

Balancing fate advice and action: using Fengshui and other forms of divination in Hong Kong

DPhil in Anthropology

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Declaration

I, Lai Hung Yu, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from any other source, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Divination is a popular practice in modern Hong Kong. This thesis investigates divination in Hong Kong from three perspectives: destiny, ethics, and adherence to divination advice. First, my fieldwork on Fengshui divination showed that many people regularly perform Fengshui divination for themselves in their homes or offices, with the aim of intervening to change their destinies. I argue that, rather than just accepting the existence of the tension between destiny's contradictory features of malleability and fixity, that paradox is necessary to allow people to claim ownership of and take responsibility for their own lives. Fengshui divination is the means which its practitioners use to exert agency in their destinies. Second, I explored divination practitioners' practical ethics by reference to their notion of karma: *jip lik*. The working principle of *jip lik* is that a person's destiny is set in the cosmic realm and that diviners should not disclose or interfere with it. If a client followed divination advice, and if that action changed their destiny, then the diviner who gave the advice would be responsible for the unpermitted alteration achieved, and therefore the diviner, or worse, his descendants, would suffer cosmic punishment. The *jip lik* mechanism and the diviners' personal ethics guide how far diviners go in performing divination for their clients, and how they deal with the ethical dilemma posed by the conflict between altruism and self-preservation. Lastly, I investigated how Hong Kong parents use divination to discover an auspicious date and time to give birth (by Caesarean section)

and how they use nominative analysis to find auspicious names for their children. Although Hong Kong parents are fate-conscious, believing that divination (and its advice) can help them improve their children's destinies, they do not follow divination advice unconditionally, but weigh it against their personal preferences and practical circumstances.

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I was pregnant during fieldwork and later became a mother. Combining parenthood and research was challenging, but my child has continued to provide me with the strength to overcome the challenge. I also thank my family, especially my husband and my parents-in-law, for their understanding, encouragement, and love in the past years. Last but not least, I thank all my research informants. They have provided not only insights into the use of divination but also trust, friendship, joy, and tears over the years. I am grateful to have met them and shared my life with them. I hope they feel the same way.

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Notes

Transliteration: romanization of Chinese words in this thesis follows the Cantonese Jyutping system, respecting the fact that Cantonese is the predominant dialect spoken in Hong Kong.

Currency: as at March 2024, the exchange rate between the British pound and Hong Kong dollar was about 1 GBP to 10 HKD.

Introduction

Divination¹ has long been practised in Hong Kong. Since the 1960s it has been documented, although only tangentially, by anthropological and historical researchers during British colonization (for example Baker (1968; 1979) and Freedman (1979)). Divination remains very popular, and is a pervasive feature of modern Hong Kong. For example, numerous advertisements for divination services appear on billboards in Nathan Road (Kowloon's major thoroughfare) and in other public spaces. Divination is widely used to predict movements on the Hong Kong stock market and property prices, and its use by local celebrities is a common subject for popular gossip. Every year, in the run-up to the Chinese New Year, every media channel in Hong Kong broadcasts divination predictions of (in)auspiciousness in terms of career, love, health, and so on for people with different Chinese zodiac signs. Divination and the city are inseparably connected.

There are numerous sources from which people in Hong Kong can learn divination techniques, including online and offline divination classes, divination manuals, television programmes, and online video channels, such as YouTube. In my MPhil research, I found that many people in Hong Kong learn to perform divination for themselves, and some of them also consult other diviners. Many divination practitioners act as both diviners

¹ Numerous types of divination are practised in Hong Kong. In this thesis, I use the word divination in the widest possible sense, to include all techniques that provide knowledge about the past or the future.

and clients at different times. So, while there is a dichotomy between diviner and client in any *one* divination consultation, the same is not true of participants who perform divination for themselves, nor of those who act variously as diviner and client *over time*. I therefore refer in this thesis to people who regularly consult divination as ‘divination participants’ or ‘divination practitioners’, regardless of the frequency of their practice, and of whether they act as diviners for others (clients) or for themselves. Unlike many previous studies on divination, which focus exclusively on either diviner or client, my research considers all divination participants in Hong Kong.

Divination’s popularity in Hong Kong deserves an anthropological explanation. This thesis explores that popularity by reference to three key themes: destiny (Chapters 1 and 2), ethics (Chapters 3, 4 and 5), and adherence to divination advice (Chapters 6 and 7).

Destiny

Elliot & Menin (2018) suggested that, in any cultural context, fate (or destiny²) has the compelling distinctiveness of ‘malleable fixity’: ‘destiny is negotiated and nurtured, manipulated and resisted in complex ways, and unavoidably inflected by other powers’ (ibid. 293). Their argument highlighted the peculiar tension between human action and divine power. This unique element of fate is also well captured in Weber’s (2001) classic study of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination in the formation of

² The terms ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’ are used interchangeably in this thesis.

capitalism, and in other anthropological studies about destiny. For example, Harrell (1987), Hatfield (2002), and Homola (2018) consider the Chinese notion of fate, and Fortes (2018[1959]), Jackson (1988), and Lawal (1985) discuss West African beliefs. All these studies suggested that knowing about destiny and acting on it are inseparable. Hence, to understand destiny, we must view it through the lens of agency.

A wide range of divination techniques is available in Hong Kong and people often use two or more techniques in combination. Chapters 1 and 2 explore how local divination participants learn and use Fengshui divination. I describe how they understand the concept of destiny, and how they make enormous efforts to learn and practise Fengshui divination regularly, with the aim of proactively changing their provisionally fixed destiny.

Fengshui divination requires knowledge of the space, design, and decoration of an environment. It ascribes agency to physical spaces and objects, both to explain and to affect the (in)auspiciousness of that environment. The word ‘fengshui’ has two different meanings in Hong Kong. First, it refers to a divination technique which examines the auspiciousness of an environment, which in this thesis I call ‘Fengshui divination’. Secondly, it expresses a concept of luck, especially with reference to the (in)auspiciousness of a physical space. Divination participants in Hong Kong often use both Fengshui and non-Fengshui divination together, not just to explain misfortune, but also actively to pursue good fortune. Sometimes a person’s destiny, as determined by their birth date and time, cannot explain events in their life, but the fengshui of their home might provide this explanation. Steinmüller’s (2013)

ethnographic account of the use of Fengshui divination in communities in Bashan, China, noted that a person, the built environment, and the landscape are seen as having no ontological separation. Hence, one's fate is not only determined cosmically at birth, but is also affected by one's environment.

Homola (2018) explained that *mingyun*, the Chinese word for fate, has two components: *ming* is the fixed and given component and *yun* is the motile component. *Yun* refers to the events, circumstances, and contingencies that a person encounters across time, space, and social interactions as their life unfolds. She also referred to the universal *yun*, called *liunian*, which is the yearly cosmological force of the Sexagenary Cycle. This yearly force forms part of the malleable component of fate: it affects everyone, some more and some less favourably, depending on each person's *ming*. In this sense, fengshui also serves as the malleable component of fate: a home with good fengshui affects one's *ming* more positively than one with bad fengshui. Applying and engaging with Fengshui divination allows participants to constantly pursue good fortune and to avoid any calamity that might otherwise be caused by one's *ming*. The ongoing use of Fengshui divination represents more than just a means of incorporating a malleable component into fate: by ascribing agency to physical environments and objects, its practitioners externalize the concept of fate and are able to change their destiny via Fengshui divination. Hence, Fengshui divination is the culturally legitimized 'malleable' element which enables participants to negotiate, nurture, manipulate, and resist fate.

People commonly invoke external agency to explain misfortune. Examples include the Kuranko and bush spirits (Jackson 2013), the Buryats and curses or curse-like gossip (Swancutt 2012a), the Nyoro with their sorcery, *mbandwa* spirit, and resentment of the neglected ghost (Beattie 1964a; 1966a), and the Zande (Evans-Pritchard 1937) and the Bocage (Favret-Saada 1980) with witchcraft. Jackson (2013) suggested that divination is a device which enables that process of externalizing misfortune and allows external agents to determine what action should be taken.

Course (2014) portrayed the Mapuche model of personhood as revealed in Mapuche narratives of destiny, which include ‘finished’ and ‘unfinished’ notions, each complementing the other. As elsewhere in lowland South America, the Mapuche see a ‘true person’ as someone who continuously engages in reciprocal exchanges to form different social relations with other people: this constitutes their notion of the ‘unfinished’ person. By contrast, the ‘finished’ person is depicted as singular and self-contained, as commonly expressed in the form of personal songs, which serve as the metonymic container of the person’s life, or their destiny fixed at birth. Although maintaining and expanding social relationships remains at the core of Mapuche everyday activities, narratives of destiny are absent from the ‘unfinished’ notion of Mapuche personhood. The Mapuche notion of personhood has much in common with Hong Kong Fengshui divination participants’ notion of destiny. Fengshui divination participants understand the fixed component of fate (*ming*) via non-Fengshui divination, especially through techniques which predict one’s lifelong fate: this resembles the

Mapuche notion of a ‘finished’ person. The Mapuche ‘unfinished’ person is ‘clearly open ended and externally oriented toward others’ (Course 2014:101). The use of Fengshui divination to bring good fortune (fengshui) to a physical space not only incorporates a regular malleable element into fate, but also acknowledges the effect of an external agent on fate: it therefore allows participants to change their destiny by taking specific, prescribed actions.

The literature on destiny shows that people are far from passively fatalistic: instead they proactively seek either to fulfil or to change the destiny that they believe has been predetermined for them. My fieldwork on Fengshui divination in contemporary Hong Kong showed that many people apply Fengshui divination regularly in their homes and/or offices with the aim of intervening to change their destinies. I suggest that the paradox posed by destiny’s mutually contradictory features of malleability and fixity is necessary to allow people to claim ownership of and take responsibility for their own lives. Understanding how people act to change their destinies might allow us to understand how people cope with uncertainty when they act to achieve a better future. Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate the pragmatic approach taken by Hong Kong divination practitioners: by working hard with Fengshui divination to earn a better destiny, they demonstrate their understanding of and dealings with fate.

Fengshui divination is an important tool in that it reminds divination participants that they have free will and can assert agency. Such agency is particularly significant in contemporary Hong Kong, given its current political situation: the colonial past has given way to the present political

experiment of One Country Two Systems, and the city faces an unknown future when the One Country One System ends in 2047. Residents fear losing their current way of life as tension escalates between the capitalist city and the socialist Chinese state. Economically, with its sky-high private housing costs, shortage of public housing, and the limited size of homes, the city frustrates the traditional precept of 'work hard and gain more'. Amid these various pressures, Fengshui divination serves to reassure divination participants that they can still make choices and control their own lives, at least on a personal level. This ability of Fengshui divination to safeguard personal agency explains its popularity in contemporary Hong Kong.

Jip lik: the ethics of divination participants

In *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*, Laidlaw (2013) showed how ethics is usually viewed from and assumed to operate at society level, rather than at the individual level, and how anthropologists seldom elaborate on participants' ethical reflections. Although ethics is an area that has received relatively little attention in anthropological studies of divination, some studies have explored participants' moral or ethical reflections.

Grillo (1992) explored the link between Dogon divination, the Dogon myth, and ethics. Dogon divination has its origin in the Dogon myth, which constructs and determines local ethics. Dogon people often use divination to reflect on and determine their actions and the consequences that these

might have. Werbner (2016) examined oral poetry in Tswapong wisdom divination and showed how verses provided by diviners allow clients to have moral imagination which guides their behaviour. While Grillo (1992) and Werbner (2016) looked at how the interplay of ethics and divination affects clients, Li (2019) investigated moral discourse in divination and how it legitimates the role of the diviners in contemporary China, where it links divination with backwardness.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 below discuss the ethical considerations that affect divination participants and how these limit the extent of advice provided by diviners to clients. *Jip lik*, Hong Kong divination participants' notion of karma, represents the moral tally of all one's deeds. It is seen as being transferrable between unrelated people, including between diviner and client; it forms the basis of practitioners' ethical judgments about themselves and other participants. If a client's destiny is altered by their adherence to the diviner's advice, the diviner might suffer an unfavourable *jip lik* transfer that reduces the fortune which the diviner was destined to enjoy (Chapter 3). This is a punishment for the diviner's violation of the cosmic rule by interfering with someone's destiny via divination, which I call *jip lik* payback.

At the cosmic level, *jip lik* is recalculated to reflect this interference with someone's destiny. A negative recalculation might affect, not the diviner's own *jip lik* tally, but that of his descendants, reducing the fortunes of future generations. Diviners therefore always take the risk of *jip lik* payback into account, and adjust the extent of divination advice provided to clients accordingly, in order to lessen the likelihood of altering the

client's destiny (Chapter 4). A diviner might refuse a request for divination altogether if he believes that a heavy *jip lik* payback might follow. Menin (2020) studied how a young Moroccan woman took responsibility for her own destiny. I highlight the role of anticipatory responsibility as a crucial element in the ethics of Hong Kong diviners (Chapter 5): the diviner must consider his responsibility, not only for his own but also for his descendants' *jip lik* tally, when deciding on the extent of divination advice that he will provide.

Chapter 5 discusses the ethical dilemma which requires diviners to balance altruism against self-preservation. On one hand, out of moral duty, a diviner might perform divination for a client even believing that *jip lik* payback is very likely. On the other hand, the diviner's self-preservation is better served by not interfering with the client's destiny and thus avoiding *jip lik* payback. Rather than focusing only on diviners' actions at one extreme or other of such conflicts, I explore how they deal with ethical dilemmas in their everyday working practice (Lambek 2010) and show how personal ethics is a factor that regularly shifts their position between the two extremes.

After divination: adherence to divination advice

Anthropological studies of divination have tried to make sense of and explain its practice. Among such studies, the functionalist approach sees divination as supporting the social structure and system. For example, Flad (2008) suggested that divination was a crucial source of power which

supported the bureaucratic institutions in the late Shang Dynasty, around 1250-1046 BC. Some anthropologists also depart from the epistemological approach, looking at what kind of knowledge is underpinned by divination and how it is related to the wider cosmology. Bascom (1991), for instance, described how Ifá divination is performed with palm nuts, clearly explained the Ifá verses, and showed how Yoruba people use it to communicate with their divinities.

Another common approach is to explain divination by reference to its social context. Divination is manifested within the structure of society and is a source of sociological knowledge (Payne 1992). It is useful to overcome disorder in social relationships (Park 1963) and, likewise, to re-establish social bonds and solidarity in a community (Clart 2022; Turner 1975). Moore (1957) showed how the Naskapi, in the interior plateau of the Labradorian Peninsula, use scapulimancy as a randomizing instrument when choosing hunting routes, in order to avoid unintentional repetition of personal choices which may be identifiable by adversaries. Varley (2012) documented how Gilgiti women in northern Pakistan use divination to assert agency in order to protect themselves against allegations of sorcery, and against the lack of autonomy and systemic inequality that reduce women's social status in the context of restrictive Islamist conservatism. Also looking at women's agency, Shaw (1985) recounted how, in a strong patriarchal society, Temne women transformed themselves and gained ontological security by consulting diviners in private.

Other anthropological studies focus on ways of knowing: how the divination message is interpreted and constructed. Swancutt (2006)

distinguished between representational and conjectural divination: the use of associative and eliminative reasoning, respectively, to prefigure divinatory results and resolve queries. Wilce (2001) showed how a Bangladeshi diviner consistently incorporated his knowledge of the community, its tensions, changes, and stratification, into his dialogues with clients before answering their enquiries. Akinnaso (1995), also discussing Ifá, recounted how, although the divination message is produced by collaboration and negotiation between Yoruba diviners and clients, diviners are always in control of the process. Zeitlyn (2001) put forward a similar theory about text-based divination: that not only the diviner-client dialogue, but also the multivocal relationship between divination technique and diviner must be examined to obtain answers. Peek (1991) made a larger claim: that in all types of divination the reality and the divination message are integrated by means of discussion between clients and diviners. The same view was expressed by Fortes (1987) who added, however, that the Tallensi seek confirmation of revelations by additional action, which approximates to the throwing of dice.

Evans-Pritchard (1937) described how the Zande explained away the contradictions inherent in their oracles, witchcraft, and magic. Meek (1931) recounted that the Jukun attributed ‘wrong’ divination outcomes to deities or ancestral spirits giving mendacious messages through the divining apparatus. Evens (1996; 2008) discussed psychoanalysis and suggested that focusing on practice results in avoidance (by anthropologists) of all the perceived contradictions of a divinatory system. Using ethnomethodology as an example, Zeitlyn (1990) demonstrated how speakers strive to remove

contradictions during conversation. He argued that the actual practice of dealing with contradictions could be understood as question-rejecting moves by which divinatory meaning is mutually negotiated and re-formed by conversations between diviner and client during divination.

Jackson (2013) showed that the Kuranko divination system is so entrenched that local people are not interested in its (in)credibility. He proposed a shift in focus away from how a divination system works and how its credibility is maintained: away from the objectivist methodology and towards the subjective experience of the consulter. Jackson suggested that divination needs to be studied from a pragmatic and existential perspective, within the context of its use and of how diviners' advice helps clients to act. Similarly, Zeitlyn (2012) argued against obsessing about the truth of divination and suggested focusing instead on how the divinatory process can satisfy clients. However, other commentators disagree, holding that, for divination to be successful, the knowledge it generates must be meaningful to clients' lives, and the clients must accept the truth of that knowledge (Whyte *et al.* 2018). Sharing the view that the actual practice and process of divination should be a prime focus, Beattie (1964b; 1966b) stressed the importance of the expressiveness and performance of divination, as with a work of art, for relieving interpersonal conflicts. A similar view is taken by Silva (2011) who saw divination as a performative activity involving embodied knowledge.

Notwithstanding the theoretical differences, the central concerns of these anthropologists are: what is involved, and who, and how? What happens at the consultation, what counts as a successful divination, and so

on. All these questions relate to what happens *during* the divination process. These studies have their merits and provide insights into how one might approach and understand divination. However, they do not address what actions clients take *after* divination. Do they follow the advice, and if not, why not? These questions deserve consideration.

