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# Reducing Uncertainty through Computation in Chinese Divinatory Arts

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► **To cite this version:**

Stéphanie Homola. Reducing Uncertainty through Computation in Chinese Divinatory Arts. Dagmar Schäfer; Zhao Lu; Michael Lackner. Accounting for Uncertainty: Prediction and Planning in Asian History, Preprint 496, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Preprint 496), pp.55-68, 2019. hal-03920636

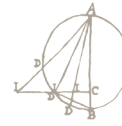
**HAL Id: hal-03920636**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03920636>**

Submitted on 8 Jan 2024

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2019

## Preprint N°496

Accounting for Uncertainty:  
Prediction and Planning in Asian History

Dagmar Schäfer, Zhao Lu, and Michael Lackner (eds.)



Accounting for Uncertainty:  
Prediction and Planning in Asian History

MPIWG Preprint  
Edited by Dagmar Schäfer, Zhao Lu, and Michael Lackner

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## Reducing Uncertainty through Computation in Chinese Divinatory Arts

Stéphanie Homola<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses on technical terms related to the reduction of uncertainty in Chinese divinatory techniques. Such technical terms are mainly found in systematized forms of divination (i.e. divinatory arts, 數術 *shushu*).<sup>2</sup> In the context of Chinese divinatory arts, uncertainty can be considered as a lack of knowledge about one's actual, and consequently future, position in the cosmos. Such uncertainty can be reduced through technical manipulations of objects and numbers, first through an addition step that ensures that the divinatory process effectively grabs the cosmological complexity of the situation, and, second, through a reducing/division step that reduces the complexity to a scale that is understandable by the human mind. These techniques provide a support for decision-making based on an organized vision of possible future courses of action. They produce a template for action planning by reducing the horizons of decision (cf. oracle's article). While limiting and defining directories of action, reducing processes also result in the selection of one occurrence in these directories which constitutes the basis for action planning. The following survey is based on primary sources which gather three types of systematized divinatory techniques.

Cleromancy involves the selection, through various processes (counting out objects or casting objects), of a hexagram of the *Book of Changes* which provides the basis for interpretation.

Chronomancy techniques rely on dates as input data (either the date of the divination or the birth date of the petitioner). Dates are processed into numerals and counted out in a six (Small six *ren*) or twelve term (Treasure of the palm) cyclic system, usually using the hand as a counting device<sup>3</sup>. Results are associated with an interpretative system that consists of a list of configurations with a various but limited

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<sup>2</sup> Such terms and related procedures are not specific to Chinese divination, as shown by ethnomathematics (Ascher, *Mathematics Elsewhere*).

<sup>3</sup> Homola, "Les usages de la main."

scope that corresponds to the aforementioned cyclic system (six elements in the Small six *ren*, twelve elements in the Treasure of the palm).

The last technique, Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*, is a mix of cleromancy and chronomancy: dates are processed to select a hexagram of the *Book of Changes*.

Primary sources listed below gather four types of documents: historical texts which are considered classical works in the field (such as the “Yarrow ritual” excerpted from Zhu Xi’s *Zhouyi benyi*); contemporary editions of classical texts (such as the Treasure of the palm); contemporary manuals or almanacs written by professional and/or scholarly diviners which present classical techniques (often based on classical works which are not always mentioned) in a didactic way and contemporary language (such as the Rice method, Drawing bamboo sticks, the Small six *ren*); divinatory techniques collected orally through interviews with diviners during fieldwork (Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*). Whereas each technique is presented below based on a single source, it is possible to gather the four types of documents on most of the techniques.

Systemized forms of divination usually follow a three steps process. First, input data are encoded into numerals in order to be processed. Input data are usually concrete data from the environment such as numbers of objects or numbered objects (in cleromancy methods) and dates (in chronomancy methods). Second, numerals are subjected to various computations. Third, the results of these computations are associated with symbolic systems of mantic figures:

[...] most techniques belonging to this category precisely revolve around the diviner’s ability to properly associate symbols to the data extracted from the question (and the questioner), before inferring an answer.<sup>4</sup>

This article focuses specifically on the second step of this process—computation—and analyses the technical processes and related vocabulary through which concrete data such as objects and temporal parameters are converted into mantic figures.

