lay Buddhist diviner named Ming and a Fengshui master named Sun. Here and throughout the book, Li captures performances in which signs of what the state would term the “essence” and the “dregs” of Chinese traditional culture appear in close succession. For example, Ming recites uplifting verses from classical texts one moment and aggressively hawks his protective amulets the next. We next meet Xin, a high official who estimates that, despite laws forbidding civil servants from patronising diviners, ‘I am pretty sure that nine out of ten officials see fortune tellers’ (p. 92). Li argues that officials, facing unpredictable odds for promotion, heavy work pressure, and complex office politics, look to diviners for spiritual sustenance and a person to talk to. Finally, Sue is a highly educated “leftover woman” (*shengnu* 剩女, a single woman over age 27) whose parents are anxious to see her wed. Sue’s case foreshadows a theme taken up in subsequent chapters: diviners tend to reinforce traditional gender roles by advocating women’s purity and docility in relations with men.

Chapters Four through Seven examine diviners’ legitimation strategies. Chapter Four identifies affinities between Chinese divinations and traditional moral codes such as filial piety, deference to authority, and karma. To change one’s fate often requires changing one’s moral character, and diviners’ predictions frequently invoke futures that will obtain *if* clients do or do not make recommended changes. By offering moral guidance in line with Confucian and Buddhist moral teachings, diviners align themselves with re-

spectable tradition and ‘escape from the binary of true and false by adding a layer of “moral truth” to divination’ (p. 113).

Chapter Five examines diviners’ attempts to align divination with the cultural nationalistic movement called the “national learning craze”. The term implicates a wide range of grassroots and state-sponsored attempts to reconnect with China’s history and sense of collective identity, and Li identifies various ways in which the Yijing has been reinterpreted to fit new political agendas and circumstances. Chapter Six looks at diviners’ attempts to transform their occupation into a profession with strong institutional and state backing, along the lines of the support enjoyed by psychological counsellors. Chapter Seven describes diviners’ attempts to replicate modern credentialism by organising academic activities that issue (sell) certifications and awards.

The book is commendably nuanced. Li illuminates social practices that, while ubiquitous in contemporary China, are politically sensitive and, therefore, difficult to study. (As discussed in the introduction, she drew extensively on hometown social networks to complete this research.) Her ambivalent attitude towards divination—we detect an alternation between appreciation and scepticism throughout—keeps the narrative honest. Moreover, she succeeds in the double act of presenting divination practices as socially marginalised yet centrally embedded in the mundane complexities of officialdom. On one occasion during a government crackdown on divination, Li enters a divination shop—its signage carefully ambiguous—to find stacks of clients’ lawsuits on a table and the diviner advising clients on which judges might rule in their favour.

It does bear mentioning that this book published in 2019 at times feels stuck in the past, as nearly all references and statistics significantly predate the fieldwork, which was conducted in 2011–2013. Many of the statistics framing “contemporary” practices were collected in the 1990s, and the Xi Jinping era is not discussed beyond a few mentions of Xi’s inaugural anti-superstition policies.