

Omikuji

An Interactive Installation Exploring East Asian Games of Divination

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a sculptural work installed at the Hong Kong Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textiles (CHAT) in 2022. The work titled *Omikuji*, and this paper discussing it, each explore the legacies of North Asian divination and their intersection with practices of games and play. Drawing on practice led research undertaken in China and Japan from 2017 to the present, this paper gives attention to modes of ludic divination that arise within China and Japan with brief discussions of divination boards, playing dice and playing cards. The paper also presents how these histories are communicated and displayed within the context of the exhibited work, opening innovative directions in games heritage. The central aim of this paper is to highlight how the mechanics, rituals, ceremonies and structures of games and play have transferred to practices of augury and divination in the past and present.

Keywords

Divination, Ludomancy, Games Heritage, China, Japan.

INTRODUCTION

Games and play have long provided ways of peering into unknown futures. Existing in both sacred and profane contexts, game devices and practices of play have served not only to entertain, but also to provide alternative logics and clairvoyant predictions (Finkel, 1995 Binsbergen, 1997; Shotwell, 2007; Bréard, 2017). Revealed here is how ludic objects, rituals and practices from China and Japan have filtered through to contemporary and global practices of games and play. Deploying the term ‘ludomancy’ derived from ‘ludic’ or ‘ludo’ referring to games and play, and ‘mancy’ or ‘mantic’ denoting practices of divination, this paper links ancient rituals of fortune-telling to contemporary practices of game theory and prognostication through game simulations. At stake in this paper are the hidden undercurrents of meaning making in games.

Divination, or in Chinese *suan ming* (算命) translated as ‘the calculation of fate’ emerges in the Shang Dynasty (1600 to 1046 B.C) when ancient Chinese priests and shamans would carve text into oracle bones (predominantly turtle shells) and heat them with fire. The cracks that would appear in the shell—cleaving the inscribed text—foretold of futures that loomed. Constituting much more than ceremonial objects, Shang Dynasty oracle bones provided important calendrical models of time and space as well as becoming emblematic of divination practices such as *I Ching* (易經) and *Feng Shui* (風水) and other tools within the arsenal of geomantic techniques.

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The divining of fortunes was not entirely reliant on the contingent, but seasonally, numerically, and geographically calculated, and the mathematical structures that informed the predictions of oracle bones also form the basis for numerous board games such as *Liubo* (六博) and *Weiqi* (圍棋) (Moskowitz, 2013). In his re-evaluation of *Liubo* as a game, Selbitschka (2016) notes that *Liubo* boards found in tombs predate by at least two centuries the earliest known diviner's boards suggesting that some modes of divination evolved from game play (Tseng 2004, 194).

Binsbergen (1997), Raphals, (2013) and Curry (2010) have each traced ancient divination games across as they appeared and spread across Asia, Europe and Africa, while Smith (2008), Lo (2000) and Lackner (2018) have given particular attention to the origins of divination practices in Chinese contexts. Their combined scholarship tends to agree that where Ancient Egyptian and Greek divination favoured communication between the realms of humans and the divine, forming a discourse of causation and moral responsibility, Chinese divination by contrast, bent toward symmetry, mathematics, and active agency within a complex and nuanced model of cosmic change (Raphals, 2013).

The interactive aspect of divination is evidenced in dice and playing cards, each of Chinese ancestry. Dotson, Cook and Lu (2021) discuss how Chinese and Mongolian dice divination voyaged along the silk road forming a relational network in which the roles of gods, dice, divination books, symbols, and fortune telling players spread toward Europe. Bréard (2017) notes that the Song Dynasty (960 to 1279 AD) flattening of dice into *pái* (牌) meaning 'plaque', but what we now know as dominos, represented a numerological turn in gameplay that was equally applicable in gambling and divination.

Domino plaques evolved into both playing cards and playing tiles each giving rise to their own games of entertainment, gambling and fortune telling in both Eastern and Western contexts (Lo 2004). While cards and tiles are identifiable in more recent East Asian games such as *MahJong* (麻將) and *Hanafuda* (花札) informing the practices of prophesy that each enable, the transmission of playing cards from China to the West saw them take on ludomantic aspects with entertainment games such as *Tarroti* and *Tarok* eventually evolving into the divination practices of Tarot cards.

Although this paper gives central attention to East Asian heritage, the rich intersection of divination and games – herein outlined as ludomancy – has been revealed by previous scholarship as a global phenomenon throughout the ancient world. Yet far from being exotic or distant, facets of ludomancy persist in contemporary and Western games and modes of play, thereby constituting unannounced instances of religious devices (Davies, 2019). Ludomantic tendencies undergird the ambitions of Game Theory in service of forecasting economic outcomes based on predictions of human behaviour, while videogames are developed in military contexts to predict real-world scenarios, decisions, and conflict outcomes (Stuart, 2019). Even the prophesy by game scholars of the forthcoming century as a 'game century' hints at a ludomantic thinking. Games and play persist as fortune telling devices.

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