Technical terms show that these computations follow a two-steps process. First, computations require a high “random” number (of objects or numerals), “random” meaning here that it must be ensured that it is not affected by human

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<sup>4</sup> Hayek, “Correlating Time,” 530.

intervention. This number is either readily available through the manipulation of small objects (fifty stalks in the Yarrow ritual, rice grains in the Rice method) or calculated through the *addition* of temporal parameters (Small six *ren*, Treasure of the palm). Second, this high number is processed through a *division* operation which refers either to counting out objects serially (Yarrow ritual, Rice method), to counting out numbers serially (Small six *ren*, Treasure of the palm), or to arithmetic division (Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*). Both operations—addition and division—involve literal *manipulations* (operations on objects or numbers performed by the hand) which are designated by various technical terms<sup>5</sup>.

The addition process ensures that the divination fully takes into account both the specificity and the complexity (multiple dimensions) of the moment/situation at stake in the divination. Then, the division process allows a reduction in the complexity of the situation (that mirrors the unfathomable diversity of the cosmos) to a scale that can be apprehended by the human mind. The key point in this division process is that attention is paid not to the result (quotient) but to the remainder of the division which constitutes the true result of the operation<sup>6</sup>. The result (the remainder) is limited to a precise range which is defined by the divisor. Thus, when looking to select one trigram out of eight, the sum is divided by eight and the remainder gives the number of the selected trigram, such as in the Rice method and Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*. Similarly, when looking to select one changing line out of six, the sum is divided by six and the remainder gives the selected line.

This process shows that the division operation can be connected to the very action of drawing lots, that is casting one object “randomly” among a limited and defined number of objects. For this reason, the Drawing bamboo sticks method is also presented below as it appears as a mere shortcut of division operations.

A major propriety of remainders is that they can be directly associated to a directory of mantic figures. That such directories are limited to a finite range (64 hexagrams in cleromancy, six or twelve elements in chronomancy) makes them suitable for decision-making and action.

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<sup>5</sup> Homola, “La fabrique des restes”; Homola, “Opérations et manipulations.”

<sup>6</sup> On the related mathematical notion of congruence, see Daumas, *Théorème des restes chinois*; on the notion of remain/remainder as a starting point rather than a completion or an outcome, see Malamoud “La notion de ‘reste’.”

As a consequence of the processes exposed above, computing terms presented below are organized into four sections based on four types of operations: adding up; dividing; manipulating objects; casting/selecting. They pertain to two main semantic fields: mathematics and hand/fingers manipulations. Definitions are mainly based on *Le Grand Ricci Online* (BrillOnline *Chinese Reference Library*). They are not meant to be exhaustive but focus on computing-related meanings. Translations of primary sources are provided selectively on their first occurrence, and extensively in the primary sources part.

## Computing Terms of Uncertainty

### Adding up

- 加 *jiā* (加起来)  
to add.  
(Math.) addition.

[The Small six *ren*—*Xiao liuren* 小六壬]

从大安上开始起月。月上加日。日上加时。时上加姓。按阴历算。

From « Great Peace » [position on the finger], add the month. From the month, add the day. From the day, add the hour. From the hour, add the surname. Count according to the lunisolar calendar.

[Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*—*Meihua yishu* 梅花易数]

首先找出年月日，把它们加起来，相加的总数被8除。

First look for the year, month, and day. Add them together and divide the total by 8.

- 上 *shàng* (上起)  
to add, to resupply.  
(Math.) to add (an abacus bead) by putting it up the crosswise bar.

[The Small six *ren*—*Xiao liuren* 小六壬]

从大安上开始起月。月上加日。日上加时。时上加姓。按阴历算。

[The Treasure of the Palm—*Yizhang jin* 一掌金]

年上起月，月上起日，日上起时。男顺行女逆行。



Add month on year, add day on month, add hour on day. Count clockwise for men, counterclockwise for women.

- 總數 *zǒngshù* / 總和 *zǒnghé*  
total, sum

[The Rice method—*Migua* 米卦法]

以食指和拇指挾碗中的米粒放在預置的平盤中，一共取出三撮，分別數出每一撮米的總數。

With the forefinger and the thumb, pick up [a bunch of] grains from a bowl [of raw rice grains] and put them on a plate; do this operation three times; count out separately the total number of grains of each bundle that has been picked up with the fingertips.

[Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*—*Meihua yishu* 梅花易數]

首先找出年月日，把它們加起來，相加的總數被 8 除。

### Reducing: Counting out and Dividing

- 揲 *shé*
  - a. to count serially (ex: by groups of fours)
  - b. to take to examine
  - c. to accumulate, to pile up.

