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Stéphanie Homola

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Stéphanie Homola | orcid: 0000-0002-1329-3610

Research Fellow, French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), Paris, France;  
French Research Institute on East Asia (IFRAE), Paris

## **Now You Can Find It All on the Internet: Spelling Out Secret Knowledge in China and the Challenge of Complexity**

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Author's version

### **Abstract**

This study examines the challenges that Chinese practitioners of divination face as their specialized knowledge becomes increasingly available online. Traditionally, diviners rely on body-based computation skills to memorize and apply complex techniques. These skills are the hallmarks of an expertise whose transmission is usually safeguarded within a personal relationship between master and disciple. However, some practitioners disclose these skills in online videos making them available to a wide audience. This work analyzes the rhetoric that practitioners develop when revealing secret knowledge to the general public in the broader context of changing modes of knowledge transmission and in contrast to other fields of traditional knowledge in China. I rely on the analysis of a video disclosing specialized skills called “Secret formulas of the palm” (*shouzhang jue* 手掌诀) to show how, through online dissemination, specialists of divination use complexity as a rhetorical device in the construction of their expertise.

### **Keywords**

complexity – divination – hand mnemonics – knowledge transmission – popularization – *shouzhang jue* 手掌诀 – “Secret formulas of the palm” – divination skill transfer in social media

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Based on the case of divinatory arts in China, this work examines the challenges that practitioners of divination, as holders of specialized know-how, face nowadays when their knowledge becomes increasingly available on the internet and in social media. In particular, diviners traditionally rely on body-based computation skills to help memorize and apply complex techniques. These skills are the hallmarks of an expertise whose transmission used to be controlled within the framework of a personal relationship between master and disciple. However, some practitioners disclose and explain these skills in online videos, making them available to a wide audience. This study analyzes the rhetoric that practitioners develop when revealing secret knowledge to the general public in the broader context of changing modes of knowledge transmission and in contrast to other fields of traditional knowledge in China. I argue that, unlike martial arts and Chinese medicine, specialists of divinatory arts do not fear that their knowledge might disappear if they do not disseminate it or that it will be distorted by Intangible Cultural Heritage valuation policies. Rather, they are confronted with another source of concern inherent to esoteric knowledge, which I call the challenge of complexity. Based on the analysis of a video disclosing skills of the trade called “Secret formulas of the palm,” I show how, through online dissemination, specialists of divination use complexity as a rhetorical device in the construction of their expertise.

The tension between secrecy on the one hand and transmission and circulation on the other is inherent in so-called “esoteric” knowledge and practices. Based on a working definition developed at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices in a Global Perspective” (CAS-E) at the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, “esoteric practices” can be defined through the combination of four main factors:

[P]ractices that: (1) have as their goal the ability to identify and influence present and future life events; (2) assume special knowledge, prolonged

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1 This paper was initially presented at the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) UK Annual Conference 2023, “An Unwell World? Anthropology in a Speculative Mode,” at the SOAS University of London, 11–14 April 2023 (<https://theasa.org/conferences/asa2023/>, accessed 12 February 2025). I thank the conference panel participants as well as the anonymous IJDP reviewers for their constructive comments, which have greatly helped to improve this work.

education, and/or special abilities, features that typically lead to the formation of specialization and expertism, which includes of strategies of secrecy and concealment; (3) are based on forms of ritual efficacy, which are generally concealed [...], and so cannot – or only partially – be apprehended by the senses; and for that reason (4) are contested and precarious, to different degrees in different culturally- and milieu-specific circumstances, since there is – especially in the twenty-first century – no unquestioned or generally accepted explanatory model for the effects ascribed to such practices.<sup>2</sup>

This article looks in particular at what happens to “strategies of secrecy and concealment” when esoteric practices are confronted with the potential for dissemination of information technologies. How is esoteric knowledge transmitted in contemporary societies where communication technologies allow information to circulate and be disclosed to an ever-wider audience? Tensions in the vulgarization process of esoteric knowledge are not a new trend. In the past, the development of printing technologies and publishing industries at various times constituted both a challenge and an opportunity for the dissemination of esoteric knowledge and practices.<sup>3</sup> The internet and social media constitute another disruptive innovation that is likely to redefine the dynamics of esoteric practices as they significantly increase the speed and outreach of knowledge circulation.

In China, divinatory practices are also part of a wider context of traditional knowledge, such as martial arts, popular Confucianism, or Chinese medicine, that faces similar challenges. Over the past ten years, a number of studies have noted a phenomenon of “embarrassment” within various traditional fields of knowledge and practices when faced with public dissemination. Laurent Chircop-Reyes mentions “a certain embarrassment linked to historicity and martiality when it comes to promoting traditional martial arts outside the private sphere.”<sup>4</sup> Hans Steinmüller notes a double embarrassment in the public evaluation of local popular Confucianism:

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2 “Project Outline: Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective,” CAS-E, accessed 25 February 2025, <https://cas-e.de/about-us/project-outline/>. CAS-E is a Center for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (*Kollegforschungsgruppe*), funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG).

3 Bernardi Junqueira, “Revealing Secrets.”

4 Chircop-Reyes, “Embarrassing Martial Arts,” 19.

Elements of popular Confucianism (which had been forcefully denied in the past) remain somewhat embarrassing for many people in the countryside. At the same time urbanites sometimes inversely perceive the Maoist condemnation of popular Confucianism as an awkward survival of peasant narrow-mindedness – all the more so as Confucian traditions are now reinvented and revitalized as cultural heritage.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Frédéric Obringer highlights how the “heritage designation process” creates tensions between the “protection” and “denaturation” of medical knowledge and practices.<sup>6</sup>

The embarrassment discussed in these works comes from the constraints faced by knowledge holders in finding a balance between preserving a kind of cultural integrity on the one hand and engaging in promotion and dissemination processes on the other. This embarrassment has several dimensions. The first one concerns the status of the master-disciple relationship as a traditional mode of knowledge transmission, i.e., a controlled, personal, selective, and elective mode of transmission that contrasts, for example, with state-sanctioned, open-to-all, and standardized teaching in classrooms at school or university. Controlled and limited transmission within a master-disciple relationship aims to preserve the quality and specificity of knowledge, particularly with regard to schools or lineages of practice. It also regulates commercial competition:

[The] traditional mode of transmission makes sense when it is remembered that martial arts were primarily a way of making a living. Given that these skills were valuable precisely because they were rare, one would not want to spread them.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, different kinds of tensions have emerged as to the relevance of the master-disciple relationship in contemporary societies. In Shanxi, some martial arts masters express their concern about the limitation of master-disciple transmission and fear that because it is so restrictive, knowledge is being lost. As one practitioner puts it: “I’m afraid we’re the last ones.”<sup>8</sup> The discourse is different in Chinese medicine, which is taught at universities, meaning that it has already abandoned the master-disciple relationship as its

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5 Steinmüller, “How Popular Confucianism Became Embarrassing,” 81.

6 Obringer, “Chinese Medicine and the Enticement of Heritage Status,” 15.

7 Judkins and Nielson, *Creation of Wing Chun*, 88; quoted in Chircop-Reyes, “Embarrassing Martial Arts,” 20.

8 Chircop-Reyes, “Embarrassing Martial Arts,” 19.

main mode of transmission. As early as the 1950s, practitioners declared that modern teaching was breaking the continuity of Chinese medicine as a living tradition and encouraged a heightened appreciation for classical sources and a return to traditional methods of instruction.<sup>9</sup> Nowadays, the master-disciple relationship endures in this field, with some university teachers privately training their disciples (*tudi* 徒弟) alongside their students (*xuesheng* 学生) at the university. Faced with the limitations of the university model in regard to Chinese medicine, there have been attempts since the 1990s to reconsider the merits of master-disciple transmission.<sup>10</sup> These contrasting situations show that the evaluation of the master-disciple relationship in different fields depends on their level of institutionalization or official recognition.

A second source of tension or discomfort concerns the question of standardization of knowledge implied by more open modes of transmission, which has taken on new importance in the context of the growing impact of the internationally recognized category of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Applications for inclusion on ICH lists, which require detailed recording of knowledge and know-how, involve a process of selection and disclosure that creates various tensions within communities. As Chircop-Reyes notes about martial arts in Shanxi: “These tensions are almost imperceptible to laypersons, but may create social division between those who are selected by local institutions to represent their art as *feiyi* (ICH), and those who are not.”<sup>11</sup> The process of defining an “orthodoxy” among several traditions is not only contingent but also in turn affects the chosen tradition, which may then no longer be considered orthodox by the communities.<sup>12</sup> Through the case of a local family drugstore business in southwest China, Lena Springer also shows how heritage registration as well as the Chinese environment of bureaucracy and audits “run against the secrecy of what traditional knowledge holders produce, sell and convey to disciples over years of exclusive training.” UNESCO and Chinese trade and heritage registration regimes also “assume an essential locality of ethnomedical heritage” that ignores the spatial and social mobility of kinship-based trade that extends throughout China.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the complex transformations brought about by changing transmission modes and valuation policies, we can observe another far-reaching evolution that particularly affects divinatory knowledge and practices in China. Secret technical knowledge that was once the prerogative of skilled

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9 Marié, “Transmission and Practice of Chinese Medicine,” 9.