Zeitlyn (2012) recommended exploring how clients' concerns are satisfied by divination consultations. Jackson (2013) stressed the importance of immediate positive psychological changes experienced by clients after consulting diviners. Graw (2012) also adopted an existential perspective, studying the immanent and immediate experiences of Senegalese divination clients, and suggested that divination is the local cultural technology of hope. However, their approaches did not involve spending sufficient time with clients to understand their reactions to divination and their subsequent behaviour. Zeitlyn (2012) recorded the actions of some Mambila clients following their divination consultations. Since his focus was on the different logics applied to divination use, he did not give much detail about why the advised actions were undertaken, except to show the importance of sacrifices and oath-taking in Mambila life. Umbres (2023), on the other hand, looked at self-divination in Romania and saw this as a way for people to empower themselves to interpret everyday happenings and as a tool to protect themselves from social stigma and uneasiness. Umbres's work brings new understanding to the phenomenon of divining for oneself, but his approach does not address what people do with divination advice, and whether they adhere to it.

My research in Hong Kong has revealed that a large proportion of divination participants do not follow divination advice. Du Bois (1992:64) saw divination outcomes as impersonal, authoritative decisions which can 'readily attract consensus'. As a linguist, his focus on intentionless divination meaning overlooks the fact that many individuals do not adhere to advice received. I am not suggesting that no divination participants ever follow such advice, but that the low rate of adherence I observed deserves investigation. Why do people who have paid for one or more divination consultations, sometimes being charged a premium by the diviner, choose not to follow the advice they receive?

A few writers have recorded participants not following divination advice. Homola (2013), describing how her informant regretted not following such advice, suggested that some clients had an ambiguous attitude towards divination. However, she did not explore why her informant chose not to follow the advice. In his ethnographic account of village lives in Bashan, China, Steinmüller (2013) documented how his informant, warned of the bad Fengshui that would affect a house he proposed to build on a slope below a road, insisted on doing so because that was the only location available near a school where he and his wife planned to open a shop selling food to the pupils. This is only part of the informant's story, and Steinmüller did not explore further how the couple's preferences and practical considerations affected their decisions in response to the Fengshui advice. Personal or familial preferences of divination participants are usually viewed through the lens of agency, but such accounts seldom look beyond what participants do with divination

advice. Do they reject the advice altogether? If not, what do they do with the advice? I have been unable to discover any anthropological accounts of why divination advice is not followed. My fieldwork has led me to conclude that most participants only follow divination advice if it is both in line with their own and their family's preferences and practically feasible.

Chapters 6 and 7 draw on my fieldwork data about how divination is used in relation to parenthood. I show how expectant and new parents in Hong Kong strongly desire to secure good fortune for their children. For example, many use divination to discover an auspicious date and time to give birth by Caesarean section (Chapter 6) and use nominative analysis (Chapter 7) to find auspicious names for their children. Although Hong Kong parents are fate-conscious, believing that divination (and its advice) can help them improve their children's destinies, surprisingly, they do not unconditionally follow divination advice. These two chapters explore how divination advice that does not accord with participants' personal preferences and practical circumstances results in low adherence.

I also show what divination participants do with advice that they do not wish to follow. While some abandon altogether advice that does not suit their plans, others employ a strategic approach by adopting part of it to meet their personal preferences. That is, divination participants' decisions on whether to follow divination advice depend on both personal or family preferences and practicality.

By contrast, Swancutt (2006) described how Mongolians react to unsatisfying results of card divination, which might state that 'everything is fine' while in fact they face a chronic problem: they then either repeat or

revise the question for divination. Unlike Mongolians, who repeat divination and even incorporate non-randomizing elements into the divinatory procedure in order to exert control and obtain a desirable outcome, my informants simply ignore (all or part of) divinatory advice which does not accord with their personal preferences and practical circumstances.

The fact that the practitioners whom I observed consulted divination but then did not follow the advice suggests that they might be more committed to the process than to the outcome. This leads to my next argument: that a client's satisfaction with the diviner's performance during a consultation significantly affects whether the diviner's advice is subsequently followed. The cases described in Chapter 7 show that the level of personal service provided by diviners *during* consultations critically affects clients' satisfaction, which in turn unquestionably affects the likelihood of their subsequent adherence to divination advice. The low rate of adherence among my informants not only renders the truth of divination ontologically irrelevant, but also protects the reputation of divination, since consultants cannot reasonably challenge the truthfulness of advice which they have not followed.

Methodology

Before the start of my DPhil research, I intended to follow Zeitlyn's (2012) suggestion to consider divination from the clients' perspective. However, as explained above, in the Hong Kong context it is unhelpful to view the

diviner–client relationship as being dichotomous: such a view overlooks the many people who perform divination for themselves. I therefore widened my focus to include all the various types of divination practitioners in Hong Kong and to consider whether their concerns were satisfied by divination consultation and its advice. To that end, I adopted the extended-case study method, put forward by Max Gluckman (1961) in my DPhil fieldwork to trace the divination trajectory of Hong Kong divination participants.

Methodologically, it is not easy for an anthropologist to establish a trusting relationship that encourages informants to reveal private matters, such as what they do with divination advice and why. This is especially true for divination about future issues, and for sequential consultations about related events. Some anthropologists have had to rely on informants' reports of other people's divination consultations. This often leaves out of account what the participants themselves think about the divination advice received. For example, Homola's (2018) informant told her about a friend who consulted three separate diviners on the same question: whether she should marry her boyfriend. All three advised against it, and she eventually broke up with him. Homola suggested that repeated divination 'is one of the devices that allow one to overcome doubt— or at least keep doubt at bay— and accord legitimacy to a prediction' (ibid. 332). However, given the relatively brief account that she received from a third party, Homola was unable to fully contextualize the subjective experience of the consulter. This issue can be addressed by the use of the extended-case study method.

I undertook my DPhil fieldwork in Hong Kong between 2018 and 2023. I worked first with informants whom I had known since conducting fieldwork in 2016 on local divination practices (for another Master's degree). In later fieldwork (unexpectedly extended because of COVID-19) I was able to use the extended-case study method in my DPhil fieldwork to explore more comprehensively the divination journey of local practitioners. This extended fieldwork included, for example, observing and shadowing divination consultations, participating in divination classes, conducting semi-formal interviews, and, last but not least, participating in the everyday lives of my informants to get to know their values, thoughts, feelings, concerns, wishes, and life circumstances.

Werbner (2015) studied one diviner in rare depth over a period of four decades. He analysed the similarities and the differences between the practices used by the diviner for close relatives and those he used for strangers. I studied several divination participants as extended cases, some for a year and others for over three years. I explored how the (*jip lik*) experiences, thoughts, and opinions of each might have affected their eventual decisions on how to advise clients or how to react to advice received.

In social anthropology the use of qualitative research has been the norm, although the use of quantitative research methods and data has also gained wide acceptance within the discipline (Mulder and Caro 1985). I did not intend to use quantitative methods to collect data during fieldwork. However, in order to evaluate my claim (see Chapters 6 and 7) that Hong Kong parents use divination to improve their children's destinies, I applied

my qualitative data to produce quantitative statistical data. Pretnar Zagar *et al.* (2023) proposed that, while quantitative data alone cannot provide detail-rich descriptions and context, they are useful for categorizing human practices and can be used alongside qualitative data to answer anthropological questions more fully. Mulder and Caro (1985) suggested that such descriptive observational categorization facilitates cross-cultural comparison. In the same vein, although this thesis makes no cross-cultural comparison, I compared the different actions taken by various Hong Kong parents to serve their fate-consciousness. The quantitative data, alongside my qualitative ethnographic account, supports my argument that, although parents want to provide good fortune for their children, they do not follow divination advice unconditionally but take into consideration personal preference and practicality.

Ethical considerations in research

I was born and raised in Hong Kong. Even before I started researching divination practice in 2016, I was aware of reports of highly effective, secret divination practices in the city, although these were rumoured to be expensive and rare. When meeting informants who might know or use such secret practices, I was careful to tell them from the outset that my concern was to understand how they used and viewed divination, not to reveal their arcane practices. Asking for details of little-known divination practices risks alienating informants, given the high prices usually charged for such specialized techniques. I felt it was important to explicitly state my occupation as a researcher, and to explain my intentions. I assured potential

informants that I was not going to work as a diviner and would not exploit any information they gave me for my own financial profit: this encouraged them to reveal (some of) their secret practices to me.

When approaching an informant, as well as explaining my research, obtaining informed consent, and promising to disguise any personal information they might provide, for example by using pseudonyms, I also clarified that I only wanted to know whether their divination involved any secret practice, not the details of how it was performed or what apparatus was involved. I conformed strictly with research ethics, respecting the privacy and choices of my informants. It is always up to informants how much sensitive information they are prepared to reveal. When sensitive data were disclosed I always double-checked their permission to include it in my thesis.

Obtaining details of secret practices and other sensitive data during my fieldwork was made possible by the trust and friendship I had established with my informants over a number of years. Some of my informants are family members and close friends who practise divination. While conducting research with our intimate others allows in-depth and unique views of how they consider and use divination in their everyday lives, Matthiesen and Szulevicz (2018) discuss the ethical considerations of working with people close to us. Using their own experience with their children and their children's schoolteacher, they suggested that some intimate informants feel unable to refuse to be research subjects for fear of harming their relationship with the researcher. Matthiesen and Szulevicz remind us of the importance of the researcher's responsibility for all

informants, and warn against assuming that our intimate others will consent to be our research subjects or have details of their lives included in our ethnographies.

Ellis (1995) described how, returning to her fieldwork site, she found that her informants had been offended by her book about birth control and the sexual practices of people there. This not only ruined her relationships with her informants, but also caused her to question her ethnographic practice. She commented that the possibility of achieving a research outcome or publication should not outweigh the possibility of causing informants to feel betrayed. Some informants, while happy to share details of their lives with a researcher in conversation, might object to those details being recorded in writing and made publicly available.

When I was choosing which cases to include in my ethnography (which necessarily involved disclosing details of their divination practice) I always asked my informants to confirm their permission for me to write about their case. I also tried to pick cases that would not be easily recognized by readers. In addition, I explained to my informants again that, although I was using pseudonyms, I would be disclosing details about the divination practice/ consultation and the practitioners' lives which might make those practitioners identifiable by readers. I asked them to consider these potential drawbacks before consenting to the inclusion of their stories in my ethnography. Some informants withheld consent but, fortunately, others did not. Some anthropologists choose to show their manuscript to informants for approval, but this risks the account becoming what the informants, rather than the anthropologist, want to say (Hicks 1977).

Instead, I tried to detach myself as a researcher, change my perspective, and read the ethnography from my subjects' point of view, in order to evaluate whether the content might offend my informants (Ellis 1995).

Hall (2014) discussed confidentiality between families in ethnographic research when the research subject or unit is a family. She stressed the importance of not sharing sensitive or private information between families (informants) even if the families know each other. In line with Hall's argument, I have been careful not to reveal any information or divination practice that my informants intended to share only with me, since some of my informants are active in several different social circles and some of them know each other. Sharing one's own or others' divination practices or consultation experience is always a hot topic at gatherings of divination practitioners, and I participated in many such gatherings. While I did not reveal any information about informants which was shared with me privately, I did recount divination experiences which informants had shared openly and publicly. Specifically, at such gatherings I recounted either my own divination experiences or sometimes those of informants who did not mind other people knowing about them. I considered it safe to repeat information if I had heard the first person of the experience sharing it openly with other people more than three times and, more importantly, if they expressed a sense of pride when sharing it.

Matthiesen & Szulevycz (2018:337) discussed the emotions of those conducting research with intimate others, and the risk that the research might become an 'overemotive and potentially psychologized autoethnography that is of little general interest other than for the

researcher herself". The ethnography in this thesis comes from many informants, including those who were already my intimates, those I met in the field but who have become close friends over time, and those with whom I have no relationship other than one of researcher/ informant. This thesis is hardly an autoethnography of the researcher, but some of the ethnographic details involve my intimate others and myself.

Van Der Geest (2003) used a pseudonym when writing about himself in order to increase protection and confidentiality for his informants. He explained that, if he had used his real name, then the identity of the town where he carried out research, and hence his informants, would become identifiable. While Van Der Geest disguised himself as the author, I have given myself a pseudonym (as a participant in the research, not as an author) and hidden myself in the ethnography in this thesis. I did this because the divination experiences of my intimate others and close friends who are diviners was, to some extent, associated with me. If I had referred to myself in the first person, this would have risked exposing them and making them identifiable by readers. My use of pseudonyms for all informants has made it less easy to tell which ethnographic details relate to me and my intimates.

No researcher can be certain of not harming their subjects: at best, a researcher can only try to minimize possible harm to informants (Matthiesen & Szulevicz 2018). Overall, respect, consent, and confidentiality have been my key ethical considerations, both during research and when writing up, in my efforts to avoid any adverse effects for my informants.

Chapter 1: Using Fengshui divination to change one's destiny

The anthropological literature on destiny includes many studies on the tension between determinism and free will (for example Nevola 2018; Menin 2020; Elliot 2016; Harrell 1987; Nieswand 2010; Weber 2001).

Writers with an ethnographic focus on the African continent usually position their studies within the wider socioeconomic, political, and even historical contexts and examine how people conceptualize fortune in relation to everyday uncertainties, successes, and failures (for example Gardini 2015; Gaibazzi 2015; Fortes 2018 [1959]; Jackson 1988).

Comparing different African cultures, Jackson (1988) argued that destiny is not fixed but results from the interplay between or harmonization of one's innate disposition and one's actions, which are based on acquired insight to serve the commonweal, since 'African *praxis* is communal' (emphasis in original). Jackson (1988), along with other anthropological authors on destiny (for example Hatfield 2002; Elliot 2016; Abimbola 1973; Lawal 1985; Guinness 2018), suggested that (knowing about) destiny and acting on it are inseparable. This is no doubt the manifestation of what is now generally acknowledged as the 'malleable fixity' of destiny (Elliot & Menin 2018), highlighting the embedded tensions between divine power and human action, or between determination and open-endedness.

The Chinese notion of destiny, in particular, combines the ambivalent qualities of fatalist and non-fatalist modalities (see, for example, Eberhard

1963; Gates 1987; Harrell 1987; Hatfield 2002; Sangren 2012; Stafford 2012; Homola 2018; Puett 2005; Poo 2005; Raphals 2005). Homola (2018) explained that the word *mingyun* (命運, destiny) has two components: *ming*, the fixed and given component, and *yun*, the motile component. *Yun* refers to the events, circumstances, and contingencies that a person encounters across time and space, as life's social interactions unfold. Homola (2018) argued that it is through the everyday 'language of fate', that is, the language of rumours, of personal crisis, and of misfortune, that the malleable fixity of *mingyun* is captured and materialized, revealing how people work within and against the limits of (fixed) life. Similarly, Hatfield (2002) saw *ming* as being located within both the self and the identity of the self, while *yun* represents relationships outside of the self. Harrell (1987) examined the concept of fate in rural northern Taiwan. He argued that, on one hand, fate maintains the status quo of the elite few who are born rich. On the other hand, and more importantly, it supports the entrepreneurial ethics of hard work, and the possibility for the petty-bourgeois and peasantry to strive for social mobility: if they failed to move up socially then fate was invoked to explain the failure of their hard work to achieve higher status, thus legitimating and maintaining the class system. Harrell showed that the notion of fate is not only far from fatalistic, in that it encourages hard work, but also a post-hoc rationalization for the sophisticated, hegemonic system of elite–petty–bourgeoisie–peasantry.

The ethnographic literature suggests that people's attitudes to destiny can be categorized into two types. These represent different manifestations of people's 'relationship with a greater power', in which destiny operates

as a moral relationship between human and superhuman actors, guiding humans in their everyday dealings (Schielke 2018). The first type of reaction involves acting as far as one is able to *fulfil* one's predetermined destiny (see for example Elliot 2016; Abimboal 1973; Menin 2020). For example, Elliot (2016) examined how young, unmarried Moroccan women skilfully prepare themselves, via cosmetic techniques and the ability to identify eligible migrant men in town, for the marital destiny predetermined for them by God. Islamic thought holds that one's destiny is written by God and is neither negotiable nor avoidable. These young women were seeking, not to change their destinies, but to realize them: hoping that their divinely predestined future would bring a desirable marriage. Similarly, studies of the Yoruba idea of *orí* (head), that is one's predetermined destiny, showed that a good *orí* is not sufficient to achieve a good earthly life without hard work, which is symbolized by the *esè* (leg) (Lawal 1985; Abimboal 1973). That is, Yoruba people are required to act (with the *esè*) in order to realize their predetermined destiny (*orí*). This type of reaction echoes, to some extent, the notion of 'enacted destiny' proposed by Nieswand (2010:49) in which 'destiny is a mere potentiality that realises itself in a contingent process of its conscious appropriation, and not an inevitable predetermined reality'.

The other reaction is to seek to *change* one's destiny. While neither type of reaction is fatalistic, both assuming the co-occurrence of predestination and agency, the second type aims to negotiate and manipulate the cosmic or divine predetermination: to intervene and bargain with the cosmic or divine power that governs human actions. Cross-

culturally, luck and destiny can be seen as two intertwining concepts. However, while there is plenty of ethnographic evidence of people acting to enhance their luck (Swancutt 2012a; Humphrey and Ujeed 2012; Daniels 2003; 2012; Empson 2012) these actions do not necessarily mean, or clearly show, from the view of analysts, that people want to change their destiny altogether. They might just want to be luckier or more prosperous, without recognizing the difference between enhancing luck and changing destiny. The second type of reaction I propose here involves a clear intention to alter some fixed and predetermined element of one's life. Some authors have looked at how people act to change their provisionally fixed destiny. Fortes's classic study of the Tale concept of destiny (2018 [1959]: 408) showed how, for the Tallensi, unfortunate destiny, such as barrenness, might be corrected by performing rituals, as self-enriching actions, for the ancestors. Similarly, Guenzi's (2012) study of astrologers in present-day urban Banaras, India, portrayed how local upper-class families ask astrologers to perform a worship ritual to a Hindu God, as a self-correcting action, to obviate an otherwise predetermined jeopardy and hence to change their destiny.

In fact, scholars of the Chinese concept of fate (for example Sangren 2012; Harrell 1987) often find that Chinese people make numerous efforts to discern, control, and intervene to change their destiny. This second type of destiny-changing reaction is relatively common among Chinese societies. Sangren (2012) conducted extensive fieldwork in Taiwan and China, and saw people's obsession with fate as their attempt to control the future. Sangren argued that this fate-controlling trait is universal and shows that

demonstrating ownership of one's being is a basic psychological need. Asserting agency by seeking to change one's destiny should be understood as a psychoanalytically informed phenomenon. Swancutt (2012b) showed how the Nuosu of south-west China accumulate fate-fortune throughout their lives to improve their social standing, regardless of the fixity of their birthright.