(Divin.) to sort out divining stalks

[The Yarrow ritual—*Shiyi* 筮儀]

次以右手四揲左手之策。

Using the right hand, count out the yarrow stalks in the left hand by fours.

- 除 *chú*
  - a. to remove, to take out
  - b. to discard, to exclude

(Math.) a. division, to divide. b. to subtract

[The Rice method—*Migua* 米卦法]

第一次挾出的米粒總數除以 8，所得餘數即為上卦之數。

The first number of grains is counted out by 8, the remainder is the number of the upper trigram.

[Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*—*Meihua yishu* 梅花易數]

首先找出年月日，把它们加起来，相加的总数被 8 除。

[Note the common meaning of 除 *chú*, to remove/discard, and its mathematical meaning, to divide. Whereas it means “to divide” in the Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes* (*Meihua yishu* 梅花易数) when it applies to *numbers*, it means to “remove”, “to count out” in the Rice method (*Migua* 米卦法) when it applies to *objects* (rice grains)].

- 分 *fēn*  
to divide, to share, to separate

[The Yarrow ritual—*Shiyi* 筮儀]

乃以右手取其一策，反于櫝中，而以左右手中分四十九策，置格之左右兩大刻。

Then take out a stalk with the right hand [out of the fifty stalks], return it to the container; with the left and right hands, divide the [remaining] forty-nine stalks and place the two groups on the left and on the right side [of the divining board].

- 餘 *yú*  
remainder, extra, surplus.  
(Math.) remainder after a division.  
(Bouddh.) *youyu* 有餘: which remains to be accomplished / *wuyu* 無餘: without (karma) residue.

[The Yarrow ritual—*Shiyi* 筮儀]

次歸其所餘之策，或一、或二、或三、或四，而扐之左手无名指間。

The stalks that remain, either one, two, three, or four, are placed between the fourth finger and the middle finger of the left hand.

[The Rice method—*Migua* 米卦法]

第一次挾出的米粒總數除以 8，所得餘數即為上卦之數。

[餘 *yú* is used to designate both the result of counting out objects (Yarrow ritual, Rice method) and of arithmetic division (Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*, although the term is only implicit in the source presented below)].

## Manipulating Objects with the Fingers

- 掛 *guà*  
to hang, to suspend

[The Yarrow ritual—*Shiyi* 筮儀]

次以左手取左大刻之策執之，而以右手取右大刻之一策，掛于左手之小指間。

Pick up the group of yarrow on the left side with the left hand, and take a single stalk from the right side with the right hand, place it between the small finger and the fourth finger of the left hand.

- 扞 *lè*
  - (Divin.) to hold the stalks between the fingers to practice divination
  - Space between the fingers
  - 仿 *lè*: (Math.) surplus, excess, remainder, fractional quantity

[The Yarrow ritual—*Shiyi* 筮儀]

次歸其所餘之策如前，而扞之左手中指之間。

As previously, the stalks that remain are placed between the middle finger and the forefinger of the left hand.

[扞 *lè*, along with 揲 *shé*, are the only two terms specifically used in (stalk) divination contexts. Interestingly, they combine meanings of mathematical operation (variant 仿 *lè*) and physical manipulation.]

- 挾 *xié*  
to hold between the fingers

[The Rice method—*Migua* 米卦法]

以食指和拇指挾碗中的米粒放在預置的平盤中，一共取出三撮，分別數出每一撮米的總數。

- 撮 *cuō*  
to pick up with the fingertips

[The Rice method—*Migua* 米卦法]

以食指和拇指挾碗中的米粒放在預置的平盤中，一共取出三撮，分別數出每一撮米的總數。

- 按 *àn*  
to press with the finger or with the hand

[The Small six *ren*—*Xiao liuren* 小六壬]  
从大安上开始起月。月上加日。日上加时。时上加姓。按阴  
历算。

[Note that the term 按 means “pressing with the fingers”, which refers here to counting with the thumb around the four other fingers’ phalanges.]

- 行 *xíng*  
to circulate, to move

[The Small six *ren*—*Xiao liuren* 小六壬]  
年上起月，月上起日，日上起时。男順行女逆行。

[Note that 行 refers here to the movement of the thumb counting and revolving around the fingers.]

### Casting/Selecting

- 取 / 取出 *qǔ / qǔchū*  
to take out, to extract, to draw out

[The Yarrow ritual—*Shiyi* 筮儀]  
乃以右手取其一策，反于櫝中 (...).  
Then take out a stalk with the right hand [out of the fifty stalks],  
return it to the container (...).