10 Obringer, “Chinese Medicine and the Enticement of Heritage Status,” 16.

11 Chircop-Reyes, “Embarrassing Martial Arts,” 23.

12 Li, “Transmission des manuscrits des *dongba*.”

13 Springer, “Recognising Roots,” n.p.

practitioners is increasingly accessible on the internet, reaching a wider audience through social media.

To understand how practitioners frame and justify the disclosure of secret knowledge, it is important to put the current popularity of divinatory arts on social media in perspective with a broader history of their popularization in the twentieth century. The first part of this article shows how the popularization of divinatory knowledge is not a new phenomenon. As early as the 1920s in China and with even more impact since the 1990s in Taiwan, some practitioners have encouraged the dissemination and didactic explanation of technical knowledge. Social media not only considerably increase the scale and impact of knowledge circulation, they also create a public space where practitioners express how and why they publicize what used to be considered esoteric knowledge. In the second part, I explain the technique known as “Secret formulas of the palm,” showing concretely how this body-based know-how is associated with a high level of expertise, in comparison with other modes of knowing used by practitioners. The third part goes into the details of a social media video in which a practitioner explains how to use the “Secret formulas of the palm” to calculate a horoscope. I examine how the practitioner deals rhetorically and technically with the complexity of the palm formulas and of their teaching. Based on this case study, the fourth part assesses the specificity of online videos as knowledge transmission tools, and how the digital sharing of skills affects the positioning of specialists and the interactions between them. In conclusion, I address what I call the “challenge of complexity,” showing that, while practitioners strive to make these practices less tedious and more understandable, they also develop a rhetoric of complexity disclosure that reinforces their legitimacy as experts.

## 2. A Brief Overview of the Popularization of Fate Calculation in China and Taiwan

In the very rich tradition of divination in China, fate calculation (*suanming shu* 算命术 or *shushu* 数术) refers to various methods of mechanical divination,<sup>14</sup> whose purpose is to interpret a person’s fate – understood as the vicissitudes of life from birth to death – based on their birth date. Fate calculation, also called “horoscopy” (*mingli* 命理), such as the Eight Signs method (*bazi* 八字), is the most widespread kind of divination in Chinese societies and communities

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14 Unlike inspired divination, which relies on a medium as an intermediary to access divine knowledge, mechanical divination is founded on the meticulous observation of natural and cosmological laws.

worldwide. This is a highly technical tradition involving complex computations to literally “calculate” fate.

In imperial times, particularly under the Qing dynasty,<sup>15</sup> divinatory knowledge enjoyed official recognition as part of the activities of scholars and was mainly transmitted through the master-disciple relationship. After the fall of the empire in 1911 and anti-traditional, anti-Confucian revolutionary, and nationalist movements, divination lost all official recognition. It was excluded from official knowledge – which became “academic” knowledge as universities were implemented based on the Western model – and from official religions and relegated to the realm of “superstition.”

In the 1920s and 1930s, practitioners tried to resist the loss of their status, notably Yuan Shushan 袁树珊 (1881–1968), who was known as one of the “three masters of fate calculation from Shanghai.” His aim was to adapt fate calculation knowledge to the modernizing nationalist ideology and to science, which was considered the major component of modernity.<sup>16</sup> Among the reforms undertaken by Yuan Shushan was a strong critique of the master-disciple relationship: this traditional mode of transmission was considered anti-modern and anti-scientific. Yuan Shushan was one of the first practitioners to offer public and distance learning classes in Shanghai in the 1920s. Many practitioners followed his example. In this context, the transformation of the role of the master into a class teacher was directly linked to the transformation of the teaching material. Before the reforms initiated by Yuan Shushan, technical manuals of divination circulated among practitioners and their apprentices, but they were not designed to replace the master’s teaching and were mainly used as aide-mémoires by people who already knew the techniques. As Ho Peng Yoke notes, these books did not aim to explain the methods exhaustively:

Texts describing the system are often quite incomprehensible except to those who understand the system; [...] the author purposely wrote in an incomprehensible way to make [the handbook] useful only to those in the Astronomical Bureau and to selected military officers and advisors.<sup>17</sup>

Yuan Shushan’s idea was to standardize divinatory knowledge, which could then be published in standardized textbooks and taught in classrooms by “standardized” teachers. Although individual transmission from master to disciple remained common, Yuan’s teaching in the 1920s and 1930s was the first

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15 Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, 1991.

16 Li and Lackner, “Contradictory Forms of Knowledge?”

17 Ho, *Chinese Mathematical Astrology*, 85–86.

attempt to transmit and popularize divinatory knowledge outside the closed confines of master-disciple teaching.

Another significant wave of popularization was launched by the so-called Modern School of Horoscopy (*xiandai pai* 现代派) in Taiwan, initiated by practitioner Liaowu Jushi 了无居士 (b. 1947). This school advocates a rationalization and standardization of divinatory knowledge with a view to becoming an academic discipline. As with Yuan in his day, this conception requires a new teaching paradigm. Once standardized and shared by a community of specialists, divinatory knowledge could be transmitted in books and in collective courses taught by teachers, who themselves would come from a standardized training program with a state-sanctioned diploma.

Although this development program has remained wishful thinking due to the persistent stigma of superstition and the difficulties of standardizing knowledge, a surge of public enthusiasm for fate calculation in Taiwan in the 1990s has been described as “fortune-telling fever” (*suangming re* 算命热). It was characterized by extensive media coverage, commercialization of divinatory services, modern technology, enthusiasm for non-Chinese methods, and a boom in publications of all sorts. In particular, more and more didactic manuals were published in virtually every possible method. These manuals had the explicit goal to replace masters and were intended either for clients who could conduct their own consultation (*bu qiuren* 不求人, practicing alone without outside help) or for people who wanted to learn the techniques themselves.

Starting in the 2000s, a similar fever reached mainland China, where practitioners and their services became more and more conspicuous in libraries and in the urban landscape in general. At the same time, professional diviners in China and Taiwan promptly took the digital turn and launched specialized websites to provide online divination services.

Thus, even before the spread of social networks in the 2010s, divinatory knowledge was being increasingly popularized through printed publication. However, in practice, books were rarely enough to become proficient in fate calculation, given the highly technical, often demanding, nature of these techniques, and many people combined book-based self-study with the teaching of a master. Indeed, although they willingly published works on the basics of fate calculation to ride the “fortune-telling fever,” most practitioners still kept the core of the knowledge or the tricks of the trade – the esoteric part of the knowledge proper – to themselves and shared them only sparingly and gradually with carefully selected persons. In the early 2020s, however, a significant part of such esoteric knowledge – including so-called “Secret formulas of the palm” – started to be spread through social media in a teaching setting – oral and visual – that could compare in some ways to the direct transmission between a master and a disciple.

### 3. The Case of “Secret Formulas of the Palm”

To understand the esoteric dimension of the “Secret formulas of the palm” and how they can circulate through social media, it is necessary to go into detail about the technique and analyze how the same know-how – here, how to compute a horoscope – can be learned, transmitted, and practiced in very different ways based on different teaching media and configurations – whether book-based, body-based, or digital – which determine different discourses of expertise.

“Secret formulas of the fingers” (*zhizhang jue* 指掌诀) or “Secret formulas of the palm” (*shouzhang jue* 手掌诀) are a clever method or trick that trained practitioners of fate calculation can use to calculate the horoscope of a person.

Most fate calculation methods such as the Eight Signs technique start with establishing or calculating the horoscope of a person. In a second stage, the specialist will interpret the horoscope to answer the clients’ questions. The first stage itself – establishing the horoscope – includes several steps. The very first step of this process – i.e., what the practitioner always starts with in a consultation – amounts to a date conversion. Chinese fate calculation is based on the conception that a person’s fate depends on their birth date and that one can derive knowledge on their fate by analyzing the calendar components of the birth date. So, at the beginning of a consultation, the practitioner always asks the person about their date of birth. Clients most often indicate it according to the Gregorian calendar.<sup>18</sup> The practitioner then needs to convert this date of birth into the Chinese traditional lunisolar calendar and the so-called sexagenary cycle, on which fate calculation methods are based.