This Chapter and Chapter 2 illustrate this second type of destiny-changing behaviour by Hong Kong Fengshui divination participants. During fieldwork, I studied a large number of people who were using and/or learning to perform different kinds of divination. These practitioners, whether diviners, clients, or those learning to perform divination for themselves, often use more than one type of divination at the same time, for example Eight Characters and Fengshui divination,³ to learn as much as possible about their own or their client's destiny.

Although not all local divination practitioners employ Fengshui divination, a large number of my informants practise it regularly. Using Fengshui divination practitioners' notions of destiny as my ethnographic starting point,⁴ I found that they are keen to improve their fortunes and repeatedly use Fengshui divination to intervene in and improve their

³ Although fengshui is traditionally seen as representing the aesthetic of Chinese landscape (Boerschmann 1923), it is in fact a form of divination commonly used in Hong Kong, as witnessed in my fieldwork, and in some Chinese societies (Feuchtwang 2002[1974]). According to Zeitlyn's (2012) divinatory logic, Fengshui is a type of divination since its application allows practitioners to understand their past, present, and future, and affects their subsequent behaviour.

⁴ W. Matthews (2021a) stressed the varied conceptions of the cosmological principle in China by different kinds of people. For example, people with expert divination knowledge might understand their cosmos differently from those who have no such expertise. Here in Hong Kong, divination practitioners using or following different divination techniques might also have varying conceptions of cosmology. This Chapter focuses only on the cosmological conception shared by Fengshui divination practitioners in Hong Kong.

destiny. Fengshui divination practitioners see destiny as fixed but alterable. Alteration can be achieved through consistent use of Fengshui divination. In Homola's (2018) terms, practitioners use Fengshui divination to change a person's *yun*, which in turn leads to an alteration of their *ming*. That is, while destiny might be seen as deterministic, changing it is both thinkable and doable.

Chinese correlative cosmology and the emic representation of forces affecting destiny

The Chinese cosmological concept of 天人合一 (*tin jan hap jat*) is fundamental to understanding the ontological nature of Fengshui divination, and how destiny is conceptualized as being affected by external forces. The concept, literally translating as 'heaven and man combined into one', suggests that humans are influenced by a wider cosmological force. Michael Matthews (2019) traced the concept to Confucian thinking and explained it in terms of Chinese correlative thought, whose underlying cosmological force or metaphysical concept is *qi*. Correlative thought 'brings everything together', connecting the cosmic realm (天, *tin*), the natural realm (地, *dei*, literally 'the earth', incorporating the big and the small, and the external and internal environments) and the human realm (人 *jan*), with *qi* being the medium facilitating that interconnectedness (M. Matthews 2019: 94). 'If chi [*qi*] energy flows everywhere and permeates everything, then the skin is no barrier to its movement' (2019: 92). Another (unrelated) author, William Matthews (2016), stated that correlative

thought and the ideology of *qi* as a constituent of all things, as well as the key Chinese cosmological concepts of *yin* and *yang*⁵ and *Ng hang* (五行),⁶ that is the Five Elements or the Five Phases (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth), became firmly established during the late Warring States period in the second century BCE, and are now pervasive.

Correlative thought is the epistemological principle underpinning Fengshui divination (W. Matthews 2020).⁷ Arguing against Descola's (2013) analogist modes of identification for Chinese culture, W. Matthews (2016; 2017) proposed 'homologism' as a distinct mode of identification by Yijing cosmologists, stating that Yijing is based on the ontological continuity of physicality and interiority. This inverts the assumption of the discontinuous nature of analogism. Moreover, it indicates that the cosmic, natural, and human occupy one unique realm, within which these three components constantly interact. Based on a real case of Six Line prediction, W. Matthews (2017) showed how the hexagon created when coins are thrown six times is seen as capturing and manifesting the configuration of the cosmos, achieved through the transformative power of *qi*. So *qi* enables the correlation of the cosmic realm and a person's past, present, and future, as exemplified in Six Line prediction. Similarly, Steinmüller's (2013) ethnographic account of Fengshui divination by communities in Bashan, China, suggests that no ontological distinction is made between humans,

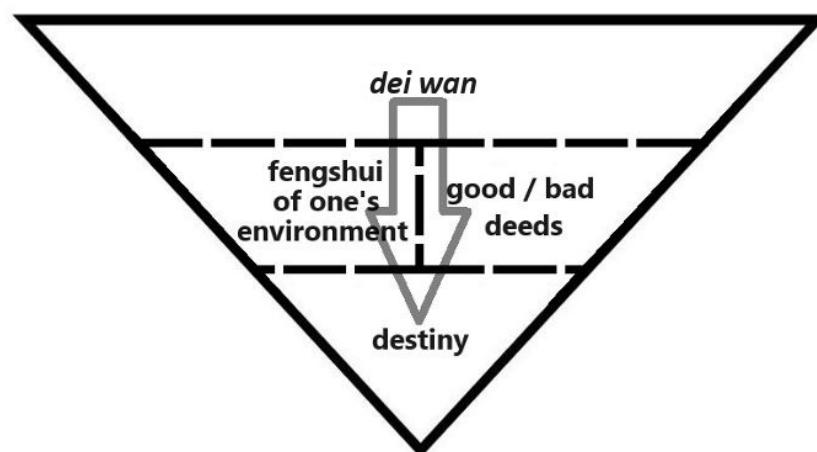
⁵ *Yin* and *yang* are the mutually perpetuating forces that interconnect to maintain the harmony of the cosmos. *Yin* represents the female/feminine, weakness, negativity, and passivity, while *yang* represents the male/masculine, strength, positivity, and activity.

⁶ Although 五行 (*Ng hang*) is often translated into English as the Five Elements or the Five Phases, I prefer to use *Ng hang* throughout this thesis to maintain the consistency of romanizing Chinese expressions in the Cantonese Jyutping system.

⁷ Chinese correlative cosmology also informs the epistemology of Eight Characters divination, a form of destiny calculation divination (Homola, 2021).

the built environment, and the landscape. Citing local legends and real-life stories about how (changes to) environments have affected people's luck, Steinmüller demonstrated the correlative thought underlying Fengshui divination. In this sense, one's life circumstances are not only cosmically governed and predetermined from birth, but are also affected during one's lifetime by the cosmic rules concerning one's environment.

Figure 1: Hong Kong Fengshui divination participants' emic representation of external forces affecting destiny



In the Chinese notion of destiny, a person's fate⁸ is fixed in the cosmic realm at the moment of birth; via *qi* transformation in correlative cosmology, a person's destiny affects their everyday circumstances (Homola 2021).⁹ The exact moment of birth is seen as determining a person's destiny, as reflected in the working of fate-calculating divination, since it gives a unique horoscopic configuration that explains the person's

⁸ See Chapter 3 for discussion of *jip lik*, the local divination participants' term for karma, and how one's moment of birth and corresponding destiny are 'calculated' and fixed at the cosmic level.

⁹ 'Destiny calculation' (or 'reckoning divination'), such as Eight Characters divination, which is based on birth date and time, can reveal a person's predetermined destiny and everyday circumstances.

life pattern. Nevertheless, Fengshui divination practitioners in Hong Kong believe that there is a hierarchy of forces that can affect and even govern one's destiny (see Figure 1). This phenomenon of external forces affecting one's destiny is also reported in Homola's (2021) study of how divination participants in Taiwan understand factors that might affect their destinies. Figure 1 shows an emic representation of how divination participants view such external destiny-affecting forces. While divination specialists commonly acknowledge and accept this representation, they always explain these forces (whether implicitly or explicitly) to their clients or students, who later also accept and normalize the representation.

Figure 1 illustrates how these forces are seen to exercise a top-down influence on destiny, and can be represented in a triangle. At the top of the triangle is *dei wan* (地運, literally 'the Land's destiny/luck'), referring to the destiny of a specific geographic location, seen as strongly influencing a person's destiny. The *dei wan* of a location can be assessed in different ways. One way is to produce a horoscopic pattern for the moment of 'birth' of the location. For example, Hong Kong was handed back to China at midnight on 1 July 1997, and this is deemed to be the moment when the current Hong Kong was 'born'. A more common way of assessing the *dei wan* of an area is through its geographical features which, from the Fengshui divination perspective, bring (in)auspiciousness in a specific twenty-year period. *Dei wan*, the term used by Hong Kong divination participants (in line with *da huanjing*, or 'great environment', the term used by Taiwanese divination participants) refers to the country in which

the person was born, and its macro characteristics in terms of cultural, political, economic, and social development (Homola 2021).

During my fieldwork I often heard diviners say that the country or city in which a person is born largely determines their entire life experience. For example, on several occasions I witnessed divination participants talking about current geopolitics and lamenting the hardships suffered by people born and living in war zones, such as Ukraine, South Sudan, and Gaza, where hunger, rape, and killing are everyday occurrences. They explained that the *dei wan* of these countries is not auspicious enough to enable their citizens to live well and flourish. They added that even the poorest people born in Hong Kong and other developed countries can get housing and financial assistance from the local government and, more importantly, benefit from a highly stable and safe environment: because these places have a better *dei wan*.

I also occasionally heard diviners comparing two people born at the same moment, and with the same gender, but in fundamentally different countries,¹⁰ such as Hong Kong and the Philippines. They commented that, despite sharing the same horoscopic pattern, their life experiences and trajectories will be very different.¹¹ This was seen to be partly due to the

¹⁰ Only those who have the same gender and share the same moment of birth will have the exact same horoscopic pattern. In Homola's (2018) terms, the same *ming* and *yun* will be reflected in their fate calculation divination patterns. By contrast, two people with the same moment of birth but with different genders will have the same *ming* but different *yun* horoscopic patterns, and therefore different destinies. A person's horoscopic pattern reveals how their destiny is determined by the interaction between their *yun* and their *ming*.

¹¹ Some scholars (for example, Homola 2021) have statistically calculated the likelihood of a group of millions of people sharing the same horoscopic pattern, and suggested that the chance of this happening is slim. For example, Homola (2021) gathered statistics from different sources and showed that, out of the 250,000 to 500,000 possible horoscopic

different socioeconomic situations in the two places, caused by their respective measures of *dei wan* auspiciousness, which affected the inhabitants' destinies differently. That is, even if two persons were born to enjoy the same auspicious and successful life (with the same horoscopic pattern) their achievements would be very different. One diviner mentioned how someone from a place with weaker *dei wan* might attain local or regional success only, while their counterpart in the place with more auspicious *dei wan* might achieve global success. It is clear to Hong Kong divination participants that different regions or countries enjoy different levels of *dei wan*, which in turn affects the fate of its people differently.

A recent Hong Kong example of belief in *dei wan* as an ideological concept that can influence people and their destinies is the 'cross-over' between migration agencies and Fengshui divination masters in the city. A new wave of emigration has occurred since the social movement in the city in 2019.¹² Responding to this trend, migration agencies host seminars (online and offline) about desirable migration destinations, often inviting divination masters to talk about the auspiciousness of those locations, or about specific areas which offer emigrants a more auspicious destiny.

In one such emigration seminar that I attended, the diviner suggested that, with the world approaching *Gau Wan* (九運, literally 'Period Nine',

configurations, fewer than 50 people would have exactly the same horoscopic pattern in a population of 14 to 23 million people. Homola (2021) also described how divination practitioners in Taiwan do not view two people sharing the same horoscope as having the same fate, because the different external (great and small) environments into which each is born are deemed to affect their fates differently.

¹² See Sun (2019) and Wong (1992) on previous waves of emigration from Hong Kong. The current wave of emigration is facilitated by the Canadian government's Lifeboat Scheme and the UK government's BNO Scheme.

from 2024 to 2043¹³) a region with water in the north and mountains in the south would enjoy a highly auspicious *dei wan*. The diviner suggested, with the aid of a map, how Malaysia (especially East Malaysia) would benefit from prosperous *qi* in the coming twenty years due to its geographical location, with the South China Sea to its north and Indonesia to its south (See Figure 2). Discussions about how different locations will enjoy different levels of auspiciousness are widespread in Hong Kong. For example, a local news article (Au 2020) described the geographical features of areas that would enjoy auspicious *qi* in Period Nine, recommending Taipei and London as cities that would enjoy high prosperity in the coming twenty years.

Figure 2: Malaysia's geographical features include water (sea) to the north and mountains (highlands) to the south



(Source: Picture from Google map with labels added by the author.)

¹³ Chapter 3 explains how Fengshui divination divides time into twenty-year periods, each with a different level of (in)auspiciousness.

The fengshui of an individual's environment, including their home, office, and ancestors' graves, is an influential factor when a person's fate is fixed at birth (see Figure 1). During my fieldwork, Fengshui divination practitioners told me that many problems experienced by individuals are caused, not by their preordained destiny, but by the bad fengshui of their living environment. One of the most striking diagnoses I encountered during my fieldwork was that a woman's sexuality had been 'changed' by her apartment's fengshui. Her horoscope revealed no sign that she might be lesbian,¹⁴ therefore homosexuality was not part of her destiny. On the other hand, Fengshui divination of her apartment revealed signs of 'disorientation' and 'overwhelming femaleness' which, through the flow of *qi*, resulted in her losing her female identity and falling in love with another female. Soon after the father followed Fengshui divination advice given by the diviner, the *qi* of the disorientated femaleness was stopped, and the corrected *qi* was restored: the woman broke up with the female partner and later fell love with a male. The fengshui of a place can change a person's destiny both favourably and unfavourably. By proper use of Fengshui divination, a person can avoid change for the worse and enhance the joyous moments in life.

The middle layer of the pyramid in Figure 1 shows that one's deeds also affect one's destiny. Chapter 5 explains in detail how one's deeds influence and change one's otherwise fixed destiny. Put simply, doing good deeds can improve one's fate, while doing bad deeds will diminish

¹⁴ Experienced diviners told me that a person's horoscopic pattern can reveal not only the personal features of their partner but also their sexuality and the sexual position they prefer.

it.¹⁵ There is a well known saying in Hong Kong, ‘善有善報,福有攸歸 (*sin jau sin bou fuk jau jau gwai*)’, regularly repeated for example on television shows, which perpetuates the idea that the good fortune and blessings will come from doing good. Not only divination participants, but all of Hong Kong’s citizens are familiar with the concept that what comes around goes around.

Both the fengshui of one’s physical surroundings and one’s deeds are aligned with *xiao huanjing*, the ‘small environment’. This term is used by Taiwanese divination participants to describe the microenvironment in which the person was born, which includes their family background, their own and their parents’ education levels, the schools they attend, and so on (Homola 2021). While one’s own environment, or significant spaces (with their fengshui) act as such a microenvironment, the family education background (depending mainly on the education and personalities of the parents) is also a crucial element in shaping a child’s personality and therefore their deeds in later life.

Dei wan is the highest of the forces affecting destiny (see Figure 1) because it influences one’s destiny more strongly than either the fengshui of one’s significant space or one’s deeds. *Dei wan* is capable of affecting the fengshui of a space, which in turn changes a person’s destiny. That is, if two spaces in different locations have equal fengshui auspiciousness, the location with better *dei wan* will have stronger fengshui than the place with

¹⁵ This Chapter focuses on how Hong Kong divination participants aim to change someone’s destiny through Fengshui divination, rather than by performing good deeds. See Chapter 5 on how and why local diviners continuously perform good deeds and how this can improve a person’s destiny.

weaker *dei wan*, because the macro *qi* of the former, which flows from the external into the internal space, is more auspicious. In Figure 1, the broken lines indicate the connections between the categories. Homola (2021) discussed how two persons with the same horoscope will have different fates because of the different great and small environments that each enjoys. Similarly, with influential factors such as *dei wan*, fengshui, and personal deeds, Hong Kong divination participants do not expect two persons sharing the same horoscope to have the same destiny.

Chinese correlative thought suggests that the cosmic, natural, and human realms are interconnected: this supports the idea that destiny is changeable by broader cosmological forces. The cosmic realm fixes the destiny, not only of humans (the human realm) but also of geographical locations (the natural realm). The destiny of a location and the fengshui of spaces (the natural realm) can, in turn, affect the destinies of people linked to these places (the human realm). Good deeds (in the human realm) also bring positive changes to a person's fate (the human realm). During fieldwork, I often witnessed Hong Kong divination practitioners using and engaging with Fengshui divination with the aim of changing their destinies. That is, people adjust and transform their significant spaces (in the natural realm) so as to obtain a better fate (in the human realm). Notably, I have not known any divination participants to consider emigrating to a country with more auspicious *dei wan* solely to obtain a better destiny, but those who wanted to emigrate for other reasons would likely consider the *dei wan* factor when choosing between countries or cities. Moving to another country solely to obtain better fortune would involve too many

compromises and uncertainties: Fengshui divination offers a much more accessible and convenient way of improving one's destiny.

Applying the results of Fengshui divination can stop the flow of bad *qi* and enhance the flow of good *qi*. Fengshui divination is seen as a culturally legitimate vehicle, allowing its practitioners to actively alter or avoid their provisionally fixed destiny. Just as Fengshui divination uses correlative thought as its epistemological principle, showing how one's nature and environment can affect one's everyday life, so there are many ethnographic examples of belief in the ability of nature to affect human lives. For example, Swancutt (2012a) described the common Buryat (and Mongol) practice of flying fortune flags outside the home to improve the occupants' fortune. Buryat people believe that there is an explicit link between the fortunes of a person and those of his or her household. Another study on Mongolia reports that people seek to enhance their fortune by merging intimately with formless elements, such as dust and wind (Humphrey and Ujeed 2012).

Flying Star and its epistemology

A Fengshui divination technique commonly used in Hong Kong is Flying Star (飛星, *fei sing*). The technique uses the numbers one to nine, in a 3x3 grid, to assess the (in)auspiciousness of different compass directions in each year, with each 'smaller grid' in the permutation representing different direction, which I call directional section, and the one in the

centre representing the central area of a space. There are nine Flying Star permutations, which rotate annually, and manifest the fengshui features for that year (see Figures 3 and 4 for examples of Flying Star permutations). It is important to know its basic epistemology to make sense of how and why some Fengshui divination advice is given.

Each Flying Star permutation contains the numbers one to nine, representing different auspicious or inauspicious aspects of life. 1 symbolizes high reputation or promotion; 2 represents illness; 3 means bullying and gossip; 4 signifies academic success; 5 is the most inauspicious of all and represents disaster; 6 suggests career success and power; 7 refers to blood, wounds, and arguments; 8 represents prosperity and points to wealth accumulation; and lastly, 9 is also auspicious and symbolizes festivity and romance.¹⁶ The permutation is applied to each specific physical space, for example one's apartment, office, and shop, usually with the aid of a floor plan.¹⁷ The diviner then assesses the (in)auspiciousness corresponding to the various compass points in the space. That is, the effects of the Flying Stars apply only to the specific direction from which it enters the space during that year.

