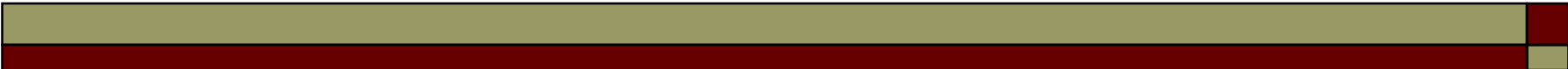


Chinese Religions at the Grassroots

Lecture 3: Interacting with Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors



Questions

- ❑ “Making sense of Chinese religious life requires a new logic.” (Anna Sun) What is this new logic?
- ❑ Can you define gods, ghosts, and ancestors?

Relationships with the gods

- “I suggest that we should understand prayer as human social action for maintaining meaningful **relationships** with the divine, the dead, and the living.” (Anna Sun)
- ecology of *relationships*
- creative act that opens **connections** with God, gods, or spirits of ancestors
- “[T] consult diviners is to take an active rather than passive stance” (Yang 2020, p. 89)

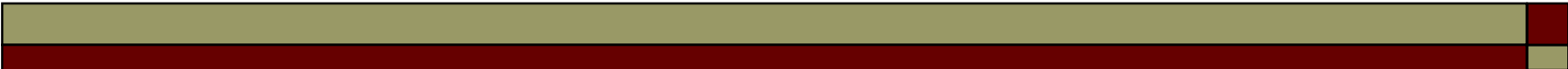


A continuous communication sphere

- “Death does not stop communication between family members and kin, for it is the beginning of an ancestor’s new life and the traffic between the living and the dead.” (Yang 2020, p. 83)
- “incense is like a mobile phone (*shouji*)” (Yang, p. 75)

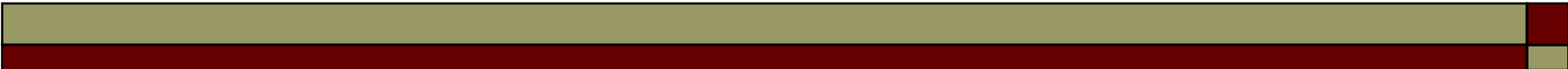
What does communication across the life-death boundary look like?
How does it differ from communication among the living?





Use of paper money at Qingming

The paper money is not expensive: one can purchase a large wad of colorfully printed, fake million-dollar bills for a pittance. As I learned in an interview with a 30-something subway engineer in Shanghai, what matters is not how much money you send, but the very act of sending it. “Of course, there are no supermarkets or shops for the deceased to spend it in,” he laughed when I asked about the use of the money. “Also, if the money were real, imagine how bad the inflation must be in the underworld, for everyone is sending millions!” Clearly, the question of belief has been decoupled from practice. (Sun, *Turning Ghosts into Ancestors*)



Production of presence

“But in that moment I felt wholly in the presence of this man who was telling me about the connections he felt with his deceased parents, how they had suffered while living, and how he thought it was his duty, and his daughter’s too, to honor and attend to their spirits a few times a year. He was keeping that thread, woven of love and care, strong between this present world and the world beyond, which, for him, was perhaps no less real than his own.”

→ Sacrifice to the ancestors *as if* they were present;
ritual in the conjunctive