[The Rice method—*Migua* 米卦法]  
以食指和拇指挾碗中的米粒放在預置的平盤中，一共取出三  
撮，分別數出每一撮米的總數。

[Drawing bamboo sticks—*Qiuqian* 求籤]  
用右手差動竹策，差動後分三次取籤，作為上卦與動爻。  
Using the right hand, the practitioner stirs the [eight numbered]  
bamboo sticks [contained in a bamboo cylinder]. After stirring the  
sticks, he will draw a divination stick three times so as to  
determine the upper trigram, the lower trigram and the changing  
line of the hexagram.

## Illustration

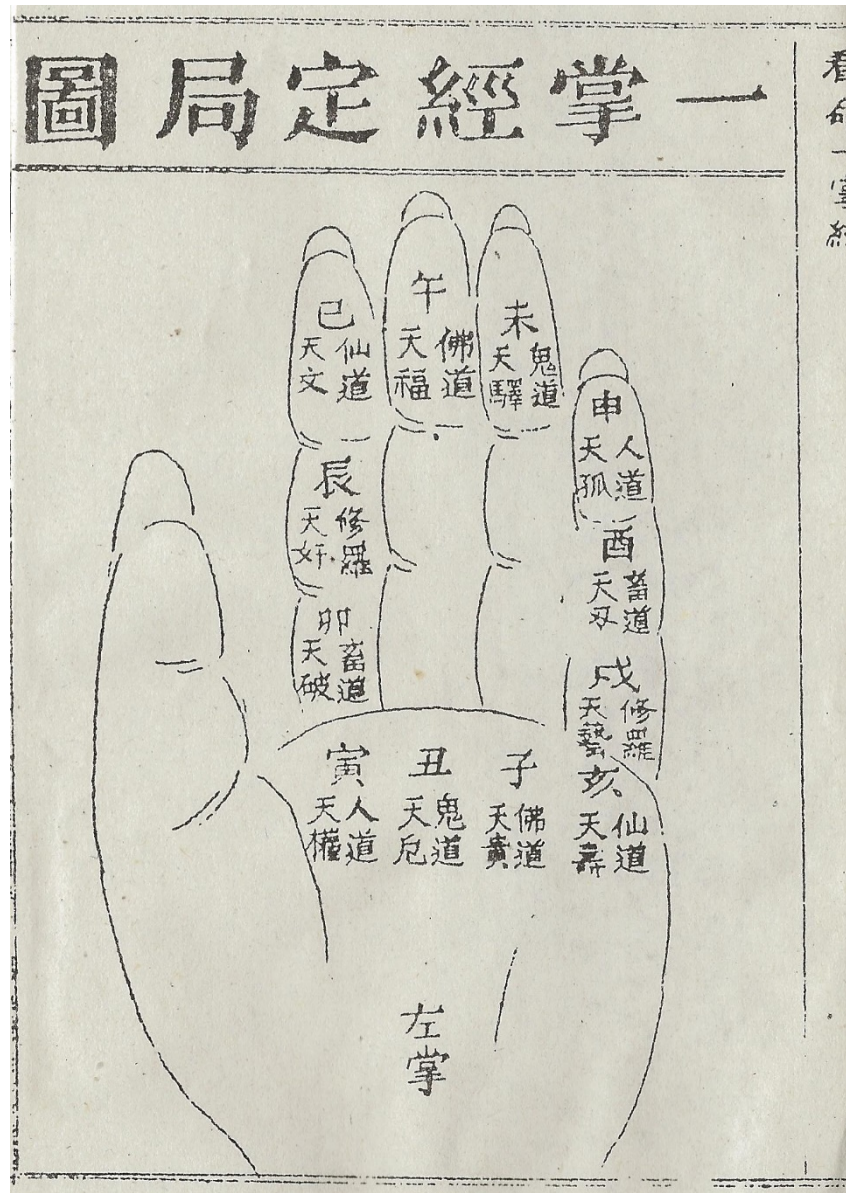


Fig. 4: Hand diagram excerpted from a recent edition of *Damo yizhangjin* 達摩一掌金 (Bodhidharma's Treasure of the Palm) attributed to Monk Yixing from the Tang dynasty (Yixing 釋一行. *Kanming yizhangjing* 看命一掌經 [Classic of Fate Auscultation in the Palm]. No place of publication: 2).

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

[The primary sources below do not present the techniques exhaustively but only focus on the computing parts of each technique.]