The location of the entry into a space, and the direction from which a Flying Star arrives there, are particularly significant for prosperity in any year. For example, if in one year Flying Star number 8 arrived at the entrance of a space, it would bring financial prosperity to the people living

¹⁶ The complete epistemology of Flying Star is beyond the scope of this chapter. See Skinner (2003; 2015) and Mak & So (2015) for detailed descriptions.

¹⁷ All the diviners I met during fieldwork based their Fengshui divination on the floor plan of the apartment, house, or commercial unit in question. The floor plan is an essential tool for Fengshui divination.

or working there. On the other hand, if Flying Star number 2 arrived at the entrance, this would bring bad health to the occupants. If Flying Star number 8 arrived where the bedroom or toilet were located, this would weaken the Flying Star's auspiciousness and prevent it from shining most favourably. On the contrary, if an inauspicious star, such as Flying Star number 2, arrived where the bedroom or toilet were located, then instead of being weakened the Flying Star's effect would be amplified.

The technique is applied annually to assess the auspiciousness of a space (called *lau nin* (流年) and explained in detail in Chapter 3).¹⁸ The nine numbers rotate in order every year. Figures 3 and 4 depict Flying Star permutations for the years 2020 and 2021 respectively, showing that the numbers in each directional section (e.g. X) move one space backwards in the next year (e.g. X-1). For example, the central number in 2020 was 7, but in 2021 it became 6. The southern position was occupied by 2 in 2020 and then 1 in 2021. So the south and the centre of a space changed from being rather inauspicious in 2020 to being auspicious in 2021. The north-eastern position was occupied by 1 in 2020, then the number moved one numerical step backwards for the next year, starting again from 9. The north-eastern direction remained auspicious for both 2020 and 2021. This numerical regression applies to all directional sections from each year to the next. The nine Flying Star permutations rotate in turn every year, starting afresh every nine years. Consequently, not only do the *directions* of (in)auspiciousness, as represented by different numbers, change

¹⁸ Both *lau nin* (in Cantonese Jyutping) and *liu nian* (in Mandarin Pinyin) mean the yearly Chinese cosmological fortune. Homola (2018) used Pinyin and I use Cantonese Jyutping (throughout this thesis) to romanize Chinese terms that describe the same Chinese cosmological fortune.

annually, but also the *extent* of (in)auspiciousness of each direction might alter every year. Fengshui divination can therefore be applied at least once a year to discover how to enhance the overall auspiciousness of one's environment and to put preventive measures in place to prevent the overall fengshui becoming less auspicious in that year (e.g. if Flying Star number 8 changes to number 7 for the entrance). The following ethnography shows how Fengshui divination can be applied more frequently, on a monthly basis, to allow more 'hard-working' or assiduous practitioners to obtain as much auspicious *qi* as possible.

Figure 3: The Flying Star permutation for the year 2020

6	2	4
5	7	9
1	3	8



Figure 4: The Flying Star permutation for the year 2021

5	1	3
4	6	8
9	2	7



Improving one's destiny via Fengshui divination

Jacky is a multi-billionaire entrepreneur in his thirties. He attributes his success to the use of Fengshui divination and his constant efforts to follow divination advice in order to avoid the business failure which was predetermined for him.

Less than a decade ago, Jacky earned only a small salary to support himself and his start-up company. Since graduating from university, he had felt destined to achieve something big. He did not think that being an employee would fulfil his destiny, so he started his own company alongside his paid employment, and worked seven days a week. Since his mid-twenties, he has consulted different diviners to discover his destiny,

wanting to know what life held in store for him. In particular, he was eager to know if his business would be successful.

Several different divination techniques are commonly used in Hong Kong to discover one's destiny, such as Eight Characters, *Zi Mei Dau Sou* (紫微斗數), and *Tit Baan San Sou* (鐵板神數).¹⁹ The various techniques usually reveal different aspects of a person's destiny: for example, areas of success, time of success, or how to achieve success if that can happen in this life. However, the results of different divination techniques are not necessarily complementary and often contradict each other confusingly. Nevertheless, all the diviners whom Jacky consulted, using different divination techniques, told him more or less the same thing: he would become very rich, or his business would be hugely successful, but his triumph would be short-lived and he would experience bankruptcy or a terribly hard time soon after reaching the peak of his success.

Such consistent predictions horrified Jacky. After years of divination consultations, reading divination handbooks, and participating in an online forum about the efficacy of different kinds of divination techniques, he had learned that different divination techniques might give contradictory

¹⁹ There might have been different schools of *Tit Baan San Sou*. However, the one that I learned during fieldwork, shared by a few informants, has the epistemological principle that the Chinese Zodiac signs of a person's parents, spouse, and children act as an external force that affects a person's preordained destiny. That is, while a person's fate (*ming*, in Homola's (2018) term) is fixed at the moment of birth, the Chinese Zodiac signs of their close relatives would interact with their horoscopic pattern (*yun*, in Homola's (2018) term) differently. For example, if one's wife has the Chinese Zodiac sign of the Tiger this might improve one's fate, whereas a wife born in the year of the Monkey would not. By finding out which Chinese Zodiac sign in a future spouse would be auspicious for one's own destiny, and then choosing a spouse with that Zodiac sign, one might be able to improve one's destiny. (However, a diviner revealing such a secret cosmic arrangement might later face a cosmic penalty: see Chapters 3, 4, and 5). This again explains how two persons born at the same moment, with the exact same horoscopic configuration, will have different destinies because they were born into different families and have different parents, and later in life they might have a spouse or child(ren) with different Chinese Zodiac signs.

outcomes. With his rudimentary understanding of how to interpret the outcomes of different techniques, he believed that the diviners had given fair assessments of his destiny. However, what particularly alarmed him was that three diviners predicted that this preordained calamity would happen after he turned thirty years old.²⁰ While Jacky was preordained to be a successful entrepreneur, he worried that his destiny would soon lead to failure.

Jacky had a happy and healthy family, with two children and a supportive and caring wife and parents. The predicted financial failure was the only aspect of his destiny that he wanted to alter. For this, he turned to Master Mo for Fengshui divination. Master Mo, who was one of the diviners who had predicted his calamity (but without disclosing when this would happen), explained to him how Fengshui divination and its epistemology might help him to rewrite his fate.

Jacky was twenty-seven years old when he met Master Mo, who had been recommended by a friend for the Master's accuracy and skills in performing divination. By this time Jacky's company had already achieved market recognition, and had contracts with two institutions, each worth millions of Hong Kong dollars over the coming few years. This showed that Jacky was on the predetermined trajectory of his destiny. However, this success also brought him profound fear! Understanding that the predestined calamity awaited him in three years' time, Jacky said he would pay everything within his means to try to change his destiny. Jacky knew

²⁰ I asked Jacky if the other diviners he visited had told him when the calamity would happen. He said they had said 'later', or 'soon', or 'it must happen later in life', refusing to be specific. Diviners set themselves boundaries for divination disclosure in order to avoid interfering with people's destinies: see Chapters 4 and 5.

that Master Mo possessed exceptional, little known Fengshui divination skills, passed down by a famous diviner from the last generation to Master Mo alone. He asked Master Mo to perform Fengshui divination for his apartment, despite the Master charging high fees that ordinary people would not be able to afford.

Jacky wanted the Master to preserve the success of his business. He was anxious that it would fail, although at that time there was no sign that it would do so. Jacky's existing apartment did not have a sufficiently good structural Fengshui divination permutation to allow a strong flow of auspicious *qi*. (It is always easier to channel auspicious *qi* if the space itself has an auspicious Fengshui star permutation.) So in April, upon receipt of a considerable fee, Master Mo started property hunting with Jacky for an apartment with better structural fengshui. Master Mo explained that the fengshui or auspiciousness embedded in buildings varies, depending on the buildings' ascribed Fengshui divination permutation, which is determined by many factors, such as the year of construction and the orientation of the building (see Chapter 3, Figure 11, for an example of a Fengshui divination permutation, and Chapter 4 on the introduction of auspicious Fengshui divination permutations between 2004 and 2023).

It should be noted that a Fengshui divination (Star) permutation²¹ is not the same as the Flying Star permutation, but the two can be and are often considered side-by-side to give a more precise picture of the overall auspiciousness of a space in a particular year, and therefore stronger

²¹ *Jyun Hung Fei Sing*, 玄空飛星, is a school of Fengshui divination commonly used in Hong Kong which gives and relies on Fengshui divination permutations to assess the (in)auspiciousness of a space or building. It is described in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

fengshui advice. (See Chapter 4, Figure 13, on considering the two permutations together to assess the auspiciousness of a space.) A Fengshui divination (Star) permutation is similar to a person's eight characters horoscope,²² which gives details of how the space or person would experience (in)auspiciousness. Similar to the Flying Star permutation, the Fengshui divination permutation is made up of Stars with numbers one to nine, with each Star number sharing the same (in)auspiciousness context as those of the Flying Star numbers. To avoid confusion, in this thesis I call the yearly rotating star, as taken from the Flying Star permutation, Flying Star; this is distinguished from the 'structural' stars from the Fengshui divination permutation, which I call simply Star.²³

A fengshui-auspicious flat must satisfy two requirements: first, the building block must have an auspicious Fengshui divination permutation. Varying Fengshui divination permutations give rise to different extents of (in)auspiciousness for the entire building block. Then, within a building, each floor has several apartments, each with a unique floor plan and size, and with the door, balcony (if any), bedroom, toilet, kitchen, and so on located towards different compass points. As a result, although all the apartments in one building share the same Fengshui divination permutation, the extent of auspiciousness is different for each one, depending on the interior layout of the unit. In Fengshui divination epistemology, the location of external doors is a key indicator of whether or not a home is

²² I refer throughout this thesis to 'eight characters horoscopes' (in lower case), to distinguish them from the 'Eight Characters technique/ divination' (capitalized) on which the horoscopes are based.

²³ In Chapter 3, I introduced the technical terms for the different natures of Stars in the *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation.

auspicious, because such openings allow the inlet of much air, and therefore also of *qi*. Therefore, the second requirement for a fengshui-
auspicious flat is an entrance in a compass direction which has structurally
auspicious fengshui. That is, the entrance must be located in the direction
of the apartment which is awarded the auspicious Star according to its
Fengshui divination permutation. If two doorways (e.g. front door and
balcony) are in the compass directions which were assigned with
auspicious fengshui Stars structurally, then in a year when the auspicious
Flying Stars (such as the Flying Star numbers 1, 6, 8, and 9) arrived at the
entrance of that home, this reinforces the overall auspicious *qi* of the
apartment. (See Chapter 4 for the ethnography and explanation of the
combined fengshui effect of the yearly Flying Stars and the structural
Fengshui divination permutation Stars).

It is worth noting that a unit with an inauspicious Star entrance located
in a building with a favourable Fengshui divination permutation might be
less auspicious than an apartment with an auspicious Star entrance but in a
block with an unfavourable Fengshui divination permutation. Location and
budget restrictions might make it hard to rent a flat in a building with an
auspicious Fengshui divination permutation: in that case a Fengshui
divination practitioner would look for somewhere with an auspicious Star
entrance instead.

To return to my example, Master Mo examined several flats that Jacky
liked, and advised which was the most auspicious in terms of their
Fengshui divination permutations and the locations of their front doors and
balconies (if any). Then Master Mo applied a little known Fengshui

divination technique to Jacky's new home, and reassured him that his business would remain profitable until the end of the year if Jacky followed all the fengshui advice to arrange the flat *and* maintain the efficacy of the fengshui objects.

In Hong Kong, media such as newspapers and television discuss the annual changes of auspiciousness of directions in Fengshui divination (as shown via the mechanism of Flying Star), and the kinds of fengshui objects that should be placed in each compass direction in that year to achieve the best possible *qi*. A novice Fengshui divination practitioner might assume that objects introduced into a space in connection with Fengshui divination need no further attention. In fact, fengshui objects do not maintain their efficacy if left unattended for months. Only participants who have diligently followed fengshui divination advice are aware of the continuous effort required to maintain the effects of fengshui arrangements.

Jacky did not tell me the details of the little known Fengshui divination performed for him because he had an agreement with Master Mo not to reveal the exact arrangements. Nevertheless, Jacky said he needed to provide *daily* care for several fengshui objects: cleaning them, polishing the metal ones, rotating one object at a specific time of the day, and changing the water inside a container. He did all this himself, not trusting his cleaner to do the job with proper care. Jacky initially wanted the Fengshui divination advice in order to protect his financial position: after three months of following that advice his company signed other lucrative contracts, and he doubled his net worth!

The stronger foundation of his business now made it even less likely to collapse as predicted in his written destiny. Nevertheless, Jacky did not forget the predicted calamity. Having witnessed the efficacy of Master Mo's Fengshui divination, Jacky decided to continue paying Master Mo for his service in the following years, to avoid slipping back onto his preordained path after he turned thirty. He knew that the Master possessed other Fengshui divination techniques even more potent than those previously applied for him. He asked Master Mo several times for higher-level Fengshui divination advice, so he could protect himself against the predicted calamity. The Master refused these requests, even though Jacky offered to pay a higher fee. Master Mo also declined to carry out Fengshui divination for Jacky's business premises. The Master said he would continue to perform the same advanced level of Fengshui divination consultation as before for Jacky's apartment, but could help no further.

Jacky felt that he lacked any control over his destiny. While he had started to see the power of Fengshui divination in affecting one's destiny, he was unhappy about having to rely on Master Mo to supply such powerful divination: he wanted to be able to perform it himself. He therefore began attending Master Mo's divination classes. Despite Jacky's extremely busy work schedule, he attended three classes every week. He was an assiduous learner, discussing divination with his classmates and other participants, reading divination manuals, and trying to work out the secret Fengshui trick that Master Mo applied to his apartment. After half a year of learning the basics of Fengshui divination, Jacky started to attend four classes weekly. He talked of how little time he had to become

prepared before his thirtieth birthday. He wanted to equip himself to change his own destiny.

Jacky understood that he would not be able to master all the available Fengshui divination skills in just two or three years. However, he explained that by constantly engaging in conversations with the other partitioners, both in and outside of class, he had at least discovered various secret and powerful Fengshui divination techniques which he could use in the future if necessary. Not content with passively awaiting future risks against which Fengshui divination techniques might be available, he chose to investigate these proactively in order to be better prepared. He explained how the effects of Fengshui divination usually appear only after the fengshui objects have in place for about two to three weeks, because the objects gently channel and adjust the flow of (in)auspicious *qi* into the space, and then bring harmony to the fengshui of the place. Nevertheless, some practices have immediate effect, such as using some particular and rare fengshui objects.

Figure 5: A fengshui object of a metal horse to attract the *qi* of (Flying) Star number 6



Such highly potent fengshui objects are rare because they need to be specially made or prepared in order to bring immediate effects. For example, one way to make such an object is to store the relevant *qi* in it in advance. Different types of fengshui objects are used to attract or avert different kinds of *qi*. The choice of fengshui object is based on the relevance of the object's qualities to the particular type of *qi*. For instance, (Flying) Star number 6 has the *Ng hang* of metal and one of its symbolic animals is the horse, so a metal horse (Figure 5) is commonly used to channel the *qi* of (Flying) Star number 6. On the other hand, (Flying) Star number 4 has the *Ng hang* of wood, so a group of four (matching the number 4) lucky bamboo plants (a matching *Ng hang*) in water²⁴ (Figure 6) is often used to exemplify the *qi* of (Flying) Star number 4. However, a

²⁴ The plant is kept in water rather than in soil because, in the construction cycle of *Ng hang*, water gives rise to wood (see Chapter 2, footnote 31). Water brings a more vital wood element. By contrast, soil has the *Ng hang* of earth, which weakens the wood element. So water plants are usually used to channel the auspiciousness of (Flying) Star number 4.

metal horse or a plant in water would not bring auspicious effects immediately unless they were themselves already rich in the *qi* of (Flying) Star numbers 6 or 4 respectively.

Figure 6: A fengshui object of four bamboos in water to attract the *qi* of (Flying) Star number 4



To prepare a rare object, it needs to be placed in a location that allows the flow of a particular kind of auspicious *qi* into an object. Figures 3 and 4 show the directions from which Flying Star number 6 would arrive in a given year: from the south-east and the centre of a space in 2020 and 2021 respectively. However, placing a metal horse in these locations for those

two years does not guarantee that the *qi* of Flying Star number 6 will flow in and be favourably stored. As explained in Chapters 3 and 4, other factors also affect the flow and extent of auspiciousness of *qi* in a space, such as the external environment and the orientation of the building. It is possible that, in one building, the annual *qi* of Flying Star number 6 in the south-east in 2020 became inauspicious because other (external) factors affecting the building prevent the auspicious *qi* of Flying Star number 6 from flowing in. That is, while Flying Star number 6 itself is auspicious, the purity of its auspiciousness might be contaminated, thus rendering the *qi* inauspicious.²⁵ To store purely auspicious *qi* of any (Flying) Star number in an object is a complicated and extremely challenging task, particularly as some buildings have an irremediable fengshui structural defect, which inevitably contaminates auspicious *qi*.

Jacky feared that the Fengshui divination advice given by Master Mo might not be strong enough to prevent the predicted business failure. He had proactively acquired the rare items needed, so that he could counter-strike instantly when he sensed the calamity coming. He was unwilling to leave his destiny solely in the hands of Master Mo, who might not be able to supply the rare objects when needed. He did not want to wait two weeks for ordinary Fengshui divination to take effect, as he might be exposed to failure during that period. He needed to be well prepared so that, if the calamity struck without warning, he would have some, if not all, of the rare fengshui items available, which he or Master Mo could use to avert it.

²⁵ Contaminated and inauspicious *qi* of (Flying) Star number 6 could lead to a lawsuit, job redundancy, or bankruptcy.

Jacky decided to prepare the rare items beforehand. In particular, he needed the specially made fengshui items to channel the auspicious *qi* belonging to (Flying) Star numbers 6 and 8, for business/career success and wealth accumulation respectively. Knowing that the structural design of his apartment made it unsuitable for preparing the necessary rare items, he went so far as to consider buying another apartment. He spent six weeks hunting on his own for a flat with the right fengshui to make the rare objects, discussing this with other Fengshui divination participants he met in class or online. He eventually found one, for which he paid over 10 million Hong Kong dollars.

