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The Online Spiritual Marketplace in Contemporary China:
A Case Study of Tarot Reading

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how political, economic, and spiritual forces combine to shape contemporary China's digital spiritual marketplace. It argues that the tarot reading in the Chinese digital spiritual marketplace displays two opposite directions: on one hand, the digital platforms emphasize the entertaining nature of these practices under political restrictions; on the other hand, some practitioners take it as a serious practice that needs to follow divine regulations.

Introduction

The term “spiritual marketplace” can be understood in multiple ways. It can metaphorically indicate the behavior of “buy” in a religious identity or refer to the marketplace where spiritual objects and activities are commodities ready to be purchased. These commercial behaviors are regulated by both religious ideology and economic constraints.¹ Some scholars have shed light on the economics of religion in contemporary China, such as Mayfair Mei-hui Yang’s work on the ritual economy in Wenzhou, China.² However, most of these works focus on Chinese folk religion/popular religions, and little attention is given to the other component of the spiritual marketplace, the Western Occultist practices, including tarot divination, astrology, and rituals.³ These scholarships mainly look at practices based on fixed physical location, while this paper primarily examines online services. Notice that although many scholars tend to use the term “economy of religion”, not all of the practices mentioned previously are considered religious, or the practitioners do not see themselves as religious persons; consequently, this paper prefers the phrase “spiritual practice” instead of “religious practices” to describe such behaviors. This paper analyzes how political, economic, and spiritual forces combine to shape contemporary China's digital spiritual marketplace. It argues that the tarot reading in the Chinese digital spiritual marketplace displays two opposite directions: on one hand, the digital platforms

¹ J. Thomas Csordas, “Introduction: Modalities of Transnational Transcendence,” in *Transnational Transcendence*, ed. J. Thomas Csordas, 1st ed., Essays on Religion and Globalization (University of California Press, 2009), 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hprt5.4>.

² Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Re-Enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*, *Re-Enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China* (Duke University Press, 2020).

³ Yang, *Re-Enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*; Julie Y. Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China* (Durham, UNITED STATES: Duke University Press, 2010), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uchicago/detail.action?docID=1172256>

emphasize the entertaining nature of these practices under political restrictions; on the other hand, some practitioners take it as a serious practice that needs to follow divine regulations.

A “History” of Online Tarot Divination in Contemporary China

The marketplace of tarot reading in contemporary China is different from both other magical/religious/spiritual practices in China and Western spiritual marketplaces. Indeed, spiritual marketplaces are generally subject to economic and religious restraints, policy plays a huge role in the Chinese one. There is no academic research on this topic; as a result, the information collected is mostly from practitioners. This section first introduces the Western origins of tarot divination, including its relationship with Occultism, and then makes a comparison between different spiritual marketplaces.

Western Origins

There are many theories regarding the origins of tarot cards. Many scholars now believe that tarot cards derived from Northern Italy in the first half of the fifteenth century. However, alternative theories like French and Egyptian origins once existed; these two hypotheses have been disregarded because of the lack of evidence.⁴ Following the Italian derivation theory, the tarot game spread to European countries. In the sixteenth century, the tarot deck found its ground in France and Switzerland and established itself in Germany and other European regions in the

⁴ Helen Farley, *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 18-21.

eighteenth century. Different versions of tarot decks emerged though the 78-card deck is the most knowable one to the public.⁵

Although the tarot deck is known for its divinatory purpose, it might have a very different use from the beginning. According to Farley, the tarot deck was designed initially for memorizing classical stories and entertainment; tarot cards as a divination tool started after the end of the eighteenth century.⁶ The game of tarot started being popular in Italy during the Renaissance, while the French occultists transformed it into an esoteric device around the eighteenth century. During the New Age in the 1970s in the U.S., practitioners explored healing and self-growth. They were exposed to multiple traditions and practices and could combine different methods, traditions, and thoughts, not limited to religious beliefs. For example, some Jungian psychoanalytic theories are used for creating tarot imagery; in addition, feminism and neopaganism showed significant influences.⁷

It is challenging to date tarot's entrance to China; some scholars suggest that it popularized since the 1990s, relatively the same as other subjects such as psychology.⁸ According to Fu, Li, and Lee, online tarot reading emerged around 2000 and has gained a large audience on digital video platforms since 2016, reconstructing ritual performances through appropriating symbols from Western Occultism and the technology afforded by digital

⁵ Farley, *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism*, 43-44.

⁶ Farley, 43-44.

⁷ Farley, 152-158.

⁸ Han Fu, Yihan Li, and Francis LF Lee, "Techno-Cultural Domestication of Online Tarot Reading in Contemporary China," *Media, Culture & Society* 45, no. 1 (2023): 74–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221104700>; Li Zhang 1965 May, *Anxious China: Inner Revolution and Politics of Psychotherapy*, 1st ed., Book, Whole (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125js0p>.

platforms.⁹ It is true for most cases, though a few readers see tarot as a tool for psychological use without mysterious meaning.