The sexagenary cycle is a cyclic representation of time based on the combination of two series, the ten Heavenly Stems – *jia* 甲, *yi* 乙, *bing* 丙, *ding* 丁, *wu* 戊, *ji* 己, *geng* 庚, *xin* 辛, *ren* 壬, *gui* 癸 – and the twelve Earthly Branches – *zi* 子, *chou* 丑, *yin* 寅, *mao* 卯, *chen* 辰, *si* 巳, *wu* 午, *wei* 未, *shen* 申, *you* 酉, *xu* 戌, *hai* 亥. Each unit of time (year, month, day, hour) of the birth date is expressed by a pair of these two series. The first element of the first series is associated with the first element of the second series, starting with the Stem-Branch pair *jiazi* 甲子, then *yichou* 乙丑, *bingyin* 丙寅, etc. Six series of ten are required to reach the first element *jiazi* again, which makes for a cycle with sixty elements. A horoscope is constituted by the four components of the date of birth, expressed by one of these sixty Stem-Branch pairs. For instance, *gengshen* for the year, *renxu* for the month, *guihai* for the day, and *jiachou* for the hour. These are the eight elements (four times two) that give its name to the Eight Signs method.

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18 Or in the Republican calendar starting in 1911 in Taiwan.

Concretely, there are three different ways to make the date conversion from the Gregorian calendar to the traditional calendar and the sexagenary cycle. Most practitioners consult a so-called “perpetual calendar” (*wannianli* 万年历). This calendar is a series of tables that list the correspondences between the Gregorian calendar and the sexagenary cycle for any given year. Thus, one can find the corresponding Eight Signs for any date of birth from, for instance, 1930 to 2030. This calendar, in the form of a thick book, is part of the basic paraphernalia of fate calculation practitioners. Being able to navigate smoothly and accurately in these complex correspondence tables – although not the prerogative of diviners alone – is part of the skills that practitioners of fate calculation must master.

Nowadays, many practitioners no longer use the perpetual calendar but instead use computer software or an application on their mobile phone that automatically determines the Eight Signs corresponding to one’s date of birth in the Gregorian calendar.

There is a third way to make the date conversion using esoteric mnemonic poems (*gejue* 歌诀, *koujue* 口诀) combined with manual computation, also called “hand mnemonics” in Western literature.<sup>19</sup> Whereas relying on the calendar or on computer software to compute a horoscope is part of an expert, non-secret knowledge, hand mnemonics is considered a secret knowledge that is traditionally transmitted from master to disciple. In this context, written forms of this practice may circulate in the form of aide-mémoires showing hand diagrams accompanied by poems (Fig. 1). As such, the diagrams can only be understood by insiders who already know how the technique works.

These poems, combined with manual computation, are called “Secret formulas of the fingers” (*zhizhang jue* 指掌诀) or “Secret formulas of the palm” (*shouzhang jue* 手掌诀). Most people, including some practitioners who use it, do not know how to call this practice. Counting on the left hand, using the thumb to go over the phalanges in a circular way, is a topical representation associated with diviners that can be observed, for instance, in Chinese historical TV series nowadays. Most people know that diviners do that, but they do not understand what they are doing exactly. The finger movements look mysterious and are part of the diviner’s professional demeanor, a mark of expertise and power.

To make the date conversion using “Secret formulas of the palm,” three poems need to be memorized to calculate, in turn, the three Stem-Branch pairs corresponding to, respectively, the month, day, and hour of birth.<sup>20</sup> Calculating

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19 Hanson, “Hand Mnemonics in Classical Chinese Medicine.”

20 The poems for month and hour are made of five or six verses, whereas the poem for the day is longer, with thirty verses.

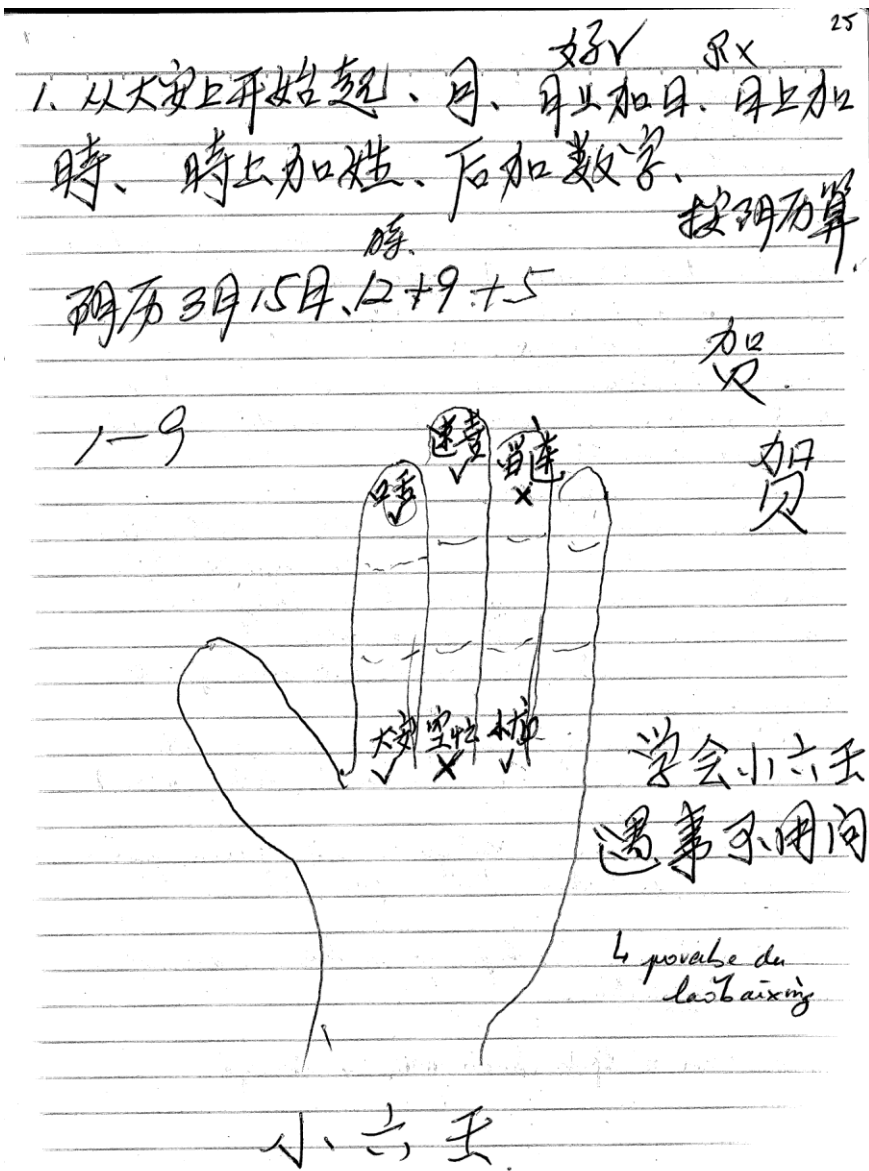


FIGURE 1 Fate calculation method (*xiao liuren* 小六壬, lesser *liuren*) taught by an amateur diviner (Stéphanie Homola, field notebook, Kaifeng, 2010)

the Stem-Branch pair of the year follows a different process, as we shall see. For instance, the poem used to calculate the Stem-Branch pair of the hour of birth is called “Method to determine the hour based on the day” (*rishang qi shifa* 日上起时法). As the name indicates, the Stem-Branch of the hour of birth is calculated based on the Stem-Branch of the day of birth. So, this computation comes last in the date conversion process.

*Jiaji qi jiazi* 甲己起甲子 *Yigeng qi bingzi* 乙庚起丙子 *Bingxin qi wuzi* 丙辛起戊子 *Dingren qi gengzi* 丁壬起庚子 *Wugui qi renzi* 戊癸起壬子

The first line of the poem reads as follows: “If the Stem of the day is *jia* 甲 or *ji* 己, start (counting) from *jiazi* 甲子.” It means that if the person was born on a day with the Stem *jia* or *ji*, then the Stem-Branch pair of the first hour of this particular day is *jiazi*. Because of the cyclic dimension of the sexagenary cycle, it can be deduced from this line – although this is not directly stated in the poem – that the second hour of this day is *yichou* 乙丑, the third is *bingyin* 丙寅, etc. If the person was born at four o’clock in the morning – i.e., the third hour in the traditional conception of time<sup>21</sup> – the practitioner knows that the Stem-Branch pair of the hour – i.e., the hour component of the horoscope of this person – is *bingyin*. To facilitate counting the sexagenary cycle in their mind, practitioners mentally superimpose the sexagenary cycle on predefined positions on the joints of the fingers of the left hand, as we shall see in more detail (Fig. 5 and 6). Using the thumb to count, they put it on the first – here *jiazi* – position and move by two positions to reach the position corresponding to the third hour.

In the same way, the second line of the poem states: “If the Stem of the day is *yi* or *geng*, start counting with *bingzi*.” The five lines of the poem cover the range of the day’s ten possible stems, which allows the practitioner to calculate the Stem-Branch of the hour for any day.