Jacky explained that these fengshui objects must be placed in the right location, in a space with appropriate fengshui, for at least 100 days. ‘Who would let you leave fengshui items in their home for 100 days? Even if they did, how could you be sure that the objects remained in the exact spot for the entire period?’ Jacky said it was easier for him to find and buy such a property than to examine the suitability of his friends’ apartments and then, if he found one, see if his friend was prepared to facilitate his request. He said that after the 100 days of ‘cultivation’, the freshly made powerful fengshui objects would need to be remain in the same spot until they were used. This is because if the objects were stored elsewhere, in a fengshui setting different from that where the items were prepared, the auspicious *qi* initially stored in the objects would slowly dissipate: as the *qi* flowed from the object into the new environment it would lose its instant potency. So Jacky bought the new apartment to make and store these rare fengshui objects in case he needed them urgently in the near future.

In the year when Jacky turned thirty years old, his business faced a lawsuit. Believing that this might be the predestined calamity which would lead to complete failure, he reacted immediately. He asked Master Mo for Fengshui divination advice specifically to counter this possibility. Master Mo, aware of Jacky's preparation of the rare fengshui objects, told Jacky which ones he should use. Jacky said that Master Mo's instruction were somewhat ambiguous and that if he had not been learning about Fengshui divination for the past three years, in classes and discussions with different practitioners, he would not have known where to place the objects and what to do with them. Jacky was not altogether sure if he had placed the fengshui objects correctly, but later he believed he had done so, because two days after he placed the objects in his apartment the petitioner asked for a court settlement, and they soon agreed on a price which Jacky was happy to pay.

In the years following the court settlement, Jacky's company continued to grow steadily. Jacky believed he had successfully altered his destiny by averting the preordained calamity. He believed that he earned the right to change his destiny all by himself, through his great efforts, not only in running his business, but also in his constant adherence to the Fengshui divination advice at home, and by proactively preparing the rare fengshui objects in advance. He was convinced that if he had not taken the initiative in preparing and storing the rare objects, he would not have been able to react instantly when the calamity threatened, and he might have been beaten by destiny. Jacky believed that the settlement of the lawsuit resulted, not from Master Mo's Fengshui divination consultation, but from the rare

fengshui items that he had taken the trouble to prepare. Jacky continued to make and store the rare fengshui objects after the court settlement. He also kept several other commonly used fengshui objects, in different sizes and quantities, in case they were unavailable when he needed them in future. Jacky wanted to control his destiny by being able to act *immediately*, through Fengshui divination and objects, whenever things did not happen as he planned or wished.

The above ethnography demonstrates Jacky's determination to claim ownership of his own destiny by applying Fengshui divination. Few divination practitioners are financially able to purchase two new apartments, as Jacky did, to enjoy better fengshui, nor to safeguard the future by making rare and potent fengshui objects in case they are needed. Nevertheless, Jacky invested not only an enormous sum of money but also enormous personal effort in learning about and using Fengshui divination to control his destiny. Jacky believed he had earned his improved destiny by his own efforts, and that his business success was due, not only to his effective management of the business, but also to his engagement in Fengshui divination.

Chapter 2: Fengshui divination, performativity, and the pragmatic approach to fate

In the last Chapter I was unable to disclose details of Jacky's daily efforts to maintain the efficacy of his Fengshui arrangements, since they relate to a secret technique. In this Chapter I describe the continuous efforts of another informant, Packo, to maintain the potency of fengshui objects.

Background to Packo's use of Fengshui divination

Packo is in his early forties. He is interested in divination and has been learning various divination techniques for almost ten years. He likes to describe how Fengshui divination helped him to change his own and his wife's destinies.

Packo had always lived with his parents. After he and Ada married in 2017, they continued to live with Packo's parents. The social movement in Hong Kong in 2019 polarized residents' political views: either for or against the local government and its advocacy of the extradition bill. These conflicting views divided many families, including Packo and his mother, who often argued when watching the news on television. Packo could not agree with his mother's political position, and she could not resist trying to persuade him to her point of view. Their relationship deteriorated, and Packo began to think about moving out and setting up a new marital home.

He thought that some physical distance between himself and his mother would improve their relationship.

Many married couples in Hong Kong choose to live with parents, both because of the financial cost and because of the responsibility to look after one's parents. Hong Kong was consistently ranked among the world's five most expensive cities to live in from 2019 to 2022 (*The Standard* 2022). Local rents are infamously high: local households spend, on average, more than half of their monthly outgoings on rent (*The Standard* 2021). Packo was planning to have a child now that he and Ada were married. He was a construction site safety officer, carrying out health and safety inspections, and earning about HKD 30,000 a month. Ada was a part-time private tutor. Packo said he had always wanted to move out of his parents' apartment, but he feared that he and Ada would not be able to afford to raise a child if they had to rent a home of their own.

Packo had learned how to perform several different kinds of Fengshui divination, and regularly performed Fengshui divination for his parents' apartment. However, he was often unable to arrange the flat in accordance with the divination results because of his parents' unwillingness to follow his advice. As a result, he gradually gave up carrying out Fengshui divination for the family home. According to Packo, although his parents believe in (Fengshui) divination, following its advice is not a priority for them. (See Chapters 6 and 7 on how personal preference and/ or practicality affect adherence to divination advice.) Either his parents complained about the space taken up by fengshui objects, or there was not enough room for him to place the objects in the appropriate location. Packo

also said that, for a fengshui object to take effect, it generally needs to be in a space which is very tidy, so that it catches the eye of anyone looking towards it. However, Packo's parents had lived in their flat for more than twenty years, and they had so many belongings that it was hard to find space to display fengshui objects properly, and thus for any Fengshui divination advice to be effective. Packo was therefore tempted to rent a home elsewhere with enough room to apply his Fengshui divination skills and fully experience its power or efficacy.

Packo had paid two diviners to perform Fengshui divination at his parents' flat several years earlier when he started to learn divination. At that time, even his parents followed the advice as far as possible, knowing that Packo had paid a high price for the divination, but the fengshui effect achieved did not satisfy Packo. He knew that powerful Fengshui divination advice could achieve much more than just safeguarding one's existing health and wealth: it could generate more of both. As Packo learned more about Fengshui divination, he realized that the level of advice that the two masters had provided was rather standard, and was incapable of achieving significant improvements to a person's destiny. Packo's early experience of Fengshui divination consultation fuelled his desire to dig deeper into divination knowledge: he wanted to apply higher-level divination skills for his home, and to enjoy as much benefit from Fengshui divination as possible.

While financial constraints might once have deterred Packo from setting up his own family home, Hong Kong's social movement, and the resulting sociopolitical arguments with his mother, increased his desire to

move and gave him the courage to do so. In November 2020, the couple decided to move out of Packo's parents' home with their two-year-old child.

Predicted bad luck for 2021

Via Eight Characters divination, Packo learned that he and his wife were destined to have an extremely difficult year in 2021, especially in financial terms: they risked losing money and being unable to secure any income. 2021 was the year of *San Cau* (辛丑), which is the year's corresponding pillar in the Sexagenary Cycle of the Chinese calendar. *San* is one of the ten Heavenly Stems (天干, *tin gon*) and *Cau* is one of the twelve Earthly Branches (地支, *dei zi*).²⁶ Two working orders are within the ten Heavenly Stems: The Combinations and The Clashes. Under the Heavenly Stems Combination rules, *Bing* (丙) (which has the *Ng hang* of fire) combines with *San* (辛) (metal) to form a new *Ng hang* element of water.²⁷

²⁶ The ten Heavenly Stems are (together with, in brackets, their corresponding features and *Ng hang*): *Gaap* (甲) (*yang*, wood), *Jyut* (乙) (*yin*, wood), *Bing* (丙) (*yang*, fire), *Ding* (丁) (*yin*, fire), *Mou* (戊) (*yang*, earth), *Gei* (己) (*yin*, earth), *Gang* (庚) (*yang*, metal), *San* (辛) (*yin*, metal), *Jam* (壬) (*yang*, water), and lastly *Gwai* (癸) (*yin*, water). The twelve Earthly Branches are: *Zi* (子) (*yang*, water), *Cau* (丑) (*yin*, wet earth), *Jan* (寅) (*yang*, wood), *Maau* (卯) (*yin*, wood), *San* (辰) (*yang*, wet earth), *Zi* (巳) (*yin*, fire), *Ng* (午) (*yang*, fire), *Mei* (未) (*yin*, dry earth), *San* (申) (*yang*, metal), *Jau* (酉) (*yin*, metal), *Seot* (戌) (*yang*, dry earth), and lastly *Hoi* (亥) (*yin*, water). All the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches together can form sixty possible combinations of pillar, each consisting of one Heavenly Stem and one Earthly Branch. In the Chinese calendar, every year is named according to the order of the sixty pillars, which together form one entire Sexagenary Cycle.

²⁷ The other four Heavenly Stem Combinations are: *Gaap* (wood) and *Gei* (earth) to form earth; *Jyut* (wood) and *Gang* (metal) to form metal; *Ding* (fire) and *Jam* (water) to form wood, and *Mou* (earth) and *Gwai* (water) to form fire. However, the presence and implication of any Heavenly Stem Combination are much more complicated since combining two Heavenly Stems might not always lead to the formation of the by-product. The technical term in the Eight Characters divination is 合而不化 (*hap ji bat faa*), meaning combining but not converting. While two fixed Heavenly Stems always attract and combine with each other, they would only produce the by-product if they satisfied specific criteria, such as the presence of a certain number of Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches with the same *Ng hang*. The formation of the by-product is an influential

Combination does not always imply harmony between the two Heavenly Stems. In the case of *Bing* and *San*, the by-product of water not only weakens the metal quality of *San*, but also destroys the fire features of *Bing*: such a combination is considered to be a betrayal of nature as it does no good to either of the original elements. On the other hand, under The Clash rule of the Heavenly Stems, *Jyut* (乙) always clashes with *San* (辛), and *Jyut* would result in a bad injury.²⁸ Not only would the clash itself harm both Heavenly Stems, but also the wood element of *Jyut*, having been destroyed by the metal of *San*, would deteriorate further.

Both Packo and Ada have the Heavenly Stems of *Jyut* and *Bing* in their eight characters horoscopes. Packo predicted that 2021 would be an extremely inauspicious year for the couple because the *Jyut* and *Bing* in their horoscopes would be badly harmed by the *San* of that year. Having *Jyut* and *Bing* as part of one's eight characters horoscope is not always worrying, but they can be harmed after interacting with *San*. Nevertheless, *Jyut* and *Bing* are the *Jung san* (用神) in both Packo and Ada's eight characters horoscopes. *Jung san* refers to the key characters, whether Heavenly Stem or Earthly Branch, which bring prosperity. Although there are eight characters in one's eight characters horoscope, not all characters have equal weight or importance in determining the auspiciousness of one's destiny. *Jung san* are the most important ones which, if the underlying characters shine or are nurtured (for example, externally by the yearly pillar) will bring achievement to those possessing them.

determinant of the level of (in)auspiciousness of a person's horoscopic pattern/ divination outcome.

²⁸ Only four pairs of Heavenly Stems clash with each other. The other three pairs are: *Gaap* and *Gang*, *Bing* and *Jam*, and *Ding* and *Gwai*.

In contrast, if *Jung san* are harmed this would reduce prosperity or even cause calamity. In Packo and Ada's case, both *Jyut* and *Bing* are the *Jung san* in their eight characters horoscopes. Hence, the presence of *San* in 2021 would have a very adverse effect on their lives in that year. Therefore the couple should avoid *San*. In Eight Characters divination, *Gei san* (忌神) is the technical term which describes the characters, whether Heavenly Stems or Earthly Branches, that can bring devastating events, and should therefore be avoided.²⁹ That is, *San* is the *Gei san* in the couple's eight characters horoscope.

Packo explained that *San* is the worst *Gei san* for both him and Ada, and they tried as far as possible to minimize interaction with this element. For example, when seeking a foreign domestic helper (who would live in the household to help with all sorts of domestic work) for their family, instead of reviewing candidates' work experience to determine their suitability, the couple estimated their eight characters horoscopes based on their dates of birth,³⁰ and turned down immediately those they knew to have *San* in their horoscope. They said their relationships with people whose horoscopes had a heavy component of *San* were usually inharmonious. They cited examples including losing money when investing with them, and having lots of arguments when working together.

²⁹ It is worth noting that if someone's *Gei san* were weakened, for example by the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches of the yearly pillar, it would bring them auspiciousness. Hence, in Eight Characters divination, it is essential to find out which characters are a person's *Gei san* and *Jung san*, in order to determine which years are (in)auspicious for that person. However, it is not easy to identify them accurately, even for a skilful and experienced diviner.

³⁰ Packo could not know the candidates' exact eight characters horoscope. The eight characters horoscope are determined by the time, day, month, and year of birth. Without knowing the exact moment of birth, Packo could only estimate six out of the eight characters in the candidates' eight characters horoscopes.

In their experience such relationships had always resulted in disappointment, anger, and sadness.

There is a popular Korean spicy instant noodle product, whose name in Chinese includes the word *San* (辛). This used to be Packo's favourite food, but once he learned that *San* is his worst *Gei san*, he stopped buying them. Ada became a divination practitioner after she met Packo. She also stopped eating this brand of noodles. They both wanted to avoid any adverse effects from the *San* element and therefore reduced their contact with that element as far as possible.

Packo had often thought about when, in the future, he and Ada might become financially able to move out of his parents' home, perhaps when their toddler started attending all-day primary school so that Ada could get a full-time job and bring home more income. However, he did not expect to do so before 2021 because he knew that year was destined to bring financial problems for him and Ada. The best possible plan for a predicted bad year was to have no plan, so they could avoid making any changes that might worsen their financial situation. Unfortunately, the plan for 'no plan' was overturned by the city's sociopolitical circumstances and the resulting divided opinions within the family.

Anticipating that 2021 would be a year of *Gei san* for himself and Ada, Packo wanted to use all his Fengshui divination knowledge, not only to arrange the new apartment in accordance with the divination outcome, but also to find a flat in a building with good structural fengshui. As explained in Jacky's ethnography above, a flat with an auspicious Fengshui divination (Star) permutation channels auspicious *qi* better than one with a

less auspicious permutation. Packo intended to *change* the bad fortune predicted for 2021 by ensuring good fengshui and auspicious *qi* in the new flat.

Packo's first step towards changing his destiny

Packo and Ada started property hunting. Because they would need Packo's parents to look after their toddler when they went to work, the new flat had to be reasonably close to Packo parents' home. This restricted their choice of location (see Chapters 6 and 7 on how preference and/ or practicality affect adherence to divination advice). At first, Packo looked for a flat with the most auspicious Fengshui divination permutation at that time (see Chapter 4 on auspicious Fengshui divination permutations between 2004 and 2023). However, there was no such building near his parents' home. Packo performed Fengshui divination for all the apartments they viewed, and eventually compromised on a building block near his parents' home with a better Fengshui divination permutation than his parents' building.

Packo explained that the Fengshui divination permutation of the apartment block he had chosen was not very auspicious, only not too inauspicious. Nevertheless, the flat he picked had a rather propitious entrance, containing Star number 8 in a direction corresponding to that of the Fengshui divination permutation. Packo was certain that the flat would bring good financial fortune. With increasing household expenses, such as rent and their child's future education fees, Packo felt it necessary to look for an apartment whose fengshui could improve their financial status. So,

although the rent was twenty per cent above the going market rate and the landlord refused to reduce it, the couple still decided to go ahead and sign the lease. They feared that the apartment would be let to someone else if they tried to negotiate any further because it was the only available unit in the building with an auspicious entrance that would bring positive *qi* for wealth. All other flats available in the building lacked auspicious fengshui, even though they shared the same Fengshui divination permutation.

The couple strongly believed that the apartment's good fengshui was worth the high rent, and would reward them in the near future. They saw this as a cost that they needed to pay for the opportunity to alter the bad destinies predicted for them. Packo explained that, not only would the flat's entrance (structurally) bring *qi* for financial fortune, because it had the same compass position as Star number 8 of the building's Fengshui divination permutation, but also, and particularly in 2021, the year's Flying Star number 8 would also arrive at the doorway, reinforcing the positive prospect of wealth creation for the inhabitants. Packo demonstrated his will and determination by counting on the fengshui of the new flat to overturn the financial misfortune predicted for 2021, and thereby to change his and Ada's destinies.

Packo rearranged the interior of the new flat, based on its structural Fengshui divination permutation and yearly Flying Star permutation and directions of (in)auspiciousness. For example, according to its Flying Star permutation, the kitchen occupied the most inauspicious location of the flat during the year. This was because Flying Star number 5 was in that compass direction on the permutation. Flying Star number 5 has the *Ng*

hang of earth. If Packo and Ada cooked in the kitchen, according to the constructive cycle of *Ng hang*,³¹ the fire used for cooking would strengthen the earth element of the Flying Star number, increasing the inauspicious *qi* entering into the kitchen and affecting its residents more severely. To avoid this, Packo decided that they would not cook at home at all: they would either eat at Packo's parents' home or buy takeaway food during the year. He did not even buy any cooking utensils for the new flat.

Packo also made the best possible use of the auspicious space in the apartment: the area by the front door. In most households, a shoe cabinet is placed near the front door where shoes can conveniently be accessed or stored. Instead, Packo put their shoe cabinet in the living room, to free more space near the front door and thus allow better channelling of *qi*. He placed his desk in the apartment's hallway and turned it into his working space. He believed that, by spending time in this highly propitious space, he would gain more benefit from its auspiciousness. He thus did more to improve the Fengshui divination outcome than the usual simple rearrangement of furniture.

As well as following the Fengshui divination results in the initial setting up and use of the space, Packo also constantly reviewed the use of fengshui items to maximize the channelling of auspicious *qi* into the flat. He explained that most Fengshui practitioners without specialist knowledge would use Fengshui divination only once a year, visiting a master and then following their advice on fengshui items for the whole

³¹ The constructive cycle of *Ng hang* is that water gives rise to wood, wood builds a fire, fire nourishes earth, earth produces metal, and metal makes plenty of water. The destructive cycle of *Ng hang* is that water puts out fire, fire burns metal, metal cuts wood, wood digs into earth, and earth absorbs water.

year. As shown in the principle of the Flying Star, the Stars arrive at different compass point positions every year, and that constitutes the macro *qi* of any space for the year. However, knowledgeable Fengshui practitioners are also aware of the presence of micro *qi*. While macro *qi* stays the same throughout the year, being based on the Flying Star permutation for the year, micro *qi* changes every month, being based on the monthly rotating Flying Stars patterns and permutations.³² That is, the yearly and monthly Flying Stars patterns co-exist and interact with each other.