Notice that although the informants of this paper are all tarot readers, many are not just tarot readers. They can be witches/wizards, astrologists, magicians, etc at the same time. For example, one of my informants, Yinan (pseudonym), a 23-year-old female, self-identifies as a “green witch”, tarot reader, and tutor of body-mind-spirit. Also, there are different traditions, and the readers can interpret cards with different methodologies. In the secular world, some are students (and a large percentage are/were international students in Western countries), like one of the diviners is studying in the U.K.; some have another full-time job: one of my informants MCat, a wizard, diviner, and astrologist, works as a game programmer.

Western and Chinese Spiritual Marketplace

Some Western scholars have tried to understand the situation of the Western Spiritual Marketplace, while the Chinese Spiritual Marketplace has different features. Sociologist Karen Gregory points out that digital tarot reading in the West involves a sense of individualism. Most digital tarot readers are self-employed and work on self-branding. For those who have limited experience of using social media, they may attend a workshop that emphasizes social networking. However, tarot readers seem to care more about branding themselves in the market

⁹ Fu, Li, and Lee, “Techno-Cultural Domestication of Online Tarot Reading in Contemporary China,” 79-97.

and being “authentic” online. Nevertheless, they also recognize that internet networking is important for them to get a good reputation.¹⁰

All digital tarot readers embrace self-employment and self-branding. However, although they all go to online platforms to do advertisements, the details are quite different. The tarot readers in the West prefer Twitter, Facebook, or personal websites. They share a lot of personal life on social media to make themselves “authentic”, while some struggle with the “hype” online information and avoid using the language of branding.¹¹ However, Chinese tarot readers do self-branding in almost the opposite way. It is difficult to know the true identity of the tarot readers in China because the tarot marketplace is in the gray zone—instead, their self-branding focuses on their divinatory technique and reading style. For example, some tarot readers tend to give a short, quick answer, while others spend a lot of time providing counseling and advice; the audience will favor different working styles. Also, it is almost impossible for Chinese tarot readers to create a personal website like Western readers. Western readers feel a need to use the internet to join the conversation with others and gain recognition, but they face the issue of being reported and banned by the government. In this case, although self-branding is shared by all the tarot readers online, it shows very different features in different places due to different political regulations.

One main struggle in Gregory’s article is that many tarot readers in the West face the issue of whether they should move their offline work online, which I never encountered in my

¹⁰ Karen Gregory, “Pushed and Pulled to the Internet: Self Employment in the Spiritual Marketplace,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 2 (2019): 208–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218794768>.

¹¹ Gregory, “Pushed and Pulled to the Internet: Self Employment in the Spiritual Marketplace,” 218-219.

work. Due to Chinese policies and regulations, a large part of China's discussion and communities of Western Occultism (including tarot reading) is online, even before Covid. Some readers mentioned that face-to-face divination would help build the energy flow and connection between the clients and the readers, but working online is always acceptable.

Moreover, the demography of Chinese practitioners is complicated because of the accessibility to the materials. On one hand, many of my informants suggest that tarot cards are easier to begin with compared to other Chinese traditions (like Daoism). Also, the materials are available online if you can find to way to search for them, while a lot of traditional Chinese materials need guidance from experienced tutors. However, these materials also require internet access and the ability to read English, which are almost considered privileges of middle-upper-class families, especially in the 90s. Even today, my informants say that if a tarot reader wants to be professional, English is the most important skill. Some even suggest studying French since many earlier texts are written in French.

It is clear that the spiritual marketplaces in different places show very different features for historical and demographic reasons. Although they display some similarities, especially in the economic aspects (self-employment and branding), the process of localization (including the time of introduction) can shape the marketplace in a very different way.

Methodology

This paper is based on online ethnographic studies from 2021-2023. I used online interviews, participant observation, and digital materials such as videos and articles for this project. I started recruiting my participants on an online video website *Bili Bili*, and the majority

of users of this website are Chinese. This paper will only use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the informants and other practitioners.

The study of tarot reading in the online spiritual marketplace in Contemporary China is important for the following reasons. The practitioners of tarot reading in China who are relevant are younger than practitioners in the West and the practitioners of other Chinese traditions, and it overlaps with youth culture and the thriving of psychology and psychoanalysis. It might also offer a map of how people's attitudes toward "superstitions" "religion", "modern/developed", and "Western" has changed throughout these years as a result of media and political influences. Finally, it allows the scholar to explore moral pluralism when multiple tarot traditions exist at the same time.

Politics and Its Impacts

Tarot divination, which is considered a form of superstitious practice, is banned by the Chinese government. But in reality, tarot readers will not be in trouble unless they are being reported; some tarot readers fall into the grey zone by labeling their practices with terms like "psychology" and "entertainment".