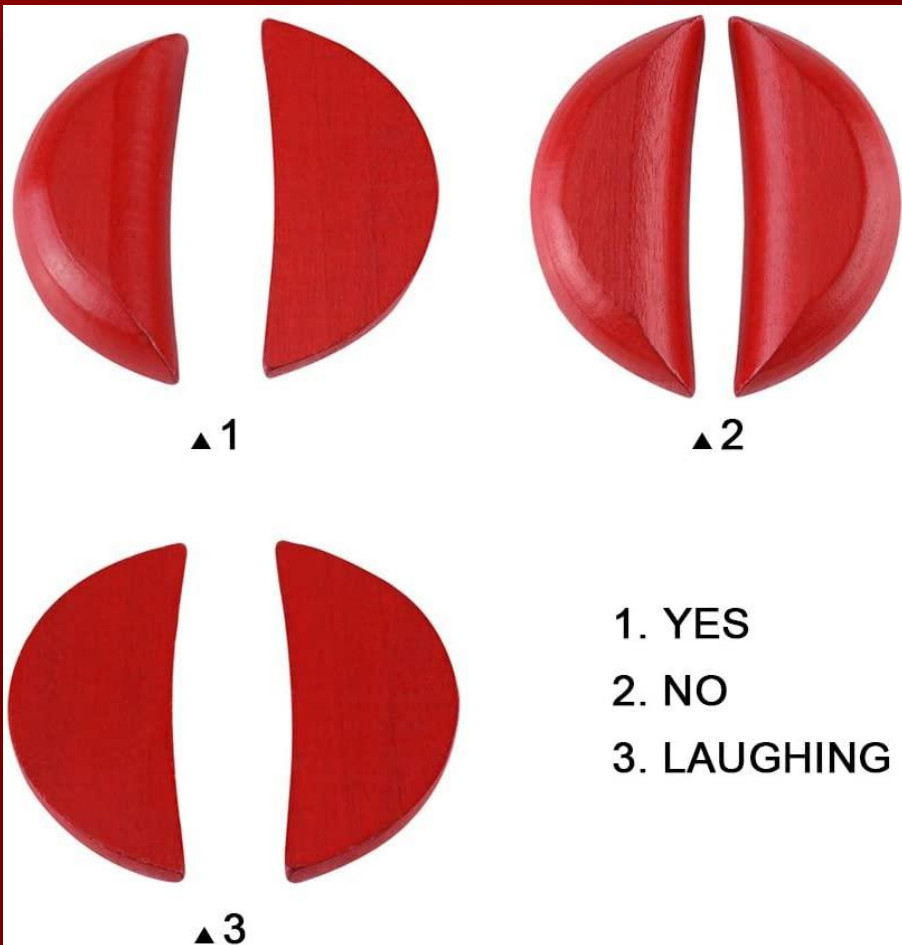
Divination

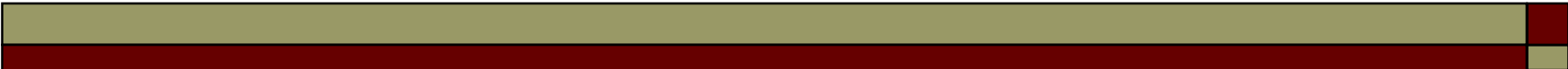
- ❑ Divinatory methods: “efforts to obtain information about the past, present, or future, with regard to one’s self or others, by recourse to experts with superior or specialized knowledge or to handbooks containing such knowledge” (Ahern, p. 45)
- ❑ Interpersonal transactions: communication with a deity, ghost or ancestor
- ❑ Divination practices that try to understand the forces and processes that operate in the world (e.g., geomancy)



Divination Set

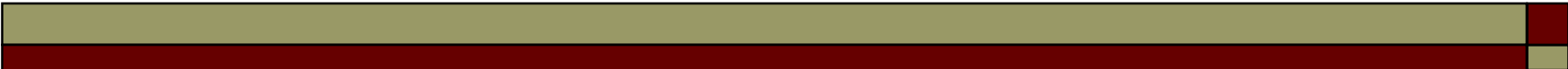






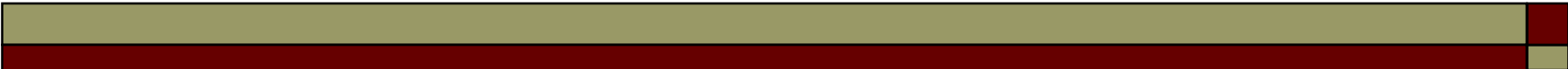
Outcomes

- ❑ 1-1-3: Prayer will be granted surely (most favourable combination)
- ❑ 1-1-1: second best combination
- ❑ 1-2-2, 1-2-1, 3-2-1, 3-3-3: unfavourable



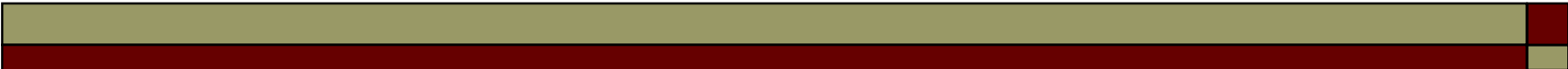
Interpersonal communication

- ❑ Implements used are tools of communication (brush, tortoise shells, paper) – speech acts
- ❑ Randomisation of communication – one element in the process is not controlled by human agent but only by gods
- ❑ Communicative code (like Morse code)



Communicative codes in divination

- ❑ Restricted code
- ❑ What is the purpose of a restricted code?
- ❑ Limited communication in terms of:
 - Vocabulary
 - Topics (health, wealth, promotions, relocation, business success, marriage, birth etc.)
- ❑ Limited interpretations



Summary: Basic postulates for human-deity relations

- ❑ Gods exist
- ❑ People should respect them (it does not hurt, anyway) and do what pleases them
- ❑ Gods can bless people and be helpful
- ❑ People should show gratitude
- ❑ Some gods are more efficacious than others
- ❑ One can consult several (specialised) gods