Packo also explained that, by tracking the monthly movements of the Flying Stars and their permutations, and analysing how the micro *qi* interacts with the macro *qi* every month, practitioners can maximize the flow of auspicious *qi* into a space. Paying attention to the micro *qi* can also minimize the amount of inauspicious *qi* entering the space. Packo confirmed that the Fengshui divination effect of considering micro *qi* and macro *qi* together is stronger than that of considering macro *qi* alone. However, following the rotation of the micro *qi* requires more frequent and time-sensitive performance of Fengshui divination: that is, twelve times a year. Packo explained that practitioners unable to carry out Fengshui divination themselves are unlikely to pay consultation fees to a master every month, because of the cost. Having learned about Fengshui divination for some years, Packo decided to perform Fengshui divination himself, and to review the fengshui items needed, every month.

³² The monthly Flying Stars permutations follow the same principle as the yearly Flying Stars permutations: the monthly Flying Stars move backwards in the sequence (from X to X-1) every month.

Packo's success with Fengshui divination arrangements

Packo had been learning different Fengshui divination techniques from different masters for several years, but he did not accept their knowledge unquestioningly. Although he believed that Fengshui divination could achieve great things, he sometimes doubted that masters would teach their pupils everything they knew. His concern was that masters would deliver, not incorrect advice, but incomplete knowledge. He therefore always wanted to test what he was taught in divination classes to assess its efficacy, but he did not have the opportunity to do this when living with his parents. In addition, his growing Fengshui divination knowledge made him aware that many more suitable, or even more powerful, fengshui items could be used to channel or avoid different kinds (in)auspicious *qi* than those revealed by the masters and the divination manuals. Packo believed that it is important to comprehend the nature and characteristics of each type of *qi*, brought by different (Flying) Stars, and then to pair it with an object that effectively represented its underlying specificities. He was eager to test some fengshui items which he believed would be effective, but had never been taught about.

Packo had in mind all the Fengshui divination arrangements he would implement in the new flat. He applied all the skills he had learned in the past years, including three different kinds of Fengshui divination, to attract as much auspicious *qi* into the apartment as possible. Packo cleared some space next to his desk in the hallway. He bought a new small high table, placed it next to his desk, and used it solely for fengshui items to enhance the financially favourable *qi* near the front door. Packo also placed three

fengshui items here: a tabletop water fountain and a white jade toad as big as an adult's palm, both on the small high table, and a medium-sized columnar aquarium (see the example in Figure 7) under the table, all these items being commonly used to attract the auspicious *qi* of (Flying) Star number 8. The desk, the new table, and the three fengshui items were the only objects in the hallway. While the rule of thumb for fengshui objects to take effect is to maintain tidiness in the (tiny) area where they were placed, Packo believed that he could magnify the effect even further if the fengshui objects stood alone in their allotted locations.

Packo's new flat was a one-bedroom apartment, measuring just over 300 square feet. While there are many smaller flats in Hong Kong, which is famous for its preponderance of 'nano flats',³³ Packo thought the flat was 'just big enough' for a family of three. A bigger flat was available for a comparable rent, but it had a less promising entrance than the smaller one. Packo had over 200 divination books and his toddler had many toys. Ada commented: 'It is very *luxurious* (emphasis in original) to use the space (the hallway) only for fengshui arrangements. The shoe cabinet is in the living room, and the bookshelf won't fit anywhere in the flat. We hardly have enough space for all our furniture and belongings.' The couple ended up keeping some of their belongings at Packo's parents' home, despite the inconvenience for all parties. All this was because Packo insisted on optimizing the fengshui outcome by keeping his flat as neat and simple as

³³ In the past decade, Hong Kong property developers have started constructing 'nano flats', generally measuring less than 215 square feet (a standard car parking space is 130 square feet) to make housing more affordable (Leung & Poon 2023). In 2022, a new nano flat of about 200 square feet was marketed at about 3.5 million Hong Kong dollars (Lam 2022).

possible: they needed the fengshui arrangements to be effective in order to improve their destinies in 2021.

Figure 7: A typical medium-sized columnar aquarium with an air pump and waterfall³⁴ (with crystal clear water)



³⁴ The air pump and waterfall create water movement and attract auspicious fengshui *qi*.

Packo, Ada, and their child moved into the new flat in December 2020. Two months later, another construction company asked Packo to work as the external safety inspector for their construction sites. Occasionally, colleagues referred such work to him so he could earn a little extra income. The work involved visiting sites, carrying out inspections, and signing paperwork to confirm the sites' safety. Since no conflict of interest would be caused between Packo's regular employer and the company offering the extra work, Packo was happy to take this on. Unlike his previous casual jobs, this company offered Packo a long-term partnership. The company was new and smaller than Packo's regular employer, and wanted to outsource the safety inspections to simplify its operations. Company representatives contacted Packo about the possibility of him becoming wholly responsible for their safety inspections. They knew Packo already had a full-time job and did not ask him to leave it: instead they suggested that he take on other safety personnel if he needed more manpower.

Packo had never thought about running his own business. He had worked for different companies doing different jobs for nearly twenty years. He was very surprised to be offered this opportunity. He was sure that this valuable offer was due to the fengshui, and especially the auspicious entrance, of the new flat. Packo explained that if the new company offered him a better paid job that required him to quit his current post, such career advancement could only have been brought by (Flying) Star number 6. However, he had the option of earning extra cash on top of an already secure job. That increase in wealth could only have been provided by strengthened Star number 8 and Flying Star number 8 together. Packo said

he had ‘nothing to lose’ by accepting the new appointment: he could keep his current job and the new appointment would bring additional income for the family. If there was too much work for Packo to manage alone then he could either ask his colleagues to share the workload or hire additional staff; he could still earn more from the new company and he would pay the extra workers. More importantly, it would cost him only his time: running the business would involve few expenses, at least in the initial phase.

Packo said that, although he had believed that the flat’s improved fengshui would bring more income, he had no clue how that would happen until this offer arrived. He insisted that such rare business opportunities could not have arrived from nowhere, and that this luck was the result of his fengshui arrangements and the consequent arrival of auspicious *qi* in his flat. Besides, it was February when the new company first contacted him. In the Chinese calendar, a new year usually starts in February and ends in the following January. Since 2021 was destined to be a difficult year for the couple, they were certain that the new opportunity was not predetermined by Packo’s destiny. Even if such good luck were due, it would certainly not have arrived in 2021. Packo explained, ‘if it had happened in January 2021, I could still say there was a chance that the opportunity was written in my destiny. But it occurred in February 2021, after the year of *San Cau* started. Only the good fengshui in my apartment can explain this event.’ By the end of March 2021, Packo reported that his income from the new job alone was more than what he and Ada normally earned in a month. Their financial circumstances had been improved by their devotion to Fengshui divination and arrangements. Packo believed

that the external force of Fengshui divination had successfully changed his destiny in 2021.

Regular efforts to maintain the efficacy of fengshui items

As well as the fengshui items in the hallway, Packo placed other items in different locations to attract various kinds of auspicious *qi* and to avert different types of inauspicious *qi*. On moving into the flat, he placed no fewer than twenty-six fengshui items in his 300 square feet apartment. Packo saw this devotion to Fengshui divination as the sole reason for his improved destiny. As well as dedicating so much space in the tiny apartment to fengshui objects, Packo regularly dedicated much time and effort to maintaining their efficacy.

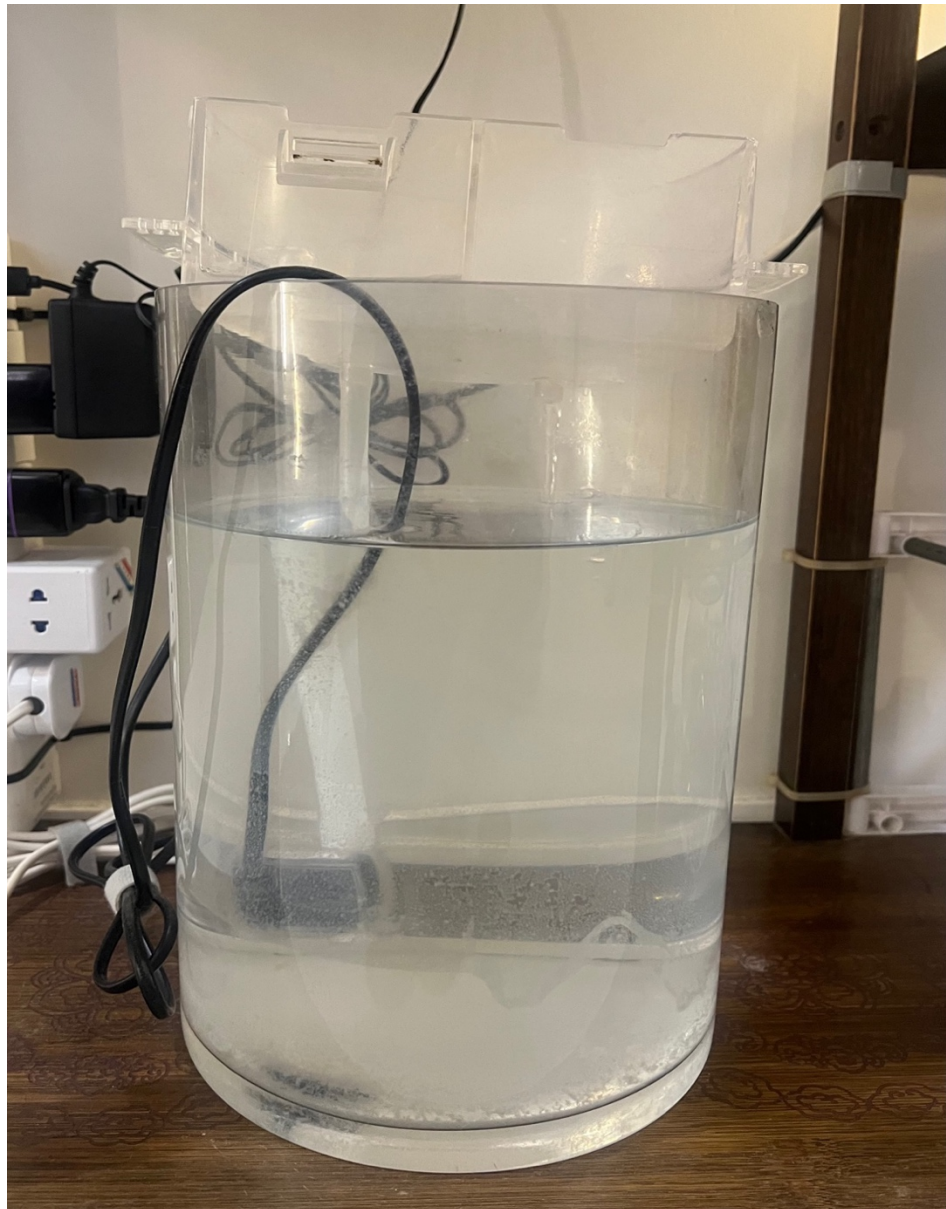
For example, every two days Packo had to add water to the water fountain and the aquarium in the hallway, to counteract evaporation. He explained that the efficacy of these items depended partly on there being enough water in them. He also had to clean the two items and change the water regularly. Dust often got into the water when the nearby front door was opened, especially into the wide opening of the aquarium. Packo explained that the water had to be crystal clear for the aquarium to attract auspicious *qi*. By contrast, unclear water in the aquarium (see the example in Figure 8) would not attract auspicious *qi*: even worse, it might turn the auspiciousness of *qi* into inauspiciousness.

Moreover, the aquarium could not bring about the ideal fengshui effect if it contained only unmoving water: movement must be maintained to

create vitality in order to accumulate auspicious *qi*. For this, an air pump is commonly added to an aquarium to create bubbles. To maximize the water movement, Packo put both an air pump into the tank and a waterfall filter onto the edge of the tank. Although fake fish are sometimes put into aquariums to make them look more attractive, Packo preferred not to do this: instead he added a colour-changing LED light for decorative effect. Fengshui divination practitioners usually choose, from a range of possible fengshui items, those they find most attractive.

Cleaning the aquarium and its accessories was no easy task. First, Packo had to reduce the water in the aquarium. He could not simply pour it all away and replace it with fresh water because the water contained the auspicious *qi* and so could not be removed completely. At most, he could remove only two-thirds, topping up with one-third of fresh water. In this way the 'seed' of the auspiciousness, and thus the prosperity it brought to the flat, were retained, although lessened. The favourable *qi* would then reaccumulate over two to three days whereas, if the aquarium were emptied completely, this would take at least six weeks. Although some auspiciousness is inevitably lost with the discharged water, this is still better than allowing the water to become dirty and destroying the seed of auspiciousness altogether.

Figure 8: The aquarium after ten days' lack of maintenance



Next, Packo needed to clean the waterfall filter. He originally installed only the air pump, but the water in the aquarium became very dirty and had to be changed every four or five days. By adding a waterfall filter, which gave additional movement to and filtered dirt from the water, Packo only had to change the water every ten days. Packo recalled a time when he was too busy at work and did not change the water for about two weeks. The aquarium's glass wall started to show an obvious watermark at the top, and

a jelly-like substance started to accumulate in the filtering layer. He also reported experiencing problems at work when the water and the aquarium were not clean, for example a part-time worker failed to perform a proper inspection and wrongly assessed the safety level. This was later discovered by Packo and required him to do extra work.

Packo was now much busier, managing both his full-time job and the freelance work. He believed that his constant efforts to maintain the cleanliness and efficacy of all the fengshui items were the sole reason for his business success. As well as changing the water and cleaning the fountain and aquarium, he also regularly polished the other twenty-odd fengshui items, keeping them clean and dust-free, which required constant attention.

In order to divert the inauspicious *qi* of Flying Star number 2, Packo first used a big metal gourd, about 30 centimetres tall (Figure 9) which would deflect the sickness caused by (Flying) Star number 2. When Packo put the metal gourd in its allotted location Ada complained very strongly about it, whereas she had accepted all the other fengshui objects in the home. As noted above, Fengshui divination practitioners also consider the aesthetics of fengshui items. Ada thought the gourd was very old-fashioned, but said that if a smaller one were used she would be fine with it. Packo's gourd was too big, and it was positioned in the living room where everyone could see it when the door was open. Ada said she would be embarrassed if they invited friends who would see it. However, Packo would not compromise and use a smaller one to please Ada. Because the yearly

Flying Star number 2 had great strength in their apartment that year, only a big metal gourd would be powerful enough to avert the bad *qi*.

Figure 9: A metal gourd: a typical fengshui item to divert the inauspicious *qi* of (Flying) Star number 2



Figure 10: A Tibetan singing bowl (with a hammer): Packo's replacement for the metal gourd



Packo tried to think of an alternative to the metal gourd. Flying Star number 2 has the *Ng hang* of earth. In the constructive cycle of *Ng hang* (see footnote 31) earth gives rise to metal. A metal item would therefore weaken the strength of earth, which nurtures metal. The metal gourd had an open top. To avert inauspicious *qi*, water could be added to the gourd. Again, according to the constructive nature of *Ng hang*, metal nourishes water. By transforming the strength of earth into metal, and then into water, the strength of Flying Star number 2 could be further weakened. Packo came up with the idea of replacing the metal gourd with a Tibetan singing bowl (Figure 10).

Tibetan singing bowls are used to promote relaxation and meditation; they have not traditionally been used as fengshui items. Packo thought a singing bowl would be a good alternative to the gourd because they share

similar features: both are made of copper and can hold water. Also, importantly, the singing bowl was aesthetically appealing to Ada. So Packo tested its usefulness as a fengshui item. To maximize its efficacy in averting the inauspicious *qi* of Flying Star number 2, Packo replaced all the water in the singing bowl with fresh tap water every day, in order to continuously reduce the strength of the unfavourable Flying Star.

Rather than emptying the water at home, Packo took the singing bowl outside of the apartment and poured the water into a drain in the rubbish collection room, which was located on the same floor. Packo explained that it would be useless to empty the water inside the apartment: although most of the bad *qi* would drain away with the water, some of it would enter into the air, circulate around the flat, and continue to affect Packo and his family.

To further counter the strong inauspicious effect of Flying Star number 2 in that year, Packo also struck the singing bowl at least once a day with a hammer, striking the bowl six times to produce six separate loud chimes. Packo believed that the sound produced by the singing bowl could help to divert the bad *qi* in the water, but that this would not work with a metal gourd. He explained that a singing bowl was used to achieve peace of mind, and that the peaceful sound produced could, on one hand, divert the bad *qi* and, on the other hand, purify it. He also explained the reason for hitting the bowl six times: the number six has the *Ng hang* of metal and could therefore further weaken the inauspicious *qi* of Flying Star number 2, which has the *Ng hang* of earth. After using the singing bowl for some time,

Packo concluded that it was effective in averting inauspicious *qi* because his family had suffered no major illnesses.

Wanting more: Packo's trials and errors with Fengshui divination objects

Packo said that, although he had always been hard-working, it was not his efforts at work that had brought him this business opportunity but his constant care for his fengshui arrangements. Having witnessed the efficacy of the aquarium in the hallway and, more importantly, the good prospects of his freelance business, Packo wanted to try some more advanced ways of using fengshui arrangements, in the hope of increasing the flat's fengshui auspiciousness to the next level.

So, for example, he added two more medium-sized columnar aquariums in different places in the flat where they would attract auspicious *qi*. As well as caring for the additional aquariums every day, Packo also began extracting some water from each aquarium every few days and adding it to the other aquariums. He had learned this process from one of his masters, who said it could boost the overall auspiciousness of the space to a new level, and Packo wanted to test the effect. However, the master did not tell him how often he should perform the task. Packo first tried mixing the water daily, but this did not bring the desired effect. By testing different frequencies of water changing, he concluded that he needed to wait for enough auspicious *qi* to accumulate in the water of each aquarium, which usually took six to eight days, before mixing them

together. In addition, Packo also analysed the nature of the monthly micro *qi* in the compass directions of the three aquariums. He mixed the water more frequently during months when the micro *qi* and the macro *qi* interacted auspiciously, and less frequently in times of inauspicious interaction.