The Chinese government's attitude toward religions and "superstitions" is crucial for understanding the situation of occultist practices (esoteric practices/magical practices) in contemporary China. In China, only Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism can be practiced within some institutional structures, while these legal practices are considered "religious superstitious (*zongjiao mixin*)". In addition to the legitimated religious traditions, there is "superstition (*yiban mixin*)", the individual folk practices such as ancestral worship, and "feudal superstition (*fengjian mixin*)", the folk practices such as magical healings and

divination.¹² In this case, the government is mainly concerned with feudal superstition, and it is illegal to spread such information online.¹³ The government specifies banning divination, while tarot reading somehow falls under the gray zone, especially when people come out with different ways of hiding themselves under umbrellas like “psychology” and “entertainment”.

The Opportunities and Challenges of Digital Platforms

Different online platforms enable the emergence of the online spiritual marketplace, while all of the platforms are more or less impacted by political restrictions on superstitious practices.¹⁴

Within these years, several digital platforms, including websites and apps, have enabled the growth of the online tarot divination marketplace. Some are general e-commerce platforms, such as *Taobao*, and some are designed specifically for these services, such as *CeCe*. Some do not directly participate in the business process while allowing the advertisement, such as video platforms like *Bili Bili* and social media like *Weibo*. Some platforms like *Douyin*, where people can easily do a live stream, are also used for advertising and product selling. Some private services occur through *WeChat*, and the tool “Moments (*Pengyouquan*)” is another means of advertising. Moreover, money transactions have become convenient with *WeChat* and *Alipay*.

¹² Ann S. Anagnost, “Politics and Magic in Contemporary China,” *Modern China* 13, no. 1 (1987): 40–61.

¹³ “Hulianwang Zongjiao Xinxi Fuwu Guanli Banfa 互联网宗教信息服务管理办法” [Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services], last modified December 3, 2021. http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2022/content_5678093.htm. (accessed May 23, 2023)

¹⁴ There are some storefront readers, but it is not the focus of this paper.

In December 2022, a famous tarot reader Cloris (pseudonym), published an article, “A Survival Guide for Tarot Business Circle in 2023 (*2023 Nian Taluo Quan Shengcun Zhinan*),” on her *WeChat* Official Account. In her article, Cloris recounts what happened to the tarot business in these ten years.

At the earliest time, tarot readers could do online readings on *Taobao* using titles like “crystal balls of tarot diviners”. At that time, tarot readers can easily earn money without needing to advertise themselves. Unfortunately, later different shops on *Taobao* started to accuse each other. Once reported, the online stores would be required to ban the products or even be closed. Eventually, all the tarot divination services (including tarot cards) were banned on *Taobao*. Nowadays, when typing in phrases like “tarot divination” in *Taobao*, no products will be shown; instead, a picture saying “Not believing in folk remedies, rejecting superstitions, living a healthy life, and advocating science (*Buxin Pianfang, Jujue Mixin, Jiankang Shenghuo, Chongshang Kexue*)” will immediately jump out. The platform not only bans the selling of such products, which only says “nothing relevant is found (*Mei you zhaodao xiangguan baobei*)”, but also makes propaganda. Such a statement clearly shows the attitude of the government and the platform: first, it recognizes that tarot reading is a type of “folk remedy” and “superstition”; second, tarot reading, thus superstition, is the opposite of “science” which could jeopardize people’s “healthy life”. And *Taobao*, one of the biggest online shopping platforms in China and the oldest platform for online tarot readings, is no longer available for tarot diviners.

2018-2019, *Douyin* became an alternative digital marketplace where tarot readers can perform online reading services through live streaming. Cloris mentioned that some could earn up to one hundred thousand Chinese Yuan for one live stream and receive hundreds of thousands

monthly. However, the platform put more and more restrictions on tarot readings and live streaming.

Since 2020, shared videos of online tarot readings have been popular on *Bili Bili*. Nevertheless, since *Bili Bili* is simply a video-sharing platform, and its users are primarily young students, tarot readers can only earn a little money from it. However, some tarot readers became famous. For instance, one of the most famous ones, “Longnv Taluo,” has one million followers on *Bili Bili* (up to June 2023), five times compared to 194 thousand from two years ago.¹⁵ It might also be associated with the pandemic since these online tarot videos encouraged people and gave positive emotional feedback when China was in lockdown. In addition, tarot readers on *Bili Bili* usually leave their contact information (WeChat, Weibo, and QQ) so the audience can request a paid-private divination.

In addition to the platforms mentioned above, which are created for the general audience, some apps are designed specifically for tarot and other forms of divination. One good example is an app called *CeCe*. Unlike *Taobao* which is a general e-commercial website, *CeCe* is designed specifically for services associated with tarot readings and other “superstitious services”. The audience can quickly identify these apps by their names and pick a diviner on the app. On *CeCe*, people can see each diviner's specialty and charging standards. Also, the clients can rate the services of the diviners and leave comments.

