A Comparative Analysis of Fortune Telling and Divination, Chinese Perspectives, and Tarot

By: Benebell Wen

Is there any value to making a distinction between fortune telling and divination? How might Chinese perspectives compare to or inform Western perspectives? This free video (or audio) lecture will examine the etymological origins of “fortune telling” and “divination” in the Chinese language, apply medieval esoteric Taoist texts to tarot reading, and propose a theoretical framework through which to read tarot, as either a fortune teller or a diviner, though the two are not mutually exclusive.

Lecture first presented at the San Francisco Bay Area Tarot Symposium 2015

Free video lecture online: https://youtu.be/16zKL7j97c0
# Learning Mandarin Chinese

## 算命

**suàn ming**

**Examples.** Natal astrology; Palmistry; Face reading

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>算</th>
<th>命</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>suàn</strong></td>
<td><strong>ming</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count; calculate; tally; to compute; to regard as. <em>Etymology:</em> 目 (counting rods); 竹 radical (bamboo).</td>
<td>Fate; one’s life; one’s lot in life. <em>Etymology:</em> Compound of 会 (accounting for) and 意 (aspirations); 口 (open mouth; receive); 令 (order; command; decree).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>算盘</th>
<th>打算盘</th>
<th>命运</th>
<th>命令</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>suàn pán</strong></td>
<td><strong>dǎ suàn páng</strong></td>
<td><strong>ming yùn</strong></td>
<td><strong>ming lìng</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abacus</td>
<td>Calculate gains and losses. [Literal translation. Calculate on an abacus. ]</td>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>Command Mandate Dictate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>算法</th>
<th>算式</th>
<th>命运注定</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>suàn fá</strong></td>
<td><strong>suàn shì</strong></td>
<td><strong>ming yùn zhù dìng</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algorithm</td>
<td>A mathematical equation</td>
<td>Ordain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>算卦</th>
<th>算子</th>
<th>生命</th>
<th>奪去生命</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>suàn guà</strong></td>
<td><strong>suàn zǐ</strong></td>
<td><strong>shēng mìng</strong></td>
<td><strong>duó qù shēng mìng</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell Fortunes</td>
<td>Fortune Teller</td>
<td>Life</td>
<td>Devitalize</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning Mandarin Chinese

**卜筮**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>卜</strong></th>
<th><strong>筮</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bǔ shì</td>
<td>shì</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Divine; foretell; prophesize.*

**Historic Note.** Divination with tortoise shells. **Etymology.** 卜 radical (prophecy or prophecy).

**筮**

Divination with yarrow stalks. **Historic Note.** Divination with yarrow stalks. **Etymology.** 卜 radical (spirit communicator; medium; shaman; magus; sorceress; witch); 篟 radical (bamboo).

### Examples.

I Ching bibliomancy; Oracle sticks (签筒; qiān tǒng) also known as *kau cim* fortune sticks, Chi Chi sticks, Oracle of Kuan Yin; Jiao Bei (筊杯), or divination moon blocks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>卜辞</strong></th>
<th><strong>卜课</strong></th>
<th><strong>巫婆</strong></th>
<th><strong>巫</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bǔ cí</td>
<td>bǔ kè</td>
<td>wū pó</td>
<td>wū</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Oracle Bone Divination (Shang Dynasty)*

*Wise Woman (Female Witch)* [Implies one who is more advanced in age.]

*Witch; Shaman Sorcerer; One Who Communicates With Spirit(s)*

### Compare:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>占卦</strong></th>
<th><strong>八卦</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>zhān guà</td>
<td>bā guà</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Divination*

*Ba Gua* *Eight Trigrams*
Metaphysical Implications of Fortune Telling

Fortune tellers are not typically affiliated with a specific religion, even if they themselves may be religious personally. Instead, their skill of fortune telling is seen as one that was studied, developed, and practiced. Furthermore, due to their innate ability to connect to metaphysical energy (or supernatural entities), such energy is often unwittingly harnessed during fortune telling sessions.

- “playing god” (role of healer, shaman)
- analysis of a fixed fate
- source of knowledge: the practitioner; ego

S = Seeker
P = Practitioner

The metaphysical mechanics of fortune telling is akin to the physical laws of thermodynamics, i.e., law of conservation of energy, where energy can be neither created nor destroyed. Instead, it changes forms and flows from one place to another. Likewise, a practitioner is harnessing energy from somewhere, often from a source not readily known to the practitioner, channeled to assist the seeker.

“All Seeing Eye”
I possess the ability to See.
I know the future. I know you.
I am Divine.

Study the Self ▷
To Know the Universe

“I do not support fortune-telling and I do not believe in future-telling. My approach to tarot is not predictive. It is analytic. ... Using tarot for fortune-telling cannot solve problems. In fact, I believe it creates more problems, because fortune-telling manipulates our expectations.” –Holistic Tarot
Metaphysical Implications of Divination

Diviners are typically affiliated with a specific religion or magical lineage. They hold themselves out as being religious and practice their divinations within the scope of metaphysical beliefs subscribed to by their religion or lineage. Their skills are often taught to them, passed down from a master or teacher. Typically, safeguards are taught so the diviner is cognizant of where exactly energy is being sourced from.