Packo reported that after he started mixing the water from the different aquariums, his earnings from the freelance company doubled! Sometimes when he did not mix the water, such as when the micro and macro *qi* did not interact favourably, his earnings decreased, but as soon as he combined the water again his earnings rebounded. Packo said that he needed to be more careful about keeping the water in each aquarium clean: otherwise, when he mixed the water from them together, it would combine, not the auspicious *qi*, but the impurities in the water. Packo would then have to do extra cleaning of all three aquariums in order to restore their efficacy. As for the new fengshui items, although he needed to spend more time and effort managing their cleanliness and efficacy and examining the interaction between the micro and macro *qi* alongside his busy work schedule, he was more than happy to tend to them continuously. Packo's recent financial gains had convinced him that Fengshui divination and assiduous care of his fengshui arrangements would result in a favourable change in destiny.

Packo was motivated by this belief to attend more and different Fengshui divination classes to build up his knowledge: when one course finished, he found another, offered by a different master, and signed up for it. In addition, he spent his free time watching YouTube videos about

Fengshui divination. He believed that acquiring more advanced divination knowledge would enable him to achieve a better destiny. Moreover, he believed it necessary, not only to understand the knowledge in theory, but also to apply it in practice. A master might mask some knowledge from his disciples, such as how frequently to mix water from different aquariums; also, the master might lack practical experience of applying the knowledge. Hence, Packo continued to test and verify the knowledge he acquired.

Once the three aquariums were working perfectly, Packo learned in another Fengshui divination class that small, colourful, tumbled stones could help store auspicious *qi* inside the apartment. To test this theory, he bought five kilograms of tumbled stones, placed them in a tall glass container next to the aquarium in the hallway, and waited patiently for them to take effect. However, nothing promising happened and, worse, his freelance business began to stagnate. The construction company suspended all the projects on which Packo had been working and assigned him no new inspection tasks. At first he accepted the situation unquestioningly, but after two weeks he started checking whether any of his fengshui arrangements were not working properly.

Packo cleaned all the aquariums again, mixed the water from them every week, and kept all the other fengshui items clean and tidy; nevertheless, after two weeks the situation had not improved. At first, Packo thought the loss of auspiciousness might be due partly to the tumbled stones. He assumed that they were working properly and absorbing all the favourable *qi* in the apartment, and that the reason why he had experienced less prosperity at work was because he had installed a

large number of stones and that they had not yet absorbed enough auspicious *qi* to produce a positive effect. Packo thought that all he needed to do was to wait and give the stones more time to complete their effect.

A month after Packo first used the tumbled stones, his freelance work had dried up and the couple's paid jobs provided the only income for the family in that month. Packo and Ada started to consider seriously what had gone wrong. They were sure their loss of fortune was caused by the fengshui arrangements in the apartment: that Packo might have used the wrong items, stopping auspicious *qi* from flowing in. Packo had been constantly adding new fengshui items in different places to enhance the flat's fengshui effects. Having installed twenty-six items when he moved in, sixth months later he had added eight more. He and Ada tried to map the timeline of the introduction of each new item and relate this to the decrease in their financial prosperity.

Packo suggested that it might be the metal horse in the living room that had caused the stagnation, since that item was linked to career success. But Ada pointed out that the metal horse had been in the flat for almost two months (almost a month before the tumbled stones were added) and that Packo's freelance business had not declined after it was added. Then Ada realized that the business had started to decline when Packo had installed the tumbled stones. Packo immediately removed them and their container.

Four weeks after the stones were removed, auspicious *qi* seemed again to be flowing steadily into the apartment. Packo was later told in the Fengshui divination class that, while tumbled stones could help enhance and store auspicious *qi*, he had used far too many: a small handful would

be enough to achieve the desired effect. Quantity matters with fengshui objects, and more is not always better. The five kilograms of tumbled stones had in fact negated the auspiciousness of the hallway. Many small stones together are as significant as one big stone, and can block all *qi* from flowing into a space. In Fengshui divination, it is important to allow *qi* to flow freely into and out of a space from different directions, and the blockage caused by the stones near the entrance had negated the effects of all the other fengshui arrangements in the flat. The resulting loss of auspiciousness was the reason why his work had declined.

Throughout 2021, Packo carried out Fengshui divination monthly to examine how the micro *qi* and macro *qi* would interact and, following the divination results, he tried adding new fengshui items to his home. Some new items brought no luck: only arguments, illness, and reduced earnings. In such cases Packo removed the new objects and added something else. His constant rearrangement of the apartment was intended both to refine his Fengshui divination skills and to achieve the highest possible level of auspiciousness. He still aimed to garner favourable *qi* in order to counteract his own and Ada's predicted bad destinies for the year. They were both happy with the improved destiny that their strenuous Fengshui divination efforts achieved.

Bryant & Knight (2019), theorizing about the anthropology of the future, categorize different modalities of the future. One of these modalities is destiny, which is 'an orientation to a future beyond the horizon, a future that is not visible, not even expectable, but is nevertheless immanent in the present' (Bryant & Knight 2019: 160). This sense of the immanence of the

future in the present is described as ‘a sense of an ultimate end to orient our lives’ (ibid. 161). Unlike other modalities of the future, such as anticipation, expectation, and potentiality, which are based on looking into the future from the past, the modality of destiny is focused in the present, and views the future *as if it were* part of the present. ‘Imaginative operations performed on a fortunate state of affairs may be conceived as forms of resistance against fate, producing their own intentional arcs of temporality, the human habitus of projective time in front of ourselves amid the flow of anticipated expectations’ (da Col & Humphrey 2012: 11). Fengshui divination practitioners, as the preceding ethnography shows, use their sense of a better future to orient their lives. For this reason they devote much effort, and do everything they can, to clear (potential) obstacles and maintain or enhance the fengshui auspiciousness of their habitual spaces: they orient themselves according to their vision of an improved destiny.

Fengshui divination and human agency

People’s desire to earn improvement in their destiny is reflected in Weber’s (1946) idea of the ‘theodicy of good fortune’. While I do not wish to conflate fortune with destiny, both must be *earned*, rather than passively received. Weber suggests that people need to know they have a *right* to earn good fortune. Daniels (2003; 2012) showed that, in Japan, luck can only be acquired and channelled via individual efforts (she called it ‘labour of luck’) and not by relying solely on acquiring *engimono* (blessings) from ancestors. Empson’s (2012) account of fortune in Mongolia showed how contemporary Mongolians must make a deliberate effort in their everyday

lives to harness and contain *hishig*, a local formulation of fortune.

Hamayon (2012) likewise outlined how West Buryat and Tungus Evenk groups, Siberian forest hunters, constantly make active efforts to maintain relationships with visible and invisible agencies in order to gain luck for successful hunting. In other words, it is not sufficient merely to *be* lucky: people must both believe that they deserve it and want to earn it. Fengshui divination is a means of making efforts to earn good fortune.

Feuchtwang (2006) looked at how Chinese public space is maintained via the three actions of gathering, linking, and centring. This principle of making public space, Feuchtwang suggested, parallels the principle in Fengshui divination of choosing auspicious sites for the dwellings of both the living and the dead. Fengshui divination is ‘the art of centering human microcosms’ (Feuchtwang 2006: 109). He described how a place selected through Fengshui divination acts as ‘a center of its own universe within the encompassing universe’ where inauspiciousness (analogous to conflict) is mediated, and auspiciousness (harmony) is pursued (2006: 109). In a later paper, Feuchtwang (2014) explored in more detail the concept of centring in relation to Chinese rituals and cosmology, and proposed that rituals bring the outside into the established centres of places (2014). These centring rituals serve to mediate the boundaries, not only between the inside and the outside, but also between the visible and the invisible. Feuchtwang’s (2006; 2014) argument again demonstrates the interconnectedness of the cosmic, natural, and human realms. This also echoes Daniels’ (2003) study of material culture and luck in Japan, which looked at how *engimono*, small good luck charms sold widely across Japan

at shrines and temples as well as commercial outlets, are used to channel luck by mediating between the spiritual and the material worlds.

Although Chinese correlative cosmology suggests that the cosmic, natural, and human realms interact with each other constantly, people are usually in a passive position, and subject to the (adverse) influences caused by the *dei wan* of the location they inhabit and the fengshui of their everyday spaces. By mediating the boundaries I do not mean facilitating the connection between the realms, because the cosmic, natural, and human realms are always interconnected, but changing one's passive acceptance into positive action to benefit from the (advantageous) influence brought by their environment.

Feuchtwang concluded that 'all cosmologies are performed in ritual and other practices that make manifest invisible worlds' (2014:131). Applying Feuchtwang's argument to the understanding of how and why specific actions have been used to change human destiny reveals a striking commonality between Hong Kong Fengshui divination, Tale ancestor worship (Fortes 2018 [1959]), Indian Hindu worship and rituals (Guenzi 2012), and the Nuosu 'ordeals' (Swancutt 2012b): they all draw more or less on 'supernatural' means as centres from which to mediate the boundaries between the human and the cosmic/natural realms, allowing people to take the initiative and change their predetermined destinies here in the worldly environment.

Stafford (2012) proposed three ideal-type accounts of how people conceive of or explain fate: the cosmological, the spirit-oriented, and the social. The cosmological account sees fate as operating within the

mechanism of the universe; the spirit-oriented account sees fate as being heavily shaped by the interventions of gods, ancestors, or other spirits; and the social account (closely resembling agency theory) sees fate as something that people create for themselves, mainly through their interactions with other people. To some extent, the social account of fate refutes the influence or power of predetermining forces over people's lives. Stafford showed how, in real life, the three accounts can be blended together to explain fate. These different accounts are helpful in understanding people's actions to change their destinies.

Fengshui divination in Hong Kong differs from other fate-changing practices elsewhere in the world (see examples above) in that it is areligious. As I observed during my fieldwork, Fengshui divination practitioners come from various religious backgrounds: Daoist, Catholic, Christian, Buddhist, atheist and so on. In Chinese or Taiwanese popular religion, many people worship their gods in the hope of changing not only their own but also their families' destinies (Stafford 2012). This also happens in Hong Kong. The numerous Daoist and Buddhist temples in Hong Kong are all crowded with religious practitioners during Chinese festivals, seeking blessings and a better destiny: this represents the teaching of the local religion, and the position of its followers, that destiny can be changed by divine power.³⁵ Hong Kong Daoist and Buddhist worship of gods, Tale ancestor worship, Indian Hindu worship and rituals, and Nuosu

³⁵ Although my research focuses on divination practices in Hong Kong, I also talked to Daoist and Buddhist practitioners (who also practise religious-related divination, such as stick divination) about how they conceptualize destiny and the forces affecting their destiny.

‘ordeals’ are all fate-changing actions that reflect a spirit-oriented understanding of fate.

Fengshui divination and worship/ritual are not only responses to two different understandings of fate, they also represent different types of response to fate-changing actions, the former being agentive and the latter supplicative. In supplication, practitioners invite gods to intervene and rewrite their ‘fixed’ destiny. However, practitioners cannot be sure when and how such a request will be answered, or whether it will be answered at all. They can only wait for a request or prayer to be answered, regardless of the number of repetitions of worship or ritual. This form of fate-changing action is therefore supplicative, in that humans can do little to affect divine decisions about whether or not, and when or how, to rewrite their destiny.

In contrast, Fengshui divination is an agentive way of seeking to change one’s destiny. It reflects the idea that better fortune must be earned, not only through everyday activities, such as work, relationship building, health care, and so on, but also by rearranging one’s habitual spaces (through ongoing Fengshui divination) to amend one’s otherwise fixed destiny. Similarly, Buryats require a series of corrective rituals to gradually overcome downward spirals of soul damage or misfortune (Swancutt 2012a). Indeed, continuous engagement in Fengshui divination in Hong Kong reflects the popular Chinese idea of 多勞多得 (*do lou do dak*): working harder to achieve a better destiny. It also echoes the traditional Hong Kong idea of the Lion Rock Spirit: the perseverance by city dwellers

to make changes in response to hard times and not to give up.³⁶ This is akin to the Talensi idea that active incorporation into one's society is a prerequisite for good fortune (Fortes 2018 [1959]). My ethnography demonstrates that human agency plays a determining role in influencing and shaping one's destiny, despite that destiny being cosmically preordained.

The paradox posed by the predetermined and the malleable aspects of destiny

Hong Kong Fengshui divination practitioners see destiny as being both provisionally fixed at birth and susceptible to later alteration by external forces. Comprehending these forces allows practitioners to achieve favourable changes in destiny. However, this ability to change someone's destiny contradicts the notion that destiny is 'predetermined'. The paradoxical combination of malleability and fixity, according to Elliot and Menin (2018), is a special feature of destiny. Examining how Hong Kong Fengshui divination practitioners seek to change their destinies, I suggest that this paradox is not just a tension that must be accepted by practitioners, but is *necessary* to allow people to claim ownership of and take responsibility for their own lives, since the deterministic aspect of destiny helps us to see more clearly the *determination* that underlies human agency.

³⁶ The term 'Lion Rock Spirit' originally described Hong Kong people's perseverance after the Second World War in improving the city's poor living standards and transforming it into a highly metropolitan city. Although the phrase was used by some to justify protests in Hong Kong during 2019's social movement, and may now refer to the fight for democracy, I use 'Lion Rock Spirit' in this thesis only in its traditional sense, referring to the personal traits of hard work and perseverance.

As shown in the above ethnography, Fengshui divination enables practitioners to alter a specific aspect of their predetermined destinies: for example, Jacky's career prospects, and Packo and Ada's financial prospects. While moving to a new home that has a better *dei wan*, or continuously performing good deeds, could help a person to achieve a better overall destiny,³⁷ these two forces, as confirmed by some diviners in discussions about forces affecting destiny, are not in themselves sufficiently compelling to change a particular aspect of destiny.

The specific function of Fengshui divination is to allow practitioners to alter a specific aspect of life. The logic of Fengshui praxis behind such destiny-changing action is the second type of reaction to destiny, outlined at the beginning of Chapter 1. This requires that: first, the practitioner has identified (for example via divination) prewritten elements of their destiny. Secondly, the practitioner accepts that the preordained happenings *will* be there waiting to happen or *have already* happened. Thirdly, although the practitioner accepts the fact of predetermination, they object to its imposition and want to act against it. Last but not least, the practitioner acts deliberately to change a preordained aspect of life, and thereby changes their destiny.

Let us go back to Stafford's (2012) discussion of the three accounts of fate and people's reactions to misfortune. Following the immanent justice view, that unfortunate things only happen to bad people, and fortunate things only to good people, Stafford suggested that people suffering

³⁷ See Chapter 1, Figure 1, for an emic representation of Hong Kong Fengshui divination participants' view of the external forces affecting destiny.

misfortune must be at least partly to blame. Hence, whichever account(s) of fate one follows, from the immanent justice point of view, anyone experiencing misfortune would undoubtedly reject the status of being unfortunate by taking corrective actions, as otherwise this would make them a bad person. Stafford (2012) argued that humans are determined to take control of their own fortune or destiny by making efforts in their everyday lives, such as by making good social connections and working hard at work. I agree with Stafford that the human will to claim ownership of and to control one's destiny is clear.

Stafford (2012), examining how people conceive fate, focused on what people do when faced with misfortune. He found that they refused simply to accept it. My Fengshui divination informants conformed with Stafford's account of people's reactions to fate: they acknowledged that misfortune was predetermined but acted to overcome it and control their own destinies. Recognizing predetermination and its effects therefore does not necessarily problematize one's life: on the contrary, such recognition is *necessary* for people to appreciate that their actions are the *only factor* that can affect their destinies.

Graw (2006:110) saw divination consultation as a tool that helps the enquirer 'to move from a more passive state of uncertainty into a more active way of dealing with the situation'. Discovering one's predetermined destiny (via divination) allows practitioners to claim ownership of their lives and avoid future misfortune. Informants told me that this view is manifested in Hong Kong in the recurring narrative of why participants are interested in using divination to find out more about their destinies.

Discovering the cosmic plan enables them to act (via Fengshui divination) to gain control over their own fates and counter any cosmically arranged misfortune.

The performative aspect of Fengshui divination and a pragmatic discourse on fate

Performativity in ritual has interested anthropologists since the work by Austin (1962) on the analysis of performative utterances and speech-acts, which suggested that ‘to say’ something is also ‘to do’ it. There is an analogy between speech acts and rituals: ‘to perform’ the performative aspects of rituals (using dramatic and aesthetic elements, such as music, dance, costume, make-up, and so on) also means ‘to do’ or ‘to intend to do’ (Tambiah 2017[1973]; Ahern 1979; Finnegan 1969).

Tambiah (2017[1973]) looked at the criteria that constitute a performative act, or an illocutionary act in Austin’s (1962) notion, in rituals. He proposed that a performative rite needs to ‘achieve a change of state, or do something effective’ (2017:467). More importantly, the rite should consist of both speech and action, closely interwoven. Tambiah (2017[1973]:467) further suggested that speech alone is not sufficient to form a performative act, but that ‘*actions other than speech* [emphasis in original] ... were entailed for the full realization of the performance’. Ahern (1979) argued for the performative aspect of ritual and examined the efficacy of rites. She distinguished two forms of illocutionary acts in rituals: strong and weak acts, the former associated with requesting and the latter

with wishing. She stressed that, rather than seeing a ritual which does not take effect as a complete failure, it should instead be seen as the weakest form of illocutionary act.

Gardner (1983:348) criticized Tambiah (2017[1973]) and Ahern's (1979) discussion of the performativity of rituals for failing to distinguish clearly between illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of ritual: that is, between 'the conventionally constituted features of particular kinds of behaviour and those which are causally linked to that behaviour'. Gardner (1983:348) argued against the applicability of performativity in rituals: in his (perhaps ethnocentric) view, the sacred supernatural powers involved in rites 'cannot be bound by human beings', and therefore informants might fail to understand both how the supreme setting works and the procedures required to achieve the effect. Gardner (1983:350) suggested that an act or a ritual is performative if: 'under the appropriate conditions, it serves to effect a transition between two conventionally defined states; the procedure constitutes the transformation between the states'. Although he gave a more precise definition of a performative rite, it does not support his argument against the performative analysis in ritual.

Ahern (1982) might have realized the need for a clearer boundary between illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of ritual. In a later analysis of what constitutes a ritual procedure, she distinguished between constitutive and regulative rules. She defined the former as a rule which creates or defines a new form of setting or behaviour, for example in a game of chess, such that a person's behaviour depends on the rule. The latter is defined as a rule which is independent of existing behaviour, for

example a rule of etiquette. She shows that Zande oracle consultations follow constitutive rules, revealing the illocutionary aspect underlying that form of divination.