Different platforms show different extents of political impacts, while E-commercial platforms seem to be mostly impacted by the policies, while some platforms like *Bili Bili* can still show content about tarot divination. The different situations can be a result of the nature of

¹⁵ The Newest data was collected in June 2023; the old data was up to March 2021, as found in Fu, Li, and Lee, “Techno-Cultural Domestication of Online Tarot Reading in Contemporary China.”

different platforms. *Taobao* is an e-commerce platform directly involved in monetary transactions, and there is obvious competition between different stores (readers). In contrast, social media and video platforms are more about attracting fans and advertising. Although competition still exists, it might be less intense due to the absence of monetary exchange.

If that's the case, how could platforms like *CeCe* still exist? The answer might be related to the two labels mostly used by tarot readers: "psychology" and "entertainment".

Two "Umbrellas": "Entertainment" and "Psychology"

Tarot reading as a "superstitious" practice is not accepted by the government, but there are ways to survive: "psychology" and "entertainment" become useful tags to help them fall under the grey zone. The term "psychology" links tarot with something scientific and superficially eliminates its magical aspect; "entertainment", on the other hand, secularizes the practices.

Entertainment

Under the restriction of Chinese regulations, the best way to avoid being reported is to label the practices as entertaining (*yule*). Platforms work hard on labeling tarot readings entertaining. For example, when watching the public tarot reading videos on *Bili Bili*, a yellow banner sometimes appears under the video saying, "(this) video is for entertainment only; please do not trust them easily."¹⁶

At the same time, *Bili Bili* tends to be loose about content about emotional problems (especially romantic relationships) and blocks videos about career divination. Some audiences

¹⁶ *Bili Bili* sets this banner when several people report the videos.

asked the tarot readers to upload videos about the future of their careers, and the readers responded that it is more and more difficult to have videos about careers to be passed through the examination of *Bili Bili*. A similar tendency can be found in *CeCe*, which labels itself a “Live streaming community for women's emotional sharing (*Nvxing Qinggan Qingsu Zhibo Shequ*),” suggesting its emphasis on emotional problems. This tendency indicates that these platforms consider problems of romantic relationships are “entertainment” while careers are serious problems. If a tarot reading is about one’s career, which is associated with money and career path, it is less likely to fit into the category of “entertainment”.¹⁷

Fu, Li, and Lee argue that online tarot reading eventually turned into mere entertainment, disassociating with superstitions. They are also aware that the tarot readers make a distinction between “private” and “public (mass)” divination, and the “mass divination” can be inaccurate because.¹⁸ However, the emphasis on the inaccuracy of mass divination and the accuracy of private divination turns out to be a potential way of advertising, though the tarot readers might make such a disclaimer as a result of platform regulations. The inaccurate results can be attributed to the massive energy resulting from a massive group of audience, and the tarot readers

¹⁷ The other possible analysis of this tendency could be related to the economic recession and low marriage rate in China. On one hand, having more divinatory videos about careers might increase people’s anxiety since the audience will leave comments under the videos; on the other hand, Chinese women (who are the big component of the audience of tarot readings) need to choose between family and career (indeed, some people can balance work and family, it is difficult when women have children). Under this circumstance, it is not impossible that the government is more tolerant towards divination about romantic relationships considering the low birth rate and marriage rate. Fu, Li, and Lee argue that online tarot videos help the audience to be “good citizens” who follow “Social Core Values” and encourage the audience during the pandemic. In this case, online tarot videos can function as propaganda during difficult times.

¹⁸ Fu, Li, and Lee, “Techno-Cultural Domestication of Online Tarot Reading in Contemporary China,” 84-85.

usually mention that if the audience wants more accurate results, private reading is a better option.

Psychology

Some tarot readers associated tarot cards with psychology and psychoanalysis, trying to earn credibility from the support of “science”. Still, these practitioners of “psychology” can be divided into two groups. One group follows Jungian and Freudian theories that Western psychologists have already disregarded. Tracing back to the origin of occultism, “science” is, in fact, a large part of its component.¹⁹ Articles from tarot5.cn, a website that contains a lot of information about tarot cards, state that:

The “collective unconsciousness” and “theory of Synchronicity” suggested by Jung is a line that connects divination and psychology. Tarot card visualizes the answers from people’s unconsciousness. From this perspective, the principle of tarot cards falls into the field of psychology.²⁰

It does not matter if these theories are psychological and scientific; what matters is that the titles of Jung and Freud, two famous psychologists, help increase the credibility of tarot reading from the perspectives of both the practitioners and the clients.

The other group of them aligns with modern psychology. For example, Cloris claims to hold a Ph.D. in applied psychology; she was also the founder of “MA Heart Classroom (*MA Xin Ketang*)” and had millions of followers on *Weibo*. Although her WeChat official account is mainly about tarot reading,²¹ her classes include communication skills and psychological

¹⁹ This paper will not discuss the definition of “science” and its genealogy.