- “kneeling before the Hierophant”
- revelation; “holding up the lantern”
- source of knowledge: spirits; divine

S = Seeker
P = Practitioner

Teaching divination was not the objective of my first book *Holistic Tarot*. My objective was to instruct on tarot in a way that would facilitate mastery. The spiritual art of divination is not one you learn from a book; divination is what happens naturally once you have mastered tarot.

The metaphysical mechanics of divination requires submission to a divine entity and energy is being transferred from that divine through the practitioner, who serves as a medium, to assist the seeker. The energy that the diviner is using is believed, on faith, to be known, to come from that divine source.

“Spirit Communicator”
I possess the ability to Connect.
I read signs and omens.
The Divine speaks to me.

Study the Universe
▶ To Know the Self
**Fortune Telling Theory vs. Divination Theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fortune Telling</th>
<th>Divination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practitioner acquires Sight</strong></td>
<td><strong>Practitioner acquires Connection</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practitioner is inserted into the Seeker’s Path</strong></td>
<td><strong>Practitioner is a passive bystander on the Seeker’s Path</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source of Knowledge: Ego, Sentience</strong></td>
<td><strong>Source of Knowledge: Divine</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception</strong></td>
<td><strong>Revelation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transcending to Union with the God Principle</strong></td>
<td><strong>Receiving and Submitting to the God Principle</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Induction &amp; Deduction</strong></td>
<td><strong>Invoking Spirit</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**算命**

**Fortune Telling Theory**

**卜筮**

**Divination Theory**
**“All Seeing Eye”**
I possess the ability to See.
I know the future. I know you.
I am Divine.

**“Mediator, Communicator”**
I possess the ability to Connect.
I read signs and omens.
The Divine speaks to me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fortune Telling</th>
<th>Divination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intuition</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core, “Gut”</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projecting Outward</td>
<td>Direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom Heavy</td>
<td>Giver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuition</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crown</td>
<td>Signs &amp; Omens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projecting Inward</td>
<td>Mediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Heavy</td>
<td>Recipient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study the Self ▷ To Know the Universe
Study the Universe ▷ To Know the Self
Western Approaches to Fortune Telling vs. Divination

No Apparent Distinction between Fortune Telling and Divination

“I shall therefore confine myself to examining briefly into what relates to their most ancient form, the Tarot, or Tarocchi Cards, and to giving, as clearly and concisely as possible, instructions which will enable my readers to utilise them for fortune-telling. . . . I shall now give several modes of laying out the cards for divination.”

S. L. MacGregor Mathers
The Tarot (1888)

“These interpretations are comparable in every respect to the divinatory and fortune-telling meanings with which I shall have to deal in their turn.”

A. E. Waite
The Pictorial Key to the Tarot (1910)
(“fortune telling” and “divination” used interchangeably)

“It is also widely believed that the idea of playing games with cards was an afterthought and that their original purpose was for the practice of divination. . . . It is thought by many that we owe our cards to the gipsies, who are supposed to have been the offspring of a low caste of Hindus, and who, driven from their own land, found their way, as fugitives, through Western Asia into Egypt, and from Northern Africa into Europe. It is certain that all kinds of fortune-telling, whether by Cartomancy or whatever method, are inseparably connected with that curious, fascinating, highly gifted and elusive people. . . . So when the fortune-tellers of the twentieth century take a pack of cards and proceed to read the mysteries revealed therein, they are following the example of the wise men of Chaldea, Egypt, and China, the Flowery Land of the East, to say nothing of their European predecessors. Divination by cards, therefore, is of great antiquity and of world-wide popularity.”

P.R.S. Foli
Fortune-Telling by Cards (1915)

“The Gypsies possess a Bible, which has proved their means of gaining a livelihood, for it enables them to tell fortunes; at the same time it has been a perpetual source of amusement, for it enables them to gamble. Yes; the game of cards called the Tarot, which the Gypsies possess, is the Bible of Bibles. It is the book of Thoth Hermes Trismegistus, the book of Adam, the book of the primitive Revelation of ancient civilizations. . . . Lastly, we will do our best to explain the elements of divination by the Tarot as practised by the Gypsies.”

Papus (Gérard Encausse)
The Tarot of the Bohemians (1892)
(as translated by A. P. Morton)
Distinction Made Between Fortune Telling and Divination

“This operation of the qabalistic sages, originally intended to discover the rigorous development of absolute ideas, degenerated into superstition when it fell into the hands of the ignorant priests and the nomadic ancestors of the Bohemians who possessed the Tarot in the Middle Ages; they did not know how to employ it properly, and used it solely for fortune-telling.”