In the context of oral transmission from master to disciple, this is the kind of knowledge that is transmitted and learned by heart. If practitioners write down the poems and draw the hand diagram or even publish them in this way, it is still not understandable to outsiders. If one wants to fully decipher the logic of these palm formulas, the set of combinations that are included in the

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21 The day has twelve hours (half as many as the hours of the day as we know them now), starting from 11:00 PM–1:00 AM (first hour), 1:00 AM–3:00 AM (second hour), 3:00 AM–5:00 AM (third hour), etc.

poem (but not fully stated) can be fully translated into tabular form (Table 1).<sup>22</sup> This type of chart has been published, for example, by practitioners of the Modern School of Horoscopy in Taiwan, with the aim of clarification and popularization. The poem only comprises the first two lines of the table (in grey in Table 1), the rest can be computed mentally by the practitioner by following the sexagenary cycle – that practitioners also know by heart – with the external support of the hand. In short, the poems, combined with the hand, make it possible to memorize the full calendar – a thick book of tables with tens of thousands of entries!

The three different ways to calculate a horoscope – tabular (calendar), digital (app or software), and hand mnemonics (poems and hand) – should not be considered solely in a linear way determined by historical and technological changes but also as different modes of knowledge that can be used concurrently depending on the context. Understanding the specificity of each mode is important to explain how esoteric methods can still be considered relevant in the face of technological progress.

Hand mnemonics is a practical and portable method that is particularly relevant for practitioners working in the street. Street diviners, as I could observe them in Beijing or Kaifeng for instance, never carry a perpetual calendar with them.<sup>23</sup> They count quickly and discreetly with their hand, which is also part of their aura as experts in divination. Relying on palm formulas rather than on the calendar also makes for the very good reputation of blind diviners. Since they have to learn everything by heart, often from a very young age, clients know that they master the techniques thoroughly and cannot be accused of using information gathered visually – such as the way a person dresses – to analyze the fate of the person. Nowadays, street diviners could easily use apps on their mobile phones. However, I never saw any doing it. Street diviners usually have very little time to gain the confidence of clients, who are some- times just passers-by whom they have to win over instantly. Counting on one’s hand rather than pulling out one’s cell phone and using an app – which anyone can do – is certainly a way for street diviners to impress clients and reassure them of their expertise. When mastered expertly, hand mnemonics can also be quicker than looking up a date in the perpetual calendar. Hand mnemonics also has a deeper meaning related to the mastering of knowledge. To be sure, it has to be practiced for a long time and regularly to be performed swiftly, which distinguishes experienced practitioners from amateurs. But beyond practical training, it denotes a degree of knowledge and understanding that exceeds simple rote learning.

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22 Homola, “La relation de maître à disciple en question,” 25.

23 Homola, “Les usages de la main,” 126.

Table 1 Tabular form of the “Method to determine the time based on the day”<sup>a</sup>

<b>Stem of the Day</b> <b>Hour of Birth</b>	<i>jia ji</i> 甲己	<i>yi geng</i> 乙庚	<i>bing xin</i> 丙辛	<i>ding ren</i> 丁壬	<i>wu gui</i> 戊癸
11:00 PM–1:00 AM	<i>jiazi</i> 甲子	<i>bingzi</i> 丙子	<i>wuzi</i> 戊子	<i>gengzi</i> 庚子	<i>renzi</i> 壬子
1:00 AM–3:00 AM	<i>yichou</i> 乙丑	<i>dingchou</i> 丁丑	<i>jichou</i> 己丑	<i>xinchou</i> 辛丑	<i>guichou</i> 癸丑
3:00 AM–5:00 AM	<i>bingyin</i> 丙寅	<i>wuyin</i> 戊寅	<i>gengyin</i> 庚寅	<i>renyin</i> 壬寅	<i>jiayin</i> 甲寅
5:00 AM–7:00 AM	<i>dingmao</i> 丁卯	<i>jimao</i> 己卯	<i>xinmao</i> 辛卯	<i>guimao</i> 癸卯	<i>yimao</i> 乙卯
7:00 AM–9:00 AM	<i>wuchen</i> 戊辰	<i>gengchen</i> 庚辰	<i>renchen</i> 壬辰	<i>jiachen</i> 甲辰	<i>bingchen</i> 丙辰
9:00 AM–11:00 AM	<i>jisi</i> 己巳	<i>xinsi</i> 辛巳	<i>guisi</i> 癸巳	<i>yisi</i> 乙巳	<i>dingsi</i> 丁巳
11:00 AM–1:00 PM	<i>gengwu</i> 庚午	<i>renwu</i> 壬午	<i>jiawu</i> 甲午	<i>bingwu</i> 丙午	<i>wuwu</i> 戊午
1:00 PM–3:00 PM	<i>xinwei</i> 辛未	<i>guiwei</i> 癸未	<i>yiwei</i> 乙未	<i>dingwei</i> 丁未	<i>jiwei</i> 己未
3:00 PM–5:00 PM	<i>renshen</i> 壬申	<i>jiashen</i> 甲申	<i>bingshen</i> 丙申	<i>wushen</i> 戊申	<i>gengshen</i> 庚申
5:00 pm–7:00 pm	<i>guiyou</i> 癸酉	<i>yiyou</i> 乙酉	<i>dingyou</i> 丁酉	<i>jiyou</i> 己酉	<i>xinyou</i> 辛酉
7:00 pm–9:00 PM	<i>jiayu</i> 甲戌	<i>bingxu</i> 丙戌	<i>wuxu</i> 戊戌	<i>gengxu</i> 庚戌	<i>renxu</i> 壬戌
9:00 pm–11:00 pm	<i>yihai</i> 乙亥	<i>dinghai</i> 丁亥	<i>jihai</i> 己亥	<i>xinhai</i> 辛亥	<i>guihai</i> 癸亥

a Ruli Jushi 如理居士, *Bazi guo wuguan* 八字過五關 [The five stages of the Eight Signs] (Taipei: Wuling, 2010), 107, quoted in Homola, “La relation de maître à disciple en question,” 25.

Learning and practicing palm formulas means assimilating the inner logic of the calendar system and fate calculation. Moreover, this is not only a specific knowledge of how to calculate the Eight Signs but an embodied skill that, when truly mastered, can be used and adapted in all sorts of relevant circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

24 Historically, hand mnemonics has been used in various fields of knowledge in China

Unlike hand formulas, the calendar is not meant to be learned by heart, but to be referred to. This means that if a practitioner does not know how to use palm formulas and does not have access to a calendar, they cannot make the computation by themselves. Using hand mnemonics rather than the calendar also affects the kind of legitimization or narrative that practitioners want to put forward: either one of mastering secret knowledge only available through special training or consulting logical and rationalized information that is available to all, a conception supported by the Modern School of Horoscopy mentioned above.

Using software or apps to calculate a horoscope also impacts the legitimization discourse of practitioners. Unlike street diviners, settled practitioners who work in a dedicated office for a regular clientele often use computers to save time on computation and spend more time on the interpretation stage. Some of them like to portray themselves as experts in modern technology, offering, for example, computer-assisted feng shui services.<sup>25</sup> Using software or apps rather than the calendar or hand mnemonics also has an impact on the assimilation of knowledge. Computing the horoscope is like doing math: if one does not train regularly, one forgets how to do it. Some practitioners forget how to compute a horoscope using the calendar, while some never learn it, which means that they do not understand some of the logic behind fate calculation. In comparison with other ways to calculate a horoscope, the use of “Secret formulas of the palm” points to a tension between complexity and simplicity that lies at the heart of diviners’ legitimization discourses. As Chinese cosmology and the Chinese calendar are notably complex and difficult to master, diviners use the hand as a cognitive tool to facilitate their manipulation. However, whereas palm formulas are meant as facilitators, they still stand in harsh contrast to calendar- or computer-based computation in terms of complexity. They imply a kind of condensation that requires a specific teaching and a lot of practice to be mastered. In other words, unless one is properly taught and trained, palm formulas add another layer of complexity to the initial complexity that was meant to be reduced. Thus, beyond their practical utility – they allow one to calculate a horoscope when one has no access to a calendar or a computer – they are a physical, and thus visible, manifestation of a practitioner’s in-depth knowledge and long practice, which can explain why they represent an important marker of expertise associated with professional diviners.

Through the detailed analysis of a social media video on palm formulas, the next section explores how practitioners articulate complexity and simplicity within their legitimizing discourses when disclosing and explaining these formulas to a wider public.

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such as law, mathematics, poetry, music, etc. Hanson, “Hand Mnemonics in Classical Chinese Medicine.”

25 Homola, *Art of Fate Calculation*, 180.

#### 4. The Rhetoric of Disclosure: The Tension between Simplicity and Complexity

For the first time in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a few books were published specifically on hand mnemonics by practitioners of fate calculation who explained in an exhaustive way the rationale behind this practice – one significant step in the popularization process mentioned above.<sup>26</sup> These books list and explain the “Secret formulas of the palm” used in various methods of divination but also, more generally, to memorize, manipulate, and apply cosmological knowledge. Although these publications are part of a broader trend of popularization that aims at demystifying esoteric or “mysterious” knowledge by revealing its internal logic, their distribution remains fairly confidential. In Taipei, these books can only be found in a few bookstores specializing in divination, where they are displayed next to other diviners’ tools such as calendars and feng shui compasses.