#### The Yarrow ritual—*Shiyi* 筮儀 (cleromancy)

Reference:

Zhu Xi 朱熹. 1979. “Shiyi 筮儀” (The Yarrow ritual). In *Zhouyi benyi* 周易本義 [The Original Meaning of *Zhouyi*]. Taipei: Xinwen chuban gufen youxian gongsi (1a–5a). <http://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=141045&page=111> (p. 111–120)

[The yarrow ritual is based on the recurring processing of fifty yarrow stalks. The process involves counting out stalks by fours to determine remainders which are then processed (added) together so as to designate successively the six lines of a hexagram. First, the practitioner takes the bundle of fifty yarrow with both hand.]

乃以右手取其一策，反于櫝中，而以左右手中分四十九策，置格之左右兩大刻。

Then take out a stalk with the right hand [out of the fifty stalks], return it to the container; with the left and right hands, divide the [remaining] forty-nine stalks and place the two groups on the left and on the right side [of the divining board].

次以左手取左大刻之策執之，而以右手取右大刻之一策，掛于左手之小指間。

Pick up the group of yarrows on the left side with the left hand, and take a single stalk from the right side with the right hand, place it between the small finger and the fourth finger of the left hand.

次以右手四揲左手之策。

Using the right hand, count out the yarrow stalks in the left hand by fours.

次歸其所餘之策，或一、或二、或三、或四，而扚之左手无名指間。

The stalks that remain, either one, two, three, or four, are placed between the fourth finger and the middle finger of the left hand.

次以右手反過揲之策於左大刻，遂取右大刻之策執之，而以左手四揲之。

With the right hand, return the yarrows counted out [by fours] to the left side, take the yarrows on the right side and count them out by fours with the left hand.

次歸其所餘之策如前，而扞之左手中指之間。

As previously, the stalks that remain are placed between the middle finger and the forefinger of the left hand.

一變所餘之策，左一則右必三，左二則右亦二，左三則右必一，左四則右亦四。通掛一之策，不五則九。五以一其四而為奇，九以兩其四而為偶，奇者三而偶者一也。

Among the possible remaining stalks, if the remainder from the left side is one, then the remainder from the right must be three, if the remainder from the left side is two, then the remainder from the right must be two, if the remainder from the left side is three, then the remainder from the right must be one, if the remainder from the left side is four, then the remainder from the right must be four.

[In this first operation, the total number of stalks placed between the fingers of the left hand is either five or nine. The whole operation is repeated twice, but without the single stalk placed between the small finger and the fourth finger, so that the total number of stalks placed between the fingers in each of these two operations is either four or eight.]

掛扞之數，五、四為奇，九、八為偶。掛扞三奇合十三策，則過揲三十六策為老陽。

Among the [total] number of stalks placed between the finger [either 4, 5, 8 or 9], five and four are odd, nine and eight are even. If three odds have been placed between the fingers [5+4+4], it amounts to thirteen stalks, thirty-six stalks have been counted out by fours (?), and the line of the hexagram is designated “old yang” [changing yang line].

[This three-fold operation is repeated five times so as to determine the six lines of the hexagram.]

### The Rice Method—*Migua* 米卦法 (Cleromancy)

Reference:

Ruli Jushi 如理居士. 2007. *Baihua weilai yuzhishu* 白話未來預知術 [Method to predict the future in vernacular language]. Taipei: Haixin tushi, p. 16.

以食指和拇指挾碗中的米粒放在預置的平盤中，一共取出三撮，分別數出每一撮米的總數。

1. 第一次挾出的米粒總數除以 8，所得餘數即為上卦之數。

2. 第二次挾出的米粒總數除以 8，所得餘數即為下卦之數。
3. 第三次挾出的米粒總數除以 6，所得餘數即為動爻之數。

With the forefinger and the thumb, pick up [a bunch of] grains from a bowl [of raw rice grains] and put them on a plate; do this operation three times; count out separately the number of grains of each bundle that has been picked up with the fingertips.

1. The first number of grains is counted out by 8, the remainder is the number of the upper trigram [based on a conventional numbering of trigrams from 1 to 8].
2. The second number of grains is counted out by 8, the remainder is the number of the lower trigram.
3. The third number of grains is counted out by 6, the remainder is the number of the changing line [one of the six lines of the hexagram].