Eliphas Levi
*The Key of the Mysteries* (1861)
(as translated by Aleister Crowley)

“For five centuries or more Tarot cards have been used in Europe, ostensibly for games and fortune-telling, but really [the cards are] to preserve the essentials of a secret doctrine. They form a symbolic alphabet of the ancient wisdom. . . . Tarot divination is not fortune-telling. The practice of fortune-telling is based on the false notion that human life is governed by luck, chance, or fate—by obscure powers that work outside the personality. True divination rests upon the occult truth that the causes of all events in human life are really internal, proceeding from the Cause of Causes—the Universal Intelligent Energy or Life-power.”

Paul Foster Case
*Oracle of the Tarot* (1933)

“I dislike the term ‘fortune telling.’ It assumes that your future is foretold and there is nothing you can do about it. For example, a fortune might include that in May of this year you’re going to take an ocean cruise and drown. This implies that such is your fate and there is nothing you can do about it. Except I don’t have to go on that cruise. I don’t have to suffer that fate. Predictions given in fortune telling are true only if we don’t change our direction in life. . . . I prefer the term divination, meaning ‘to make divine.’ When you achieve a state wherein you can see (with or without the help of things such as Tarot cards) the possibilities, you can describe to yourself or others the path that is most likely to be taken if the person being read for continues on his or her current path.”

Donald Michael Kraig
“Divination vs. Fortune Telling”
(Llewellyn, 2012)
Other Notable Quotes

“Then the first two suits (sceptres and cups) signify ‘good’ and the other two (swords and pentacles) mean ‘evil.’ Thus every card of the fifty-six indicates the presence of the principle of activity or passivity, of ‘good’ or ‘evil,’ arising either in man’s will or from without. . . . And this makes the Tarot adaptable for fortune-telling. Thus, including the Kabala, Astrology, Alchemy and Magic, the Tarot makes it possible to ‘seek gold,’ ‘to evoke spirits,’ and ‘to draw horoscopes,’ simply by means of this pack of cards.”

*The Symbolism of the Tarot* (1913)
P. D. Ouspensky

“Divination is a practice or practical use of the universal system in a particular instance. And so the universal may elucidate the particular and throw light down in the world of phenomena, darkly veiled by the maya of matter.”

*General Book of the Tarot* (1930)
A. E. Thierens

### FORTUNE TELLING AND DIVINATION WITH TAROT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tarot as Fortune Telling</th>
<th>Tarot as Divination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mindset &amp; Will:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mindset &amp; Will:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• YOU possess the SIGHT</td>
<td>• You CONNECT with the DIVINE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SELF-CONFIDENCE in outcome</td>
<td>• FAITH in the greater PURPOSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You are ALL-KNOWING</td>
<td>• A MEDIATOR OF KNOWLEDGE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The words spoken when your intent is fortune telling holds weight as a form of powerful magic. As such magic, your words fix the seeker’s fate. Your words become, in effect, a spell you cast on the seeker to manifest the fate you have augured with your cards. You therefore become an integral part of the character cast in the seeker’s play of life. In fortune telling, as a form of magic, you are a creator. Your intent is not to transmit a message; your intent is to tell the seeker what you know, by virtue of being all-knowing. You tell the seeker what will happen, without an inspiration for creating change.

The words spoken when your intent is divination holds weight as a form of oracle, a translated and transmitted message between a higher Divinity and the seeker. In psychological terms, that can be congruous with a heightened state of consciousness after a transcendent experience, because your heightened state of consciousness is what connects you to Divinity. Divination as a form of magic has a conductive value. You are a conductor of energy, not the creator. You serve to connect seekers with Divinity so that divination will inspire them to create change. You present possibilities, not fixed fates.
“All manifestations in the universe can be generated by the practitioner’s physical body, through the hand. The function is determined by the will of the practitioner. The mechanics is determined by the practitioner’s mind.”

“Before every event, there are opportunities that Heaven avails to the practitioner to exercise metaphysical force to transform the path of nature [or fate].”

Unknown
Tang Dynasty 618-907 A.D.
黃帝陰符經 (Huang Di Yin Fu Jing)
Classics of the Hidden Talisman
Benebell Wen is the author of Holistic Tarot and The Tao of Craft. She studies tarot, feng shui, the I Ching, numerology, and both Chinese and Hellenic astrology. When not lecturing, teaching, or writing on metaphysics, Wen practices law in California and New York. She currently works in venture capital. Wen is of Taiwanese descent and lives in Northern California with her husband, James, a financial analyst, and the spirit of their beloved cat, Prince Marshall Rimbaud the Great. www.benebellwen.com

Email: benebellwen@gmail.com

Instagram: @bellwen

Facebook Page: facebook.com/benebellwentarot

Website: www.benebellwen.com

Twitter: @Tarotanalysis

YouTube Channel: youtube.com/c/BenebellWen