In the mid-2010s, however, palm formulas started to circulate on the internet, as shown by some basic research in internet search engines. Although analyses based on search engines have many limitations, they can nevertheless be used to identify trends.<sup>27</sup> Here, they are meant to support the observation that, when I first became interested in palm formulas in 2009, the keyword *zhangjue* 掌诀 or similar keywords yielded virtually no results in internet search engines, whereas nowadays, hundreds of websites mention them, including videos showing how they work.

In order to document this trend, I used the keyword *zhangjue*, which is relatively unequivocal and appears to be the most common one among various ways to designate palm formulas, and the search engine google.com, which returned the largest number of results.<sup>28</sup> Fig. 2 and 3 show a relatively recent

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26 Jiang, *Qiazhi shensuan*; Lin, *Shouzhang jue*; Songlin, *Shouzhang jue*; Xingshan Jushi, *Zhangjue*; Zhang, *Xueshu kanyu*.

27 The internet search mentioned here is by no means meant to be exhaustive, but is intended to show a trend. Limitations include the fact that search engines do not browse web archives but only the state of the internet at a given date, which can be significantly distorting when researching a long period of time. One could argue that part of the growing trend of websites mentioning palm formulas is simply due to the increased use of the internet. Absolute figures should also be treated with caution, as it is not clear how search engines treat what they present as “similar” results.

28 Although giving less results, the Chinese search engine Baidu shows a similar trend. The use of google.com or google.tw (for Taiwan), as well as using simplified Chinese characters or not, did not seem to be significant. Chinese, Taiwanese, or other Chinese-language websites were taken into account.

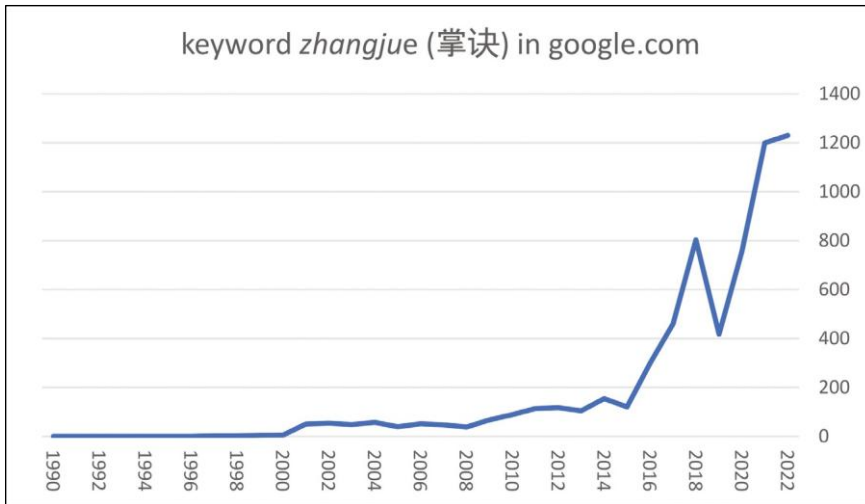


FIGURE 2 - Number of websites mentioning palm formulas (*zhangjue*) using the search engine google.com

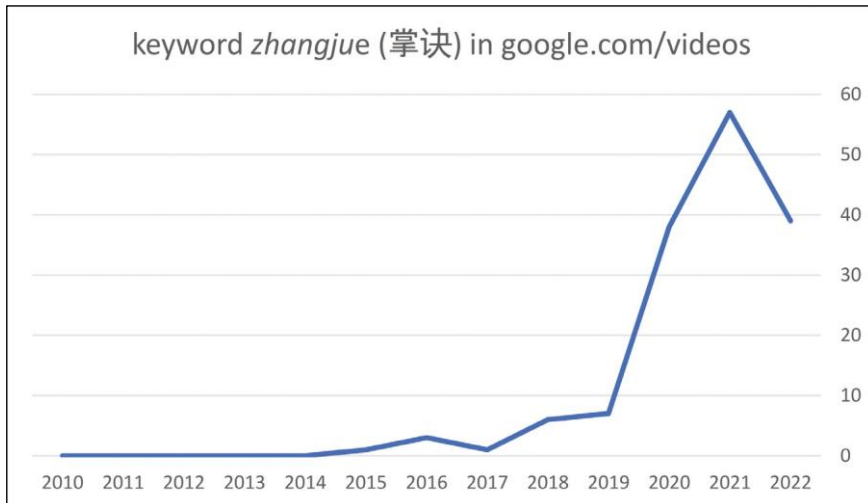


FIGURE 3 - Number of videos mentioning palm formulas (*zhangjue*) using the search engine google.com/videos

and significant rise starting in 2016 for general websites mentioning and explaining palm formulas and in 2019 for videos showing how they work.

The keyword *zhangjue* appears mainly on specialized websites run by professional and amateur diviners. For instance, an article posted in January 2022 on the social media platform Sina Weibo, “Finger Counting: The Twelve Earthly Branches Palm Chart”<sup>29</sup> shows and explains the positions of the branches on the palm of the hand and how it can help identify the “opposition” (*xiangchong* 相冲) relationship between certain branches, which is a basis of fate interpretation. Interestingly, as mentioned above, the article introduces the practice by referring to common representations associated with diviners:

In the movies, we often see people pinching their fingers, this is to deduce a lot of information. In fact, the palm is used to memorize the Stems and Branches, and then the Stems and Branches are used to deduce some of the information needed. This method of finger-palm memorization is still widely practiced today.

Videos featuring hand mnemonics mainly appear on video-sharing websites and social platforms such as Iqiyi, YouTube, Bilibili, Sohu, and Facebook. In the rest of this article, I rely on the case study of one of these videos to analyze the concrete way in which palm formulas are used and taught and how revealing specialized knowledge is articulated discursively. The nine minutes, forty-eight seconds video, titled “First Public Showing of Supernatural Palm Formulas, Calculate the Stem and Branch of the Year in a Second,”<sup>30</sup> was one of the first posted in July 2020 on a Bilibili channel<sup>31</sup> by a diviner who, since then, has been posting several videos per month on various divinatory topics. The middle-aged male diviner, who appears in a teaching setting in front of a rather untidy bookshelf next to a small whiteboard, begins the video by declaring:

In *Yijing*<sup>32</sup> studies, there is a problem that we encounter frequently, that is how to convert a given year [in the Gregorian calendar] into the Stem-Branch system. Today, with the development of science and technology, more and more people use an app. I will teach you a method [...]

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29 Caomang zhui meng zhong ren 草莽追梦中人, “Qiazhi yisuan: Shier dizhi zhangjue tu 掐指一算：十二地支掌诀图,” Sina Weibo article, posted 19 January 2022, accessed 14 December 2023, [https://k.sina.cn/article\\_7494521253\\_1beb551a500101131v.html](https://k.sina.cn/article_7494521253_1beb551a500101131v.html).

30 *Shenxian zhangjue shoufa, miaotui ganzhi nian* 神仙掌诀首发·秒推干支年.

31 The channel, “specialized in the culture of the *Changes*,” is named *Lei Tian Dazhuang Yi* 雷天大壮易, from *Dazhuang* (The Strength of the Great), the name of the thirty-fourth hexagram of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经) (<https://space.bilibili.com/143709095>, accessed 14 December 2023).

32 *Yijing* 易经 (*Book of Changes*) is the most revered philosophical and divinatory classic in China and a common term to describe divination as a whole.

called palm formulas [...] After you have practiced it a few times, it is even quicker than looking it up on your smartphone.

Throughout the video, the practitioner constantly frames his explanation in a dichotomy between easiness and difficulty, simplicity and complexity.

#### 4.1 Calculating the Stem of the Year

Taking the case of the year component, the practitioner starts by explaining how to find the Stem of the year in question, stressing how easy it is: “The conversion to find the Heavenly Stem is very easy (*feichang jian dan* 非常简单), you can see that the rule is very simple (*feichang jian dan*).” The first step is to look at the last digit of the year in question. For instance, if one wants to find the Stem of the years 1984, 1754, or 2124, the last digit is four. Then, as written on the whiteboard, one checks a correspondence table between Stems and numbers from 0 to 9 (see the upper part of the whiteboard in Fig. 4):

TABLE 2 Correspondence table between Stems and numbers from 0 to 9

甲	乙	丙	丁	戊	己	庚	辛	壬	癸
<i>jia</i>	<i>yi</i>	<i>bing</i>	<i>ding</i>	<i>wu</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>geng</i>	<i>xin</i>	<i>ren</i>	<i>gui</i>
4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3

The number 4 corresponds to the *jia* Stem, so we know that the Stem of the years 1984, 1754, and 2124 is *jia*. If the last digit of the year is five, like 1985, then the Stem of the year is *yi*. The practitioner goes on:

When you know the cycle [of the Stems], is it necessary to learn this whole correspondence by heart (*siji yingbei* 死记硬背)? No, it’s not necessary. The first step is to position the ten Stems on the fingers of the left palm. Then, how to count? I think that everybody can choose the way they prefer. For instance, I am used to putting *jia* on the bottom phalange of my index finger. Counting clockwise, *yi* is on the middle phalange of the index, and *bing* is on the top one. Then, counting the ten Stems on the ten phalanges, one goes back to the beginning. This is my way of counting; you can have your own habit.<sup>33</sup>

33 Meaning, for instance, that one can decide to position the first element of the cycle, *jia*, on a different phalange.