²⁰ <https://www.tarot5.cn/taluopai/5/taluopai10.htm>

²¹ The name of her WeChat Official Account contains the term “tarot”, but the full name of it will not be revealed in the paper.

knowledge. These practitioners combine knowledge from tarot reading with communication and emotional control. Instead of explaining the complicated and potentially outdated theories of Jung, an academic title is more intuitive and carries more weight. This group explicitly works on counseling and psychotherapy, and tarot reading is simply one way for them to understand the client's problems.

Finally, a good example of using “psychology” and “psychotherapy” as an “umbrella” is *CeCe*. *CeCe* offers multiple services, including counseling, tarot reading, Chinese zodiac, astrologists, etc.²² However, if we look at the main page of the app, it is clear that “counseling”, “sand table”, and MBTI testing are on the first home page. In order to find services like tarot reading, the users need to go to the next page.

The title of “Psychology,” regardless of the historical connection between Jung and the tarot deck, becomes a useful tool for the diviners to protect themselves from being reported. Whether tarot reading makes up the gap in psychotherapy in China is uncertain. However, it is true that many of my informants noted that the stigma of “being sick” pushes many clients to look for help from “superstitious practice” instead of psychotherapy.

Divination and Ai

Finally, the use of Ai for online tarot reading might be an indirect result of Chinese policies. Nowadays, some tarot apps have offered random card drawing, and the logic behind it can still be explained by synchronicity and the power of divine beings. Sometimes the interpretation of the results is simply copies of online resources; while in some apps, the

²² See Appendix 1

interpreters are tarot readers and are paid. In this case, the tarot diviners do not directly involve in the process of card drawing (which is finished by a computational program), and they only offer interpretation services, which are not directly related to superstitious practice.

Interestingly, because of the discussion of Ai, especially the release of Chatgpt, some of the diviners are exploring the potentiality of using Ai as a true divinatory device. MCA (pseudonym), a computer programmer, started his spiritual journey in high school and claimed to be a diviner, astrologist, and wizard. He mainly worships Norse deities and enjoys understanding his practices through mythologies and academic sources. Maybe because of his identity as a computer programmer, he is sensitive to data and probability. To fulfill his interests, he wrote computational programs and applications.

He called what he does “cyber-metaphysics” and tried to find out if Ai can be used as a true divinatory tool and how the logic of it might work. He did a lot of experience with Ai and divination (using tarot and geomancy),²³ and his original purpose was to detect the logic of metaphysics (*xuanxue*). However, his results made him start working on studying a mixture of the logic of metaphysics and Ai. According to MCA, his viewpoint refuses the basic logic of divination.

To some extent, Ai reminds people of logic, professionalism, and rationality, and a rational approach to tarot reading is important for the spiritual marketplace in China. Tarot readers remind the audience to treat online tarot videos rationally, and people need to make rational decisions when things are associated with their futures.²⁴ The relationship between Ai

²³ The process and logic of his experiences are too professional that I have no way to understand.

²⁴ Fu, Li, and Lee, “Techno-Cultural Domestication of Online Tarot Reading in Contemporary China,” 84.

and divination is an ongoing study, and no one can predict its future, especially when it entangles with the development of Ai technology. However, it could be a new way for diviners to understand the world and their cosmology.

Conclusion

Chinese politics play a huge role in the digital spiritual marketplace in contemporary China. Its regulations make some of the platforms permanently no longer available for tarot readers and make some of the tarot readers use labels like “psychology” and “entertainment” in order to “legitimate” their practices. Sometimes tarot readers will embrace both labels at the same time; also, though this paper suggests that these labels function as umbrellas for tarot divination, it does not mean that the connection between tarot and these two labels is fake. In fact, tarot reading, including Occultism, is closely associated with the history of psychology, while tarot cards originally appear as a type of game (entertainment). In conclusion, Chinese policies on superstitions shape the spiritual marketplace by affecting the digital platforms that allow the existence of the marketplace.

Economic Restraints

All the marketplace needs to be subject to some economic restraints, and the digital spiritual marketplace cannot escape from this rule. As a “marketplace”, there are demands and supplies, producers (tarot diviners), and consumers (clients).

Two Modes of Business

Following the discussion of platforms, this section shows the different business modes resulting from the different types of platforms. This section roughly identifies two modes of

digital tarot businesses, while some people might have tried both ways. The first mode is self-employment, which usually happens on *Weibo*, *Bili Bili*, and *Douyin* when the individual accounts receive much attention. The second mode takes place on *CeCe*, in which the platforms become the media between the reader and the clients, and the platforms themselves help to prove readers' credibility.

In the first mode, some tarot readers gain many fans/followers/audiences and are considered “Internet celebrities.” Their fans usually trust the ability of the tarot readers regardless of what platforms they are using. As a result, the readers need to prove their ability to the audience while they can manipulate the process of selecting the audience. For example, on *Bili Bili*, tarot readers publish many pick-a-card public readings. In this case, the results can be inaccurate. The readers usually make the following explanations: first, since it is a public reading instead of private, a lot of information comes in, which makes the results a collection of data from all the potential audiences; second, if nothing in the video correspondent with the audience’s situation, this video is not for “you” or the connection between the reader and the audience in this video is not strong enough.