### Drawing Bamboo Sticks—*Qiuqian* 求籤 (Cleromancy)

Reference:

Ruli Jushi 如理居士. 2007. *Baihua weilai yuzhishu* 白話未來預知術 [Method to predict the future in vernacular language]. Taipei: Haixin tushi, p. 18.

1. 用右手差動竹策，差動後分三次取籤，作為上卦與動爻。
  2. 第一次差動八支竹策，順勢取出一支，看號碼幾號，記下，作為上卦。隨後將籤支放回籤筒。
  3. 第二次差動八支竹策，再順勢任意取出一支，看號碼幾號，記下，作為下卦。隨後將籤支放回籤筒。
  4. 取出籤筒內七號和八號竹策，置於桌上，餘下六支（一至六號），作為動爻參數。
  5. 第三次差動籤筒內六支竹策，任意取出一支，看是幾號，記下，作為所求之卦的動爻。
1. Using the right hand, the practitioner stirs the [eight numbered] bamboo sticks [contained in a bamboo cylinder]. After stirring the sticks, he will draw a divination stick three times so as to determine the upper trigram, the lower trigram and the changing line of the hexagram.
  2. The first time, the practitioner stirs the eight bamboo sticks and draws one stick out without extra trouble (?). He looks at the number, memorizes it: it designates the upper trigram. Then he puts the divination stick back in the cylinder.
  3. The second time, the practitioner stirs the eight bamboo sticks and draws one stick out again without extra trouble (?). He looks at the number, memorizes it: it designates the lower trigram. Then he puts the divination stick back in the cylinder.
  4. The practitioner takes the sticks numbered seven and eight out of the cylinder and put them on the table. Only six sticks remain



(numbered from one to six), they will designate the parameter of the changing line.

5. The third time, the practitioner stirs the six bamboo sticks contained in the cylinder, draws one stick out without extra trouble (?), looks at the number, memorizes it: it designates the changing line of the selected hexagram.

### The Small six ren—*Xiao liuren* 小六壬 (Chronomancy)

Reference:

Pan Tongjue 潘统觉 (ed.). 2010. *Duyitang tongshu* 读易堂通书 2010 (Almanac of the Yi reading hall 2010). Zhejiang: (no publisher name), p. 4.

从大安上开始起月。月上加日。日上加时。时上加姓。按阴历算。

From « Great Peace » [position on the finger], add the month. From the month, add the day. From the day, add the hour. From the hour, add the surname. Count according to the lunisolar calendar.

### The Treasure of the Palm—*Yizhang jin* 一掌金 (Chronomancy)

Reference:

Yixing 釋一行. 1995. *Damo yizhangjin* 達摩一掌金 (Bodhidharma's Treasure of the Palm). Taizhong: Ruicheng shuju, p. 2.

年上起月，月上起日，日上起时。男順行女逆行。

Add month on year, add day on month, add hour on day. Count clockwise for men, counterclockwise for women.

### Plum-blossom Numbers of the Changes—*Meihua yishu* 梅花易数

Reference:

Interview with M. Tang, an amateur diviner, Kaifeng, 2010.

For a contemporary edition of a classical work on this method, see Shao Yong 邵雍. Edited and commented by Zheng Tong 郑同. *Meihua yishu jiangyi* 梅花易数讲义 (Explanations and commentaries on the Plum-blossom numbers of the *Changes*). Beijing: Hualing chubanshe, 2009.

首先找出年月日，把它们加起来，相加的总数被8除。然后记下来，为天干。再把年月日时加起来，相加的总数被8除，记下来，为地支。把天干地支合在一起看是否相生。然后再把天干地支的总和加起来被6除，找出动爻看是否相生。这样才能算数真正的吉凶。首先应该把这个符号研究，直到它们的作用和意义，对告拆卦很有帮助。这种方法能测万事万物。

First look for the year, month, and day. Add them together and divide the total by 8. Remember the result [the remainder of the division], it designates the Heavenly Stem [meaning here the upper trigram of the

hexagram]. Again, add the year, month, day, and hour, divide the total by 8. Remember the result [the remainder of the division], it designates the Earthly Branch [here the lower trigram]. Compare the Stem and the Branch and see if they engender one another or not [according to the doctrine of the five phases]. Then, add the numbers of the Stem and the Branch and divide the total by 6. The result designates the changing line of the hexagram. See if the new trigrams engender one another or not. It is only in doing so that one can compute genuine good and bad luck. One should first study these symbols, their use and meaning. They are very useful to understand hexagrams. This method allows the prediction of anything.

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