EXPLORING WEAL AND WOE:
THE SONG ELITE’S MANTIC BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

BY

LIAO HSIEN-HUEI*
National Chi Nan University, Taiwan

Divination during the Song Period

Divination was so commonplace among the Song literati that modern scholars rarely pose the kind of questions about its role in elite life that they have pursued with respect to spirits and the underworld.\(^1\) While some scholars contend that the elite’s divinatory practices were too widespread to deserve mention,\(^2\) others attribute the prevalence of divination during the Song period to its vigorous practice by the literati.\(^3\) Some recent studies address several discrete

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2 In their study of the \textit{Yijing} (Book of Changes), for example, Kidder Smith, Peter Bol, Joseph Adler and Don Wyatt examine how four influential figures of the Song used the \textit{Changes} to address profound issues of human values, without referring to the popular usage of divination. See Kidder Smith Jr. et al., \textit{Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching} (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), viii, 234.


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features of the literati’s mantic practices. Chikusa Masaaki’s work on the Song elite’s relations with fortune-tellers, for example, suggests that concern for one’s official prospects was the driving force behind appeals to men of mantic skills. Close contact with celebrated figures in turn served as a means for fortune-tellers to obtain wealth, prestige, and prominence. Similarly, in his study of divination, dream interpretations, and omens in the Song, Wu Ou explains the elite’s enthusiasm for prophecy as having resulted from their anxiety over the uncertainty of their examination attainments and future careers.

Although these studies reveal the Song literati’s intimacy with various methods of prognostication, an integral picture of their mantic beliefs and practices has yet to be drawn.

A fine example of the Song literati’s approach to the mantic arts is provided by the famous scholar, Su Shi (1036-1101). As reported by Su himself and his fellow contemporaries, his association with divination started at a very young age and continued throughout his entire life. As a young boy of fourteen in 1049, Su had foreseen his examination success in a dream vision. He also learned in advance of the attainment of his examination degree in 1055 while traveling to Chengdu (Sichuan) from a diviner. While his anxiety over the civil examinations lessened as he successfully advanced to official positions, Su’s use of a variety of methods to prognosticate fate remained a salient feature of his long years of official service. He visited Xu Shouxin (徐守信, 1033-1108), an eccentric Daoist priest known for his accurate predictions of future events, at least two or three times. 

9 Xinbian fenmen gujin leishi 新編分門古今類事 (Congshu jicheng chubian叢書集成初編, Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937), 7: 90-1.
10 The diviner Su encountered was Li Shining (李士寧), who was often referred to by his contemporaries as a yiren異人 (eccentric person), a daoren道人 (man of the Way), or a fangshi方士 (occult specialist). A native of Pengzhou (蓬州), Li later traveled to the Northern Song capital Kaifeng (開封) and became very popular in official circles from the reign of Emperor Renzong (仁宗, r. 1023-1063) to the reign of Shenzong (神宗, r. 1068-1085). See Su Shi, Dongpo zhilin 東坡志林 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 2: 45; Liu Bin 劉攽 (1022-1088), Liu gongfu shihua 劉貢父詩話 (Baichuan xuehai百川學海 ed.), 16a.