Traffic

No matter which mode the practitioners are doing, the key to earning money is the same. From Cloris and many of my informants’ perspectives, a successful tarot reader needs the following elements: information, traffic (*liuliang*), and connection (*renmai*). First, people must find a way into a good circle/community (*quanzi*), which brings them helpful information and high-quality connection; the traffic comes afterward if the readers work hard. Traffic is the ultimate goal since it can be transferred into monetary gain. People can generate a large volume

of traffic by making shared videos and live streaming; however, if they are not famous enough, they need to rely on the traffic brought by the platforms.

Pricing and Price

Different business modes have different standards of charges. On *Cece*, the charge ranges from 2.5 to 3.5 Chinese Yuan per minute, depending on if it is a public live streaming or a 1-to-1 consultation. Regardless of ratings and background, each tarot reader follows the same standards. In contrast, tarot readers who do self-employment create their own charging standards. It is difficult to tell how the platforms like *Cece* decide the prices for the tarot readers, but at least it seems acceptable to both the readers and the clients. Nevertheless, I interviewed many of my informants, primarily self-employed tarot readers, and they emphasized the importance of the client's circle or customer portrait.

One of my informants used a Chinese idiom simply to conclude their strategies, “treating them according to their social status, relationship with them, etc. (*Kanren Xia Caidie*).” It depends on who the clients are and how much they can pay, and it is when the circle and customer portrait become important. If a tarot reader is surrounded by students (even the reader can be a student), it is common that the clients can only pay 50 Chinese Yuan for one reading. In contrast, a company's boss can pay hundreds or even thousands of Chinese Yuan for the same services. Cloris even connects circle and energy:

If you stay in a low-quality circle, you will always be set back (*beiren danwu*) and surrounded by negative energy (*fu nengliang*). When you realize it, you have already missed many opportunities (*fengkou*)

For many tarot readers, if their connections can only bring them certain types of customers, they will rely on platforms. As mentioned before, the users of *Bilibili* are mostly

students, while there are other potential platforms like *Xiaohongshu* and *Pinduoduo*, which Cloris do not mention. Some of my informants called these two platforms “sinking market (*xiachen shichang*)” because “you can imagine what kind of customer portraits these platforms have”.

However, to get more clients, sometimes the readers offer students discounts, though the type of discounts varies by the reader. Some readers will generously give 50% off to students, while others simply change the “products”: for example, one tarot reader asks for 300 Chinese Yuan for 30-minute reading (2-3 questions); when I told her I am a student, she changed to 100 Chinese Yuan but only allows a 10-minute reading (1 question).

On the one hand, the prices depend on the clients; on the other hand, the prices decide what kind of clients they could get. “The wealthy people select tarot readers based on their price,” said one of my informants, “If his/her business is worth millions of Chinese Yuan, they will not go to a tarot reader who only asks for twenty Yuan.” In this case, the digital spiritual marketplace is no different from other marketplaces, and it is subject to the economic restraints of supply and demand, producer, and consumer.

Two Service Styles

Like other markets, competitions exist among tarot readers, so they need to find a way to prove that their services are better than their competitors. “What the clients need is problem-solving.” –a sentence I heard from many informants. The tarot readers need money, and the clients want their worries eliminated. In this case, the tarot readers have two different service styles. Some focus on giving accurate divination, which sometimes follows with ritual services

as problem-solving techniques. The others spend a long-time providing advice and counseling, helping the clients establish confidence and change bad habits if needed.

On the one hand, a group of tarot readers insists on the function of a tarot deck as a form of divination. They believe that tarot reading is a mysterious practice associated with the power and ability of the readers, and they usually come from a witchcraft tradition. In this case, it is difficult for them to prove their ability and a small amount of them started claiming a relationship with Western covens and divine power. For example, one claimed to be a reincarnation of a Norse witch; others claimed to be the children of the deities.²⁵ Many of my informants consider these types of relationships ridiculous and joked about it as “a large open world for cosplay and original characters”. The most common situation is that a practitioner becomes the worshiper/follower/messenger of one divine power (which could include Pan, Lilith, Odin, Archangel, etc.). In this case, these practitioners show their ability by uploading images of statues and alter in their houses and claiming to receive an esoteric inheritance from the divine power. What usually follows the divinatory track are ritual services and magical products, such as candles that can accumulate good luck.

On the other hand, some tarot readers are closer to the role of “counselor” and “psychotherapist”. As mentioned before, “psychology” is a good umbrella for tarot readers to do their business, while many of them consider providing mental comfort and healing to be what the clients need. M Cat suggested, “[we treat] tarot readings as ‘psycho’ (*dangzuo xinli laizuo*)”, and sometimes the diviners in the WeChat group complained that the time for reading cards only take a small amount of time (ten to thirty minutes), while they need to spend hours to make the clients

²⁵ Although reincarnation is a Buddhist concept.

feel good. Fu, Li, and Lee also point out that some tarot readers display themselves as helpers on online tarot videos.²⁶

Tarot readers who embrace different service styles dislike each other. Here is an anecdote from one of my informants who is a tarot reader and an international student in the U.S.:

I have a friend, and who needs to go to an interview. He went for a tarot diviner, and the diviners gave him an arbitrary result. The tarot diviner gave him a list of what he should do on the day of the interview, saying that he had to wear red cloth to the interview otherwise he would fail.