FIGURE 4 - Screenshot from the Bilibili video “First Public Showing of Supernatural Palm Formulas, Calculate the Stem and Branch of the Year in a Second.” Using his own hand, the practitioner shows how to position the ten Stems on the phalanges of the left hand. The subtitle reads: “I am used to putting *jia* on the bottom phalange of my index finger.”

While explaining the positioning of the ten Stems on the left palm (Fig. 4), the practitioner shows it directly on his palm. When filmed, the fact that the phalanges form a ten-position square around the fingers of the left palm (Fig. 5) becomes evident and the practitioner does not write it nor draw it on the whiteboard. Relying on these positions on the hand, one only needs to memorize one of the ten correspondences between the numbers and the Stems:

For instance, when I studied these things a very long time ago, how did I remember them? I thought that *xin* 辛 looked very much like the numeral 1. Doesn't it? So, I remembered this one: *xin* is 1. And I count starting from *xin* on my palm to deduce the other numbers. One of my friends says he prefers remembering that *jia* is 4.

Determining the Stem of the year does not rely on the memorization of a poem like for the month, day, and hour but is based on the same logic – the cyclical nature of the sexagenary cycle means that one can memorize a single element of the correspondences and find the other cases by counting on the hand. In addition to palm formulas, the online encyclopedia Baidu Baike – the Chinese version of Wikipedia – lists five other methods to make the conversion of

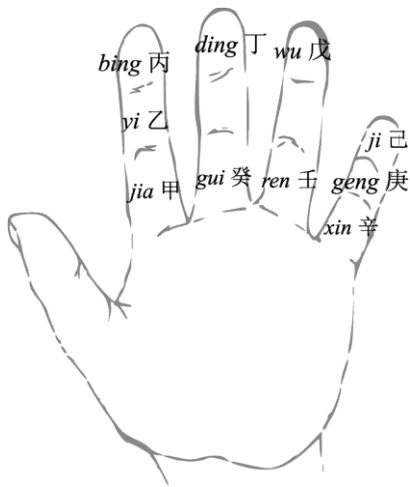


Figure 5  
The practitioner in the video positions the ten Stems on the phalanges of the fingers (design by Stéphanie Homola).

the year component from the Gregorian calendar to the sexagenary cycle, most of them involving complex congruence calculations.<sup>34</sup> Palm formulas, here called “Using the hand to count years in the sexagenary system” (*Yong shou zhiqia suan ganzhi jinian* 用手指掐算干支纪年), are by far the simplest and fastest way to make the conversion. This smart method – simply looking at the last digit of the year – is based on the logical fact that the Stems follow a cycle of ten (there are ten Stems) that matches the decimal way to count years in the Gregorian calendar. This explains why years ending with the same digit in the Gregorian calendar all have the same Stem in the sexagenary cycle.

The way this method simplifies the computation is remarkable in two ways. The first one is simplification by condensation. Palm formulas, including those for computing the month, day, and hour, condense knowledge so that an entire calendar can be summed up in a few characters. When counting years, finding the Stem by looking at the last digit of the year is almost immediate, i.e., both fast and without intermediary steps. However, if condensing knowledge makes it easier to memorize, it does not necessarily mean being easier to use. Indeed, using the poems to count on the hand requires explanation and training.

Another noteworthy characteristic of this method and the way it is taught by the practitioner is its low degree of standardization. He insists that the way he mentally positions the Stems on his left palm and remembers one of the

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34 “Ganzhi jinian 干支纪年 [Counting years in the sexagenary system],” Baidu Baike, last updated 3 June 2024, accessed 14 December 2024, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/干支纪年/3383226>.

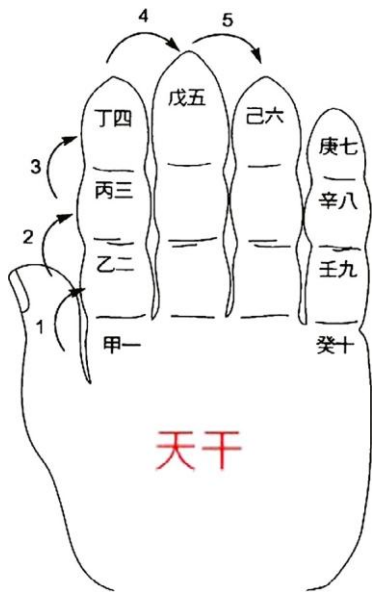


FIGURE 6

The ten Stems can also be positioned on the lines of the fingers.

Note: “Mingli zhangjue, tiangan 命理掌訣, 天干

[Horoscopy palm formulas, Heavenly Stems],” *Yuntan fengqing buluoge* 雲淡風輕部落格 [Mild clouds, gentle wind blog], published 27 October 2021, accessed on 10 January 2024, <http://211-75-223>

-181.hinet-ip.hinet.net/zblog2/?mod=pad&act=view &id=1948

Stem-number correspondences is his own choice, and that everyone can do it according to their own habits. Indeed, although the way he positions the Stem is quite common, another common way is to put the Stems not on the phalanges but on the joints of the finger (Fig. 6). This shows that this palm method is not a dogma or a fixed theory but first and foremost a practical tool. The method used is not important. What matters is how quickly and accurately one can reach the result. In this sense, palm formulas are not a unique fixed method but rather a skill that can be adapted to many circumstances, in particular when navigating knowledge that has a cyclical component.<sup>35</sup> This know-how also encourages creativity: practitioners are eager to find and design their own tricks to save time in computation. It also implicitly shows that they have mastered complex knowledge and is therefore an important component of their expertise, singularity, and charisma, both in relation to their colleagues and their clients.

#### 4.2 Calculating the Branch of the Year

After he has explained how to find the Stem of the year, the practitioner continues, insisting on how he can alleviate the apparent complexity of the computation:

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35 Homola, “La fabrique des restes.”

Finding the Stem of a given year is thus very easy. Let's see how to find the Earthly Branch of a given year. It might be a little bit complex (*yi dian- dian fuza* 一点点复杂). But I will explain it very clearly. After you have practiced it a few times, you will be proficient (*shulian* 熟练). It sounds like a lot of trouble (*tingqilai hen mafan* 听起来很麻烦), but when you do it, it is actually very easy (*rongyi* 容易).

The first step is to mentally position the twelve Branches on the four fingers of the left hand, excluding the thumb. "I advise you to do it according to my method." Unlike the Stems, which can be positioned on the phalanges, the twelve Branches are positioned on the finger joints and fingertips. The first Branch *zi* – in the conventional order of Branches – is put at the bottom joint of the ring finger; the second Branch *chou* at the bottom joint of the middle finger, and so forth in a clockwise direction. This time, the practitioner does not show the positions directly using his own hand but points at a hand diagram pinned to the whiteboard (see the hand diagram in Fig. 4). Unlike the Stem positions, the positioning of the Branches on the finger joints is standardized. The practitioner then removes the hand diagram to show a chart featuring the positions of the twelve Branches on the fingers in a table-like manner (see the bottom part of the whiteboard in Fig. 7). This chart is also a standard way to represent Branches in divinatory theories and allows to better manipulate and compute time-based data. In the second step, three specific Branches need to be considered in the chart, *zi*, *chen*, and *shen*. These are the three starting points for counting the Branches depending on the period (Fig. 8):

- *shen* for a year between 1800 and 1899
- *zi* for a year between 1900 and 1999
- *chen* for a year between 2000 and 2099

Again, the practitioner insists on the reduced cognitive load and explains that one does not need to remember the three positions. He himself has decided to remember only the *zi* position because he was born between 1900 and 1999. He can retrieve the other positions by adding one hundred years for *chen*, and subtracting one hundred years for *shen*. "Ok, maybe this is not very clear, but don't worry, I will give an example and you will understand very clearly. Let's stop talking about theory and take an example so that everybody can see clearly."

The third step is a formula that the practitioner writes on the whiteboard (Fig. 9): "The last two digits of the year in question –  $12 \times n = X$ . This looks very complex, but don't worry, wait until I demonstrate, it is very simple," he explains while waving his hand in denial.

