Many problems are framed in traditional humanities discourse as universal. Yet in many cases, their formulation arises from Western antiquity, and is “universalized,” creating a discourse that claims to be value-neutral, but is not. This paper is a case study of one such example, from the comparative study of mantic practices in antiquity, suggesting the very different kinds of semiotics that arise from Chinese and Greek divination and cosmology.

In the first section I show how the supposedly neutral categories for the classification of divination derive from Plato and Cicero. I then turn to the contributions of Chinese and Greek divination to systematic cosmology and semiotics. The second section takes up the role of the mantic arts in the development of Chinese astronomy and cosmology, a topic that has no direct Greek counterpart. The third section takes up changing Greek views of divination and the understanding of causation, a topic that has no direct Chinese counterpart. I conclude with brief remarks on very different Chinese and Greek understanding of divination as a semiotic system.

Theorizing Divination

Many classifications of divination still in use begin with Plato. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates argues that madness (*mania*) is beneficial as long as it comes from the gods. His example is the madness of Sibyls and Pythias, which he considered

---

* Author’s Note: The title of this contribution gives little indication of its, or my, debts to Professor Zhang Longxi through some twenty-five years of friendship. This paper is adapted from several sections of my book *Divination and Prediction in Early China and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). The project of which this paper is a part (see Raphals 2013, especially chapters 3 and 9) began during a fellowship at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies at City University of Hong Kong, at that time newly launched by Professor Zhang. More generally, he has been a formative and ongoing influence who quietly pushes us toward both exactitude and imagination.
the true mantic art (mantikē). He contrasts it with tekhnē: studying signs of future events by the flight of birds and other methods (Phdr. 244a–e). This distinction is part of Plato’s broader epistemological agenda: to contrast the self-conscious reflection of the philosopher with the inferior, unreflective activity of the seer and bard. Socrates plays on this distinction in his account of the oracle given to Chaerophon (that no man is wiser than Socrates) in the Apology, and argues that inspired seers and bards work not by wisdom (sophia) but by nature (phasis).

They are ignorant of what they create; they can describe sword and shield, but cannot wield them. Plato needs to deny manteis and bards self-consciousness reflection about their art in order to reserve this ability for philosophers. For Plato inspired divination is unlearned (adidaktos) and without skill (atekhnos), while technical divination is both learned (entekhnos) and skilled (tekhnikos).

Plato’s distinction reappears in the oldest Western comparative study of divination: Cicero’s De Divinatione. According to Cicero, there is a “consensus of antiquity,” that there are two kinds of divination: by nature (natura) and by technical expertise (ars, Cic. Div. 1.6.12). For Cicero as for Plato, natural divination came from the gods and was the highest form of the mantic art. It came “without reason or consciousness” (sine ratione et scientia, Cic. Div. 1.2.4) and was inspired by frenzy or dreams. It occurred either when the soul was free of the body (in dreams or to those approaching death) or when the soul’s natural power of prediction became overdeveloped, manifesting as frenzy or inspiration (as in the case of Cassandra). He explicitly excluded from natural divination both the use of reason and prediction by “natural law,” for example, the predictions of physicians, pilots, or farmers.

Thus for both Plato and Cicero, the power of prediction was a universal human potential, but was only realized fully in limited circumstances: in the grip of divine possession or when the soul was loosened from the hold of the body. They were only subject to study or mastery in the inferior form of technical divination by signs.

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, classicists turned to anthropology to reconstruct the origins of Greek and Roman society. Central to their evolutionist models was the view that societies evolved in stages from the “primitive” to the “rational.” Key in that evolution was the passage of ancient Greece.