My friend was scared by the result and the ritual advice. So, he came to me, and I gave him another reading and spent a lot of time comforting him.

From my informant's perspective, his friend's interview is something that happened in the future, and the reader should not give clients horrible results and scared them by giving non-sense advice. What clients need, according to this informant, is positive support from the tarot reader. However, on the opposite side, there are tarot readers who criticize that many tarot readers only say positive things, which cannot really help with the client's situation.

Moreover, the two service styles demonstrate Charles Taylor's theory of "porous and buffered self". According to Taylor, people believe in a "porous self" in the earlier pre-modern enchanted world, and they are vulnerable to spirits, demons, and cosmic power. However, in a modern and disenchanting period, people buy into the idea of a "buffered self" that there is a clear line between the inner and outside world.²⁷ In the case of the tarot reading market, the two different service styles are not only different problem-solving strategies but also the result of different traditions: the esoteric/magical one and the psychological one. These practitioners display very different understandings of "future" and "cosmology" in their services. The

²⁶ Fu, Li, and Lee, "Techno-Cultural Domestication of Online Tarot Reading in Contemporary China," 84.

²⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age, Gifford Lectures*; (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

practitioners who believe in the accuracy of divinatory power usually provide ritual services or sell magical products to change the future. But for those who trust personal power, personal effort and confidence are enough to change the future. In both cases, the future can be changed, but how and by whom is different: one relies on “luck (*yun*)” and help from the divine power, while the others believe in individual agency. The former chose an enchanted, magical world, while the latter emphasizes the buffered self in a modern world.

However, service styles do not fully equivalent to practitioners’ beliefs; it could simply be a choice due to market competition. In reality, it is possible that someone believes in supernatural power and employs theories from psychology (and even earns a degree in Psychology). For example, a tarot reader who has 26 thousand followers posted:

To me, tarot is neither divination nor test. I don't want to know what the future is like because all my life is created by myself. Psychologically speaking, consciousness is a small portion of mentality, there is also unconsciousness, so I use tarot as a tool to communicate with my unconsciousness.

Clearly, her understanding of tarot reading is more on the “psychological” side that praises personal agency. However, the way she does tarot reading shows the esoteric aspect of tarot. She invites participants to come to her for private tarot readings for free (though she also provides paid services). At the same time, she also asked the participants to do *Mudita (suixi)*,²⁸ giving her a red pocket as much as they like, and she will later donate the money. The red pocket enables the flow of energy between her and the participant (client), and she needs the name of the participant and their astrological signs. In this case, tarot readers can combine a psychological understanding of tarot readings with an enchanted worldview without any issues.

²⁸ *Mudita* is originally a Buddhist term, that means joy; especially sympathetic or vicarious joy, or the pleasure that comes from delighting in other people's well-being.

In conclusion, these two service styles, though to some degree show the divergence of traditions and practices embraced by the tarot readers in the marketplace, are also choices resulting from the market competition. Those who tend to do counseling and encourage people to gain success through individual effort condemned that some tarot readers provide negative and horrifying divinatory results, which scare the customers, whereas those who value the accuracy of the results dislike the “psychotherapists” because they only say good things to comfort the customers.

The Divine Intervention: Karma

The business negotiations between the clients and the readers are not the only players in this game; the spiritual power (or divine power) is also involved in the spiritual marketplace. The prices are defined by at least three parties: the client, the reader/performer, and the divine power; it is not necessarily in the form of money. Interestingly, when I asked them how they set up the prices, they immediately taught me how to run a business without mentioning the importance of spirits and supernatural laws behind. At the same time, they commonly discuss the potential bad karmic results if the money one charges exceeds his/her ability. It is a conflicting narrative of what they said: “One can charge as much as the clients are willing to pay”.²⁹ Eventually, I got the following answers when asking if there are any prohibitions regarding divination. But the answers to this question are even more diverse.

²⁹ It is difficult to tell if some people say this because of jealousy.

The most crucial idea is “karma (*yinguo yeli*),” coming with each action like divination or ritual.³⁰ In this case, karma is the price practitioners pay for knowing or changing something. “If we have to bear more karma, why don’t we charge more?” During one casual conversation, one of my informants said. “Karma” is originally a Buddhist term referring to action, deed, or work and the consequences or results of them. Nowadays, it seems to be accepted by most Chinese people regardless of traditions.³¹ However, all the informants in the group became silent when I asked them to explain “karma” to me.