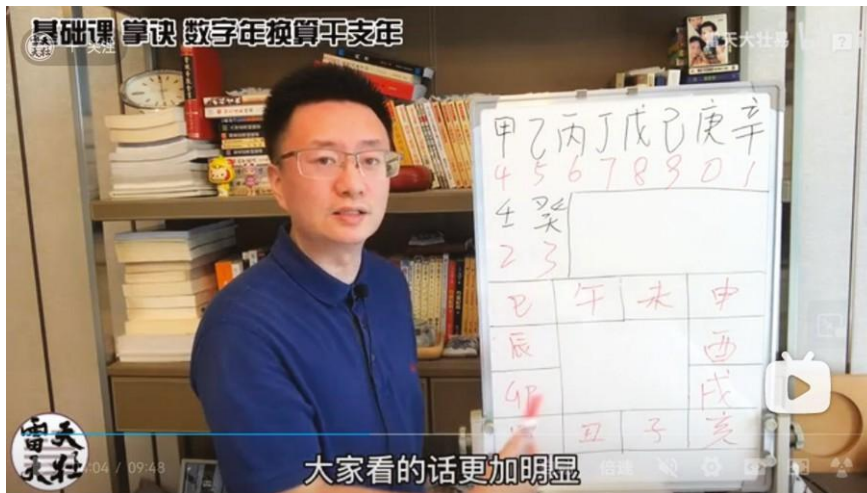


FIGURE 7 The chart in the bottom part of the whiteboard features the conventional positions of the twelve Branches on the fingers in a table-like manner. The subtitle reads: “It’s even more obvious when you look at it.”



FIGURE 8 Three specific Branches need to be considered in the chart: *shen* for a year between 1800 and 1899, *zi* for a year between 1900 and 1999, and *chen* for a year between 2000 and 2099. The subtitle reads: “Ok, maybe this is not very clear.”

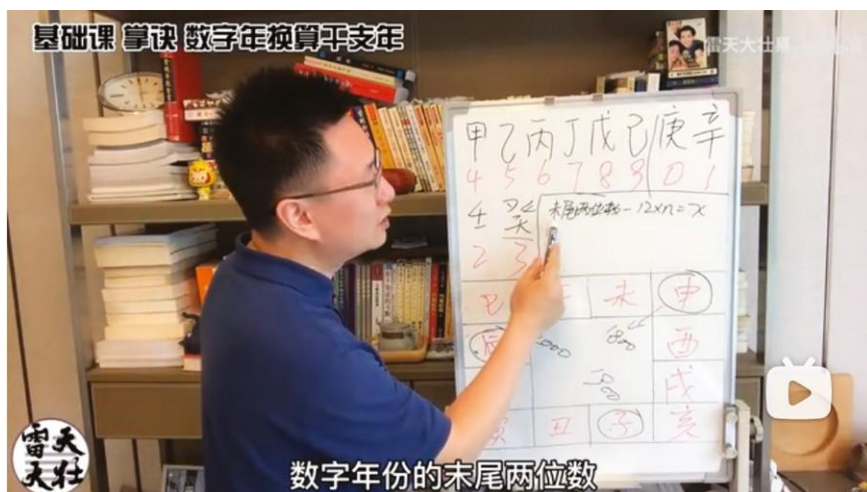


FIGURE 9 Formula to calculate the Branch of the year: “The last two digits of the year in question –  $12 \times n = X$ .”

The practitioner takes the example of 1880. Because the last digit is 0, we know that the Stem is *geng*. To find the Branch, he first applies the formula. The last two digits of 1880 are 80. Then one needs to calculate mentally how many times 12 is contained in 80, with a remainder less than 12. Although the practitioner does not mention it, this is a congruence calculation that is typical in calendar-related computation. He completes the formula:  $80 - 12 \times 6 = 8$ . The result is the remainder of this division by 12, i.e., 8. Then, going back to the second step, one starts counting to 8 on the fingers from the *shen* position (as the 0 position) because 1880 is between 1800 and 1899, thereby reaching the position *chen*. The Branch of the year 1880 is then *chen*. The practitioner gives another quick example with the year 2019: the Stem is *ji* (year ending with 9), and the Branch is *hai* ( $19 - 12 \times 1 = 7$ ): starting counting to 7 from the *chen* position (2019 is between 2000 and 2099), one reaches the *hai* position. “Just practice a dozen times and you’ll become very familiar with it.”

One striking aspect of the video is how the practitioner frames his technical explanations in a rhetoric of complexity/simplicity that may seem paradoxical: while the video teaching aims to reveal and clarify an esoteric know-how, the practitioner’s constant reminders of how complex it looks rather emphasize the difficulty to master it and, consequently, the superiority of the teacher. Thus, while the dissemination through social media may appear to be a further step on the road to popularization, it also features an expertise-building dynamic akin to the master-disciple relationship.

## 5. Social Media Videos as Visual and Interactive Transmission Tools

Relying on this example, we can analyze how the video form affects knowledge transmission compared to other modes of transmission, such as books or face-to-face explanations.

When they teach their students face-to-face, masters show the method directly on their hands and draw hand diagrams as a training step to help students memorize the positions. After some time, the students do not need the hand diagram anymore. In books, the method is explained in written form – as I do in this article – along with the poems and the hand diagrams. In the video, the practitioner also relies on hand diagrams or charts, although he also shows the positions on his hand. Thus, the hand diagrams appear to be a necessary step in all transmission settings, as an aide-mémoire to help master the technique. The main advantage of videos or face-to-face training is that the explanations of the formulas that go with the diagram are given orally. Explaining them in writing takes a lot more time and considerably increases the level of complexity – a key point for this type of knowledge. This example shows that explaining palm formulas through a video is particularly adapted to this type of body-based computation. Videos capture the advantages of oral teaching between a master and a disciple – in opposition to tedious written forms – while making it public. Unlike private face-to-face interactions, this creates a sense of sharing and community.

Indeed, video teaching does not involve a purely one-way transmission but allows interaction in the form of comments from viewers, who can thus interact with each other – although not directly with the teacher. One special feature of the Bilibili platform is that it allows viewers to send live comments while the video is running. Comments scroll across the screen from right to left (see one example in the top left corner in Fig. 4). The types of comments posted by viewers show different levels of expertise. For instance, beginners express their wonder at how smart this method is, how well they understand it, and praise the teacher for his clear explanations: “Got it!,” “It’s quicker than using an app,” “So counting on finger is true,” “Thank you, Professor!,” “The teacher is very attentive and professional.” Some make their own suggestions: when the practitioner explains that he likes to remember that the Stem *xin* equals 1 because he thinks it looks like the Chinese numeral 1, a viewer notes that one can choose to remember *ding*, which looks like the Chinese numeral 7. A supposedly more knowledgeable person criticizes the formula for calculating the Branch of the year as too convoluted: “I fainted just now, there is a method that is even quicker, after you deduced the Stem, you just have to know the zodiac sign of the year, and then you have the Branch of the year.” Indeed, the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac follow the cycle of the twelve Branches. Knowing the zodiac sign of a given year thus means knowing the Branch of the year. However, when making this comment, the viewer, who obviously knows and masters the sexagenary cycle, seems to ignore that the method taught in the video is used precisely to calculate the Branch of a year whose sign is unknown. The method demonstrated by the practitioner can thus be used for any year, including those that are far from the current year.

Some other comments were obviously made by experts. One comments on the method to find the Stem of the year based on the last digit of the year: “This is very useful, but one has to be careful that the years are based on the twenty-four solar terms (*jieqi* 节气).” This technical term refers to a subtlety in the Eight Signs method, which affects the calculation of birth dates close to the transition to a new year. Later, when the practitioner explains the three positions that need to be considered when computing the year Branch – *zi*, *chen*, *shen* – one comment scrolls, “To be precise, it is *shen*, *zi*, *chen*,” referring to the order of years (respectively 1800, 1900, 2000), and not to the conventional order of the branches – starting with *zi* – as the teacher did in the video.

Sharing comments, as allowed on the Bilibili platform, creates a sense of community among

people sharing the same interest, while also staging a hierarchy of knowledge between different levels of expertise. In some ways, by offering an open and public platform to confront one's habits and knowledge with others, it also breaks down the barriers of a knowledge that is traditionally highly compartmentalized. Technical discussions on the Eight Signs usually take place during one-to-one or small group conversations – between master and students or between two knowledgeable friends – which makes it difficult to find out how things are being done elsewhere.