Without explaining “karma” clearly, the discussion continues. Some diviners consider that divination is prying into either the destiny or private information of someone else depending on what kind of questions are being asked, and this action accumulates bad karma. As a result, when doing divination, one underlined rule is that the questions must be closely related to the clients;³² the less connection between the clients and the questions they ask, the more energy of the tarot reader will be costed.

One of my informants suggested that Karma exists even when someone just thinks about taking (any) action. Most practitioners believe that the action associated with life and death will accumulate the largest amount of karma so that they will avoid these types of questions. Also, some diviners refuse to deal with the lottery, which potentially brings bad consequences.

³⁰ In this case, divination itself can be considered a ritual; or many of my informants provide ritual services after divination to solve the client’s problems; *yinguo yeli* are in fact separate words, but it seems most practitioners mix them together, so this paper will not make a clear distinction; what’s important in the paper is how they think about these terms not how the Buddhists define them.

³¹ It is difficult to tell if “Karma” can be a sign of localization since Western Occultism also refers to many Eastern practices; it is also possible that there are similar ideas in the West and the practitioners just picked a translation that fits best.

³² This rule might not be applied to someone who believes in Synchronicity.

However, none of them explicitly explain what “bad consequences” will be. Even the practitioners may have no idea when they perform the ritual. They might have a feeling that what they are doing results in bad things, which could be a signal sent by divine power.

However, these restrictions are directly associated with the traditions of the practitioners. For example, one of them, coming from a British Witchcraft tradition, told me that the concept of karma does not exist according to her tradition. While many others suggest that there is common sense that practitioners following Western traditions care less about “Karmic results” compared to the ones who practice Eastern religions (Buddhism, Daoism, etc.). There are some Eastern traditions that train people to do divination for life and death, which supposedly accumulate the most karmic consequence. “If one tradition refuses to do so, open the door and find another”, said my informants. If the process involves ritual and communication with deities, informants might choose a proper deity based on the personality of the deity. For example, the issues about love affairs and cheating go to Lilith, although the practitioner might have a closer relationship with another deity. It is possible that the practitioners cannot find a proper deity to work in certain situations, so they come to the WeChat group and ask if anyone can take the job. In this case, business competition and monetary benefit need to give in to divine power.

Sometimes, the practitioners cannot tell the prices even if they already pay for it. For instance, a lot of practitioners describe the cost in this way: “There was a time period when I had really bad luck, like falling from the stairs, losing money, etc. Eventually, I realized that those bad things happened to me because of my previous divination.” It is possible to conclude that bad karma results in bad luck, and other bad things are consequences of bad luck. However, one of my informants also suggested that if one has a good relationship with a deity (divine power), it is possible to erase the bad karma caused by divination.

In this case, money from the client partially compensates for the bad things that potentially happen to the ritual performers in the future. Bad luck can be converted into a monetary price for both parties: the clients pay for divination to avoid bad results, while the diviners receive money for future costs that result from the divination. At the same time, holding some principles could help establish a professional image.

Conclusion³³

This paper discusses the spiritual marketplace in contemporary China, focusing on the platforms that allow the existence of such services and the different modes of business. It shows how spiritual/divine power, economic restraints, and political regulations work together to shape the marketplace. Economic gain asks people to do self-branding and advertising, while these economic behaviors are controlled by both policies and supernatural power. On one hand, politics force digital platforms to secularize tarot reading by turning it into entertainment, especially for the audience; some practitioners also choose the path of secularization by preferring the psychological side of tarot reading. On the other hand, some practitioners see it as a serious action that needs to be regulated by divine power and follows with karmic consequences.

³³ One limitation of this research is that the population of tarot readers is so diverse that it is difficult to know the background of each of them. My informants are mostly the ones who take their practices seriously and devote a lot of time to working on their skills and traditions, but there are more amateurs. Also, the sensitivity of such topics makes it difficult to get their personal experiences and responses. What I can generate is how they want to display themselves in public and in front of other practitioners, which limits the scale of the study in the marketplace itself instead of their life stories.

A question keeps coming out throughout the whole study: why do tarot reading, and online tarot videos still exist when they can be easily banned from the platform (*Taobao*)? Is it because, as Fu, Li, and Lee suggest, online tarot videos are secularized and advise people to become good citizens?³⁴ In other words, it is a way of propaganda tolerated by the government? Based on the information I have collected; it is not true for part of the practitioners; tarot reading is never fully secularized, and many businesses are in fact “immoral” (tarot reading has diverse topics and problems). From my perspective, it will be easier to understand all of these when mapping it as a free marketplace with some regulations from the government and the deities; the demand for a substitute for psychotherapy, and the increased anxiety of an unpredictable future facilitate the existence of the spiritual marketplace of tarot reading.

³⁴ Fu, Li, and Lee, “Techno-Cultural Domestication of Online Tarot Reading in Contemporary China.”

Appendix 1

Home page of *Cece*: 1st



Home page of *Cece*: 2nd



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