## **6. Concluding Remarks: The Challenge of Complexity**

Although the title of the video boasts “First Public Showing of Supernatural Palm Formulas,” it is striking that the esoteric dimension of fate calculation does not really shine through in this video. When explaining how to use palm formulas to Bilibili viewers, the practitioner puts no emphasis on the secret aspect of this knowledge, nor does he demonstrate any desire to demystify it. What is more apparent from the video is the fear that people do not understand how it works despite his explanations. He almost apologizes when things may seem too difficult and keeps saying, “Don't worry, it will be very clear and easy after I explain.” Thus, what he rather aims to demystify is not the esoteric aspect of these techniques, but their complexity. Complexity and tediousness are indeed the main experience of amateur practitioners or anyone who wants to learn these techniques. When asked generally about the sexagenary cycle, calendar theories, and the related Eight Signs, most novices spontaneously point out their complexity and the fact that they do not understand anything. However, despite his willingness to make this knowledge available to all, the practitioner's attitude is not free from a certain ambiguity. His flow of speech and the video's rhythm are fairly fast, as befits this type of short video. It has obviously been edited to avoid downtime. This conveys the impression that the practitioner is smart and outstanding and that these computations are very easy for him and part of basic knowledge. At the very end of the video, he hints that it is possible to go further and deeper into this type of calculation, but as he introduces a few elements very quickly and without explanation, it gives, once again, an impression of complexity. This ambiguous attitude is in line with an underlying discourse common among practitioners: fate analysis is a complex skill that can only be understood by sufficiently intelligent people, and its mastery is therefore considered a mark of intellectual superiority, a sign that distinguishes practitioners from average people.

Although the Bilibili video analyzed here is only one case study that highlights the practice of an individual practitioner, the discourse it conveys about fate calculation – a highly complex knowledge that can nevertheless be mastered by smart people – is common among practitioners in various contexts of transmission. The embarrassment caused by the complexity of fate calculation and the difficulty of making it understood stands in contrast with other types of embarrassments mentioned in the introduction about traditional knowledge such as Chinese medicine or martial arts. One main reason is that these practices do not have the same status. Whereas Chinese medicine is institutionalized and martial arts enjoy a generally positive image, divination is officially highly contested. Since the mid-2010s, practitioners have been facing increasing condemnation. For instance, since 1 January 2016, Communist Party members have been officially forbidden to be involved in “superstitious activities,” such as divinatory consultation.<sup>36</sup> In the early 2020s, the closing down of online divination services showed a more and more restrictive official stance toward divinatory activities.<sup>37</sup>

This explains why, unlike Chinese medicine and martial arts, there is no Intangible Cultural

Heritage discourse on divination in Communist China. In the late 2000s, according to information I collected in Henan Province, some attempts were made to put a so-called “*Book of Changes (Yijing)* culture” on a local ICH list. However, the proposal never made it to the next level and disappeared in the following years, preserving fate calculation from the disputes brought about by valuation policies. In spite of this, and unlike the fear faced by martial arts proponents that some practices may disappear, divinatory practices themselves are very much alive. There are discourses among some practitioners that very few people really master these techniques, but I never observed or heard of any fear that the knowledge will disappear if it is not passed on. On the contrary, practices and their transmission in various contexts – online, face-to-face classes, etc. – are booming.

The standardization of knowledge is a topic among practitioners, many of whom see it as a necessary first step toward eventual official recognition. However, facts show that divinatory practices tend to run counter to standardization. Practitioners and clients alike value diversity – of techniques, types of diviners, places of practice, modes of transmission, etc. – which I analyze elsewhere as being a constitutive element of the dynamics of divination, based on personal encounters and understandings of fate and of what fate calculation can bring.<sup>36</sup> So far, among the many existing schools of thought in the milieu of fate calculation experts, no single “orthodoxy” has been defined, nor has it taken precedence over others.

The embarrassment caused by complexity is a distinctive feature of fate calculation practice and teaching. Fate calculation is said to be a *xuewen* 学问, i.e., a rich and complex type of knowledge and skill that can only be acquired at the cost of a significant, long-term personal investment of time and energy. A tension between complexity and simplicity is visible in the transmission process, as shown in the Bilibili video. On the one hand, this type of video aims to show that palm formulas are not all that complex and that anyone can learn them. This is in line with the popularization process mentioned earlier, which blurs the boundaries between specialists and clients. Knowledge extends along a continuum of various stages of expertise, redefining the social basis of both masters and students in contemporary societies. This trend is also fostered by the use of apps and computers. It has become so easy to calculate a horoscope that anyone can do it.

36 “China Communist Party Reinforces Ban on Superstition,” Radio France International, published 4 January 2016, accessed 26 April 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/china-communist-party-reinforces-ban-superstition>.

37 Zhuang, “Ethnographic Study.”

38 Homola, *Art of Fate Calculation*.

On the other hand, the video also conveys the distinct impression that “this is not that simple.” Contrary to what the practitioner explains, palm formulas are not faster than using an app. But using palm formulas requires an in-depth understanding of the calendar mechanism that is lost when using the app. In other words, palm formulas are no longer indispensable today but remain important for mastering the basic principles of fate calculation. However, revealing these tricks also carries a risk, which is why, until recently, many kept them secret. Palm formulas aim to facilitate computations. But computations are only the first (and, in fact, the easiest) part of fate calculation, such as the Eight Signs method. After the computation comes the interpretation, which is even more complex and even less standardized. Revealing palm formulas as mere tricks can give a false impression of simplicity that belittles fate calculation as a whole.

One example drawn from fieldwork in Kaifeng, Henan Province, will illustrate this risk. When I was in Kaifeng in the late 2000s, an amateur practitioner taught me a fate calculation method called *liuren* 六壬,<sup>39</sup> which requires counting on the hand. When explaining the method to me, he repeatedly told me to keep it to myself and not to reveal it to anyone. One day, we took a little trip near the Yellow River with one of his friends and decided to use the *liuren* method to help her make a decision about choosing an appropriate high school for her son. As I was still learning this method, my practitioner friend told me to try it on this particular case. Because I was not very confident, I started counting on my hand openly and aloud, so that he could check if I was making a mistake. Seeing this, he was quick to say: “Shh! Shh! Don’t say it out loud!” and we moved away to calculate so that the friend could not hear. Later, I discussed the incident with him and realized that by calculating aloud and showing hand movements, the risk was that people might understand how it worked and think it was easy. What is too easy is not only less valuable but, above all, gives the false impression that one can master a fate calculation technique by mastering only the computation. As my practitioner friend told me, “Computation can be learned in twenty minutes, but when it comes to interpretation, you can spend years on it!” This anecdote highlights one important dimension of esoteric practices: when disclosed out of context or disconnected from progressive learning, esoteric knowledge can seem trivial; it only gains value through slow maturation and self-discovery.

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39 “Six *ren*,” from *ren*, the ninth Heavenly Stem, see Fig. 1. About the *liuren* method, see Kalinowski, “Les instruments astro-calendériques des Han”; Homola, “Les usages de la main.”

In this sense, the Bilibili video analyzed in this article shows that sharing esoteric knowledge on social media is not just a matter of revealing a simple secret or trick that would have been jealously guarded precisely because of its simplicity. The video practitioner makes palm formulas accessible to all, while still conveying a sense of complexity and of the superiority of qualified practitioners.

The tensions between experiences and representations of complexity, simplicity, secrecy, and standardization within divinatory arts are at the heart of what I call here the “challenge of complexity,” as reflected in the video. Because Chinese horoscopy and the cosmology on which it is based are complex and tedious to learn, practitioners rely on facilitating skills to help learn and apply the techniques. These skills are traditionally kept secret as insider knowledge because simplification possibly belittles valuable knowledge and makes it more accessible, which may threaten practitioners’ knowledge monopoly and trade. However, today’s practitioners do not hesitate to divulge secret knowledge that was previously only available to a limited, selected audience through widely accessible videos on social media. While doing so, they do not stress the secret characteristic of these skills as a selling argument but rather seem to be embarrassed by their complexity. The embarrassment expressed by the practitioner is of a different nature to that mentioned in relation to martial arts and Chinese medicine. Divinatory practices are booming in China and the holders of this knowledge do not fear that it may disappear. Due to their low status, they are also not subjected to the problematic selective standardization implied by valuation policies. Despite some practitioners’ efforts, knowledge standardization is low in the field. Making palm formulas widely accessible on the internet does not seem to be a problem for some practitioners – it does not threaten the trade nor diminish their legitimacy – because they are so complex that even when openly disclosed, they remain accessible to few. One could argue that online dissemination does not threaten diviners’ expertise because the complexity of palm formulas and their low level of standardization – the diverse and flexible ways to use palm formulas – protect diviners’ specialized skills, just as secrecy did. In this sense, the embarrassment expressed by the practitioner in the video seems to be a rhetorical one. He is confident that online dissemination will not threaten his expertise. Rather, the public staging of the complexity and tediousness of the palm formulas in online videos adds another layer to the rhetoric building of expertise.

Online transmission gives a new dimension to the tension between complexity and simplicity that characterizes Chinese fate calculation. I would argue that the main disruption is not so much that former secret knowledge is becoming even more widely available online but that some of it can be replaced by automation. Using a mobile app or a computer program to perform computation implies a loss of knowledge and understanding. Part of the knowledge can be bypassed without direct and immediate consequences. This phenomenon is consistent with the popularization process that is affecting divination: there are always experts who master the finer details of the techniques, but knowledge extends along a continuum of different stages of expertise. The blurring of social positions between practitioners and clients may well be the main consequence of the vulgarization of esoteric knowledge, accelerated in particular by online dissemination.

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