Performing Fengshui divination and complying with its advice on arranging one's personal space might not at first sight resemble a ritual. However, carrying out the advice is not only dramatic (for example, Packo striking the singing bowl) and aesthetic (decorating the aquarium, and the choice of singing bowl over metal gourd) but also has other features which make it performative in nature. First, to follow Gardner's (1983) definition, Fengshui divination spatial arrangements can effect a transition from unfavourable to favourable destinies, such as from Jacky's predestined bankruptcy and business failure to his expanding and increasingly profitable enterprise, and from Packo's predicted financial failure to his success. Secondly, Ahern (1982) argued that a performative ritual is one that has constitutive rules, such as the Zande oracle. In both Fengshui divination and the Zande oracle consultations, practitioners' behaviour depends on the rules governing the divination: both are illocutionary acts. Sax (2004) examined healing rituals in India and found that divination consultations there were also performative.

Thirdly, Turner (2016[1980]:85), discussing drama and ritual performance, defined performance as the 'processual sense of "bringing to completion" or "accomplishing"'. Turner saw performance, not as a one-off act, but as part of a process. Rather than seeking to define the performative aspects of ritual, Turner assumed ritual to be performative, directly linking ritual and drama, and proposed that ethnographic notes

recording a ritual should be performed as a drama to better understand the sociocultural processes confronted by informants. From all these studies it is clear that the continuous process undertaken by Fengshui divination practitioners (including learning techniques, arranging personal spaces, and regularly maintaining fengshui items) in order to accomplish a destiny-changing outcome is performative.

Figure 1 in Chapter 1 suggests that mundane actions are not sufficient to change destiny, and that only external forces can achieve this. I argue that Fengshui divination is a performative force that allows individuals to intentionally change their destiny. For example, if you are destined to be childless this cannot be changed by engaging more frequently in sexual intercourse. In such circumstances Fengshui divination enables practitioners to enhance the flow of favourable *qi* into, and avert unfavourable *qi* from, one's habitual spaces, thereby granting practitioners a way of altering their preordained destiny. The procedures of the performativity of Fengshui divination are, as witnessed in Packo's and Jacky's cases: continuously expanding one's Fengshui divination knowledge; preparing in advance fengshui objects that may be needed; continuing to use and renew Fengshui divination objects (including on a trial-and-error basis); and daily caretaking of those items to maintain their cleanliness and efficacy. All these actions are performed in order to change one's destiny and claim ownership of one's fate.

By considering how Hong Kong Fengshui divination participants follow and apply its advice proactively and continuously, this chapter looks into and beyond the long-recognized tension between predetermination and

agency. Participants' recognition of and resistance to being ruled by the fixed nature of destiny makes them want to exert their agency over their own lives. Repeatedly engaging in the performative use of Fengshui divination for one's habitual environments (such as one's home and office), deciding to change one's prewritten destiny, and eventually succeeding in this and achieving a favourable outcome: all this illustrates practitioners' determination and continuous hard work to claim ownership of their destiny. They exemplify the local motto of *do lou do dak* and the Lion Rock Spirit by working hard to earn a better destiny: this demonstrates their pragmatic approach to understanding and dealing with fate.

Chapter 3: Hong Kong divination participants’ discussions of *jip lik*

Ethics lie at the heart of divination consultations, and limit how far diviners can go in performing divination for their clients. Hong Kong divination participants, regardless of whether they are amateur practitioners or specialists, subscribe to the notion of karma, which they call *jip lik* (業力), and which sets the underlying ethical boundary. Although *jip lik* is not the same as fate, the two are, as I will show, very closely related. The idea of *jip lik* might have originated from or been influenced by Buddhism, but local divination participants’ understanding of it is areligious. Whatever their religious background, everyone is very familiar with the idea. There is a saying: '若然未報,時辰未到 (*joek jin mei bou si san mei dou*)', which carries the meaning 'you have not yet been punished for your wrongdoing because it is not yet the time'. It can equally mean 'you will be rewarded for your goodness, although maybe later', but participants usually use it in the negative sense. When writing, it is easy to confuse 業力 with 孽力 (both romanizing as *jip lik*), since the words 業 and 孽 have the same Cantonese pronunciation. The term 孽 refers to all evil deeds or sins, while 業 has a neutral meaning, embracing both good and evil acts. In this thesis, I use *jip lik* in the neutral sense, referring to both good and bad behaviour. In sum, *jip lik* represents the moral account of all one's deeds: a reminder that everyone will ultimately be held responsible for all their actions, good as

well as bad. I use *jip lik* and karma interchangeably in this thesis to refer to Hong Kong divination participants' notion of karma.

The karmic mechanism of jip lik

The philosophy behind *jip lik* also underpins 'karmic eschatology', a sophisticated rebirth model introduced by Obeyesekere (2002).

Obeyesekere conducted a cross-cultural comparison of reincarnation beliefs. He first suggested an elementary structure of reincarnation, which he called 'rebirth eschatology': the circulation of souls from the other world, where the ancestors live, to this world, where their descendants live. The deceased's soul would enter into a newborn baby related to the deceased. This simple rebirth model values the other world positively and ensures reincarnation in this world. Obeyesekere then took into consideration the ethical component underlying the rebirth process in the more complex 'karmic eschatology', 'whereby amorally right or wrong action becomes religiously right or wrong action that in turn affects a person's destiny after death' (ibid. 75). Obeyesekere argued that, when a person's this-worldly behaviour has been evaluated after death, delayed punishment or reward is experienced in that person's next life. This belief underlies some cultures' belief in cross-species reincarnation.

Divination participants in Hong Kong subscribe to the idea that punishment or reward can be delayed, sometimes until the next life. They believe that a person's eight characters horoscope, determined by their time of birth, reveals how their destiny, that is their everyday encounter in this

world, is affected or governed by both their own and their ancestors' actions: namely, their *jip lik* in their previous life or lives. So the *jip lik* of a person and their ancestors is the key determinant of their destiny in this life. In other words, *jip lik* is an accumulative force that functions longitudinally across reincarnated lives. Similar accounts of karmic reincarnation, although not explicitly called *jip lik*, feature in studies of Chinese folk religion by, for example, Eberhard (1967), Brokaw (1991), and Chu (2010). These studies recall Obeyesekere's argument (2002; 2003) that a person's karma influences their reincarnation. This view of longitudinally functioned karma across reincarnated lives is also shared by some South Asian societies (see for example Babb (1983), Doniger (1980), and Fuller (2004)). However, Hong Kong divination participants' understanding of *jip lik* differs slightly from the traditional Chinese view of karmic reincarnation. While the latter views karmic force as being transferrable only between one person's sequential reincarnations and between souls within the same family, the former sees it as being transferrable also between unrelated people, including between diviner and client.

Hong Kong divination participants believe that a person's accumulated *jip lik* tally determines their moment of birth and therefore their destiny in this life. Let us consider that each person (or more precisely each soul, since cross-species reincarnation is possible) has a *jip lik* karmic credit account. Before a person is reincarnated, their *jip lik* score for this life is calculated in the cosmic realm. Any accumulated punishment or reward can be delayed until their next life or lives, and that longitudinally

accumulated *jip lik* may be split up, with parts being assigned to different reincarnations. After birth, a person's *jip lik* score is not fixed but shifts up and down, depending on their deeds in this world, along a range from absolute goodness at one end to absolute badness at the other. Good or bad deeds in this life are reflected either immediately in a person's current *jip lik* account, or in a later reincarnation. This view of the *jip lik* calculation system supports the idea that a person's destiny is alterable in this world (see Chapter 1). The possibility that a good deed will improve this world's *jip lik* account leads to the idea that, by accumulating good *jip lik*, a person can gradually enhance their *jip lik* score and change their destiny in this life.

The transfer of *jip lik* between two unrelated souls usually results from interfering with someone's destiny by performing divination. If, as a result of divination, a person's destiny is altered, for example if a predetermined misfortune is avoided by a client following a diviner's advice, then a karmic debt will be added to the diviner's own *jip lik* account, reducing his *jip lik* credit. Avoiding the cosmically predetermined misfortune violates the karmic system of reward and punishment. The misfortune was to be the client's punishment in accordance with their longitudinally calculated *jip lik* score, determined by their own and their ancestors' deeds. The client did nothing to deserve that improvement in their destiny. In order to compensate for that alteration, the *jip lik* scores of both diviner and client must be recalculated and reallocated. The karmic debt of the client, which initially caused the misfortune, then passes to the diviner whose advice interfered with and changed the client's destiny. As a result, some

misfortune (although maybe not so great as would have befallen the client) now attaches to the diviner instead. In other words, the bad luck is transferred from client to diviner.

Similarly, if a diviner performs Fengshui divination³⁸ and brings unexpected good fortune (money, health, love, etc.) to a client, the diviner's *jip lik* will be negatively affected. Any fortune gained by the client which is not warranted by their *jip lik* is seen as 'inauthentic': the client does not deserve that success at this time. Again, legitimizing that gain of fortune involves a transfer of *jip lik* credit between diviner and client. At the cosmic level, the change in destiny is compensated for by transferring the diviner's karmic credit to the client's *jip lik* tally. The increase in the client's karmic credit is compensated for by reducing the diviner's *jip lik* merit due to his interfering with and changing the former's destiny. The reduction of the diviner's *jip lik* merit will decrease the prosperity he would otherwise have enjoyed in this life: worse, he may even suffer the loss of money, health, or a family member if he transfers too much of his own karmic credit to his client(s) following divination.

This idea of *jip lik* transfer parallels the belief of some Christians in the USA in sin eating: the sin eater (the diviner) consumes a ritual meal (performs divination to change the client's destiny) to spiritually take on the sins (karmic debts) of the deceased (the client). A diviner who interferes with someone's destiny is morally responsible for that action. The transfer of *jip lik* not only punishes the diviner for changing someone's

³⁸ See Chapter 1 on using Fengshui divination to change one's destiny proactively.

destiny, but also legitimizes that change in the client's destiny. Raheja (1988) studied inter-caste relations in the northern Indian village of Pahansu via gift (*dan*) taking. Donors pass on their associated inauspiciousness via the gift of *dan* to recipients. She argued that we should look beyond the hierarchical relations of caste. The receipt of inauspiciousness equates the status of the recipients of *dan*, who belong to different castes, including Brahmans, Barbers, and Sweepers, is similar to the transfer of auspiciousness which occurs in Fengshui divination. In Hong Kong, the diviner takes on a similar role as the potential recipient of *jip lik* debt from his client. While recipients in India cannot refuse a gift of *dan*, this and the next chapter show that diviners in Hong Kong can choose whether or not to accept a client, as well as the level of divination advice or disclosure to provide, in order to control the amount of *jip lik* debt they are likely to receive.

All the experienced diviners I met during my fieldwork, whether practising commercially or not, believe in the transferability of *jip lik* between unrelated persons. Many of them had experienced bad luck or even tragedy after divining for others, which they saw as the result of losing karmic credit or gaining karmic debt. Even those who had not personally experienced the consequences of *jip lik* transfer were convinced of its possibility by accounts of their peers who had suffered after divining for others. This explains why Hong Kong diviners avoid seriously interfering with a client's destiny in this world. A well known local idiom ('天機不可洩漏, *tin gei bat ho sit lau*') states that someone who knows the secret cosmic plan should not disclose it to anyone. The phrase not only

explicitly forbids disclosure, but implies that altering the plan is also prohibited. Nevertheless, clients are still willing to consult diviners in the hope of receiving some revelation! Ideologically, the idea of the transferability of *jip lik* shares principles of Chinese correlative thought concerning the flow of energy (*qi*) which connects the cosmic, natural, and human realms. As discussed in Chapter 1, the flow of *qi* mediates the boundaries between a person and the cosmos. *Jip lik* can also be transferred between unrelated persons.

Attitudes to and motives for learning divination

Many Hong Kong diviners continually learn new divination techniques and polish their skills, either by attending lessons from reputable diviners or by reading traditional divination texts and manuals. Big B is a full-time diviner in his late forties, and has been involved in divination for over ten years. Terry is ten years younger, and has practised as a part-time diviner since 2015. Unlike Big B, Terry does not rely on performing divination to earn his living; he has other sources of income.³⁹ Both grew up in upper-middle-class families and received secondary and tertiary education abroad. Both returned to Hong Kong in their mid-twenties after graduating, but only started working as diviners in their thirties after unsatisfying careers elsewhere. They were both advised, when in their late twenties, by diviners that they were destined to practice divination. Terry and Big B

³⁹ Diviners in Hong Kong can be divided into two types: those who rely on divination to earn their living and those who do not. This is not a general local categorization, but my own, based on my fieldwork.

have known each other for eight years, having met at classes in the *Daai Luk Jam* (大六壬) divination technique. Interestingly, neither now uses *Daai Luk Jam*, despite studying it for more than a year, because they find it challenging to apply. In Big B's words, the technique is not user-friendly at all. The divination pattern is complicated to read: it requires layers of interpretation whose explanation involves great effort.

Big B and Terry have both been learning several different divination techniques in the past few years. They are always curious to find out more and to compare the accuracy or power of divination techniques. However, they have different attitudes to and motives for learning these techniques, exemplifying the two distinct approaches adopted by most of my fieldwork informants in their divination learning journeys. Big B repeatedly says that, as an experienced diviner, he needs only 'enough' divination skills to handle his clients' inquiries. He holds that there are too many Chinese divination techniques, not to mention the non-Chinese ones which can also be learned in Hong Kong. It would be impossible to learn, let alone master, all the techniques. Big B uses three divination techniques to answer his clients' inquiries, although he has studied several more. His choice of techniques is based, first on his experience of obtaining accurate (in Zeitlyn's (2012) term) diagnoses and prognoses for his clients, and secondly, on the user-friendliness of the technique's application.

One of the divination techniques Big B uses for his clients is *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* (奇門遁甲), which was first developed more than 4,000 years ago. Its outcome is a horoscopic sign permutation, presented as a square

subdivided into nine smaller squares, representing the eight cardinal and intercardinal compass directions plus the centre.⁴⁰ To interpret the outcome, the diviner examines the location of the horoscopic signs, *saam kei* (三奇), *luk ji* (六儀), *baat mun* (八門), *baat san* (八神), and *gau sing* (九星)⁴¹ among the smaller squares. The different combinations of and interactions between the elements in each square, such as the underlying constructive/ destructive *Ng hang* relationship (see Footnote 31 in Chapter 2) inform the divination outcome. What is more, the same technique can also be used in Fengshui divination, to enhance auspiciousness or improve one's destiny. In contemporary Hong Kong, several different schools of *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* are taught. Each has different rules about how the signs (*saam kei*, *luk ji*, *baat mun*, *baat san*, and *gau sing*) should be positioned in the smaller squares. The time at which the divination is performed captures and manifests the 'written destiny' of the cosmos (W. Matthews 2017). Interestingly, the divination permutations produced by different *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* schools for the same inquiry at the same moment vary and require different interpretations.

⁴⁰ The *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* horoscopic sign permutation, coincidentally, has a similar presentation to the Flying Stars permutation which is also divided into nine smaller squares (see Figures 3 and 4 in Chapter 1), representing and taking into consideration the nine different directions. Not all divination techniques base their divination permutations on these nine directional presentations.

⁴¹ *Saam kei* refers to the Heavenly Stems of *jyut* (乙), *bing* (丙), and *ding* (丁). *Luk ji* refers to the six Heavenly Stems of *mou* (戊), *gei* (己), *gang* (庚), *san* (辛), *jam* (壬), and *gwai* (癸). *Baat Mun* is represented by *jau* (休), *saang* (生), *hoi* (開), *dou* (杜), *ging* (景), *sei* (死), *ging* (驚), and *soeng* (傷): the first three represent auspiciousness and the last three are inauspicious. *Baat san* and *gau sing* help describe the nature or characteristic of the inquiry. *Baat san* includes *zik fu* (值符), *dak se* (騰蛇), *taai jam* (太陰), *luk hap* (六合), *baak fu* (白虎), *jyun mou* (玄武), *gau dei* (九地), and *gau tin* (九天). *Gau sing* includes nine elements: *tin pung* (天蓬), *tin jam* (天任), *tin cung* (天衝), *tin fu* (天輔), *tin jing* (天英), *tin jeoi* (天芮), *tin cyu* (天柱), *tin sam* (天心), and *tin kam* (天禽).

Big B had learned about three different *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* schools in the past few years, while Terry had learned two. However, Big B had used only one of them consistently since then: was not the most accurate but the easiest to apply. However, this form of *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* is still 'powerful' enough to bring an immediate gain in fortune, or other change, to its practitioners and applicants. 'It is enough to acquire some insight into the other schools of *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* and to be able to distinguish between them,' Big B stated. Big B and Terry agreed that it is not helpful to apply more than one *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* technique for the same inquiry because the different divination permutations obtained sometimes contradict each other. Nowadays, Big B explained, clients expect divination masters to have encyclopedic knowledge. It is not uncommon for clients to visit different divination masters (using either the same or different divination techniques) with the same inquiry. Clients are familiar with the wide range of divination techniques available in the city, and some have even learned techniques themselves.

Big B was very experienced in and happy with the three divination techniques he employed to respond to his clients' inquiries. He was not interested in adding further techniques to his list. Nevertheless, he felt the need to continue learning about other techniques so that, if his clients wanted to discuss techniques other than those he used, he could explain the techniques and the differences between them. Big B's motives for continuing to learn about divination were client-centred. On one hand, he wanted to acquire more knowledge, and on the other hand, he wanted to engage more deeply with his clients.

Terry often complained that he was not as lucky as Big B, and wondered why. He thought that Big B managed to learn authentic divination techniques that accurately predict the future, and was jealous of Big B's ability to acquire these techniques cheaply. Terry had long been interested in *Taai Jyut San Sou*⁴² (太乙神數) but had not yet had an opportunity to learn it. He was once quoted a price for learning *Taai Jyut San Sou* from the same master who had taught Big B, and Terry's quotation was five times more than Big B had paid four years earlier. *Taai Jyut San Sou* is used to predict events, not on a personal level, but on a geographic level. It is mostly used to predict *dei wan*: the (in)auspiciousness that is likely to affect a geographical area (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1, the pyramidal model of forces affecting destiny).

In the *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* (玄空飛星) school of Fengshui divination, time is grouped into nine twenty-year periods, following the concept of *Saam Jyun Gau Wan* (三元九運, 'three eras and nine periods'). The idea behind the concept is that the auspiciousness of a physical space, whether a continent, a country, or an apartment, changes every twenty years due to the changing influence exerted by planetary movements. Each of the three eras covers three periods. The first era is called *Soeng Yun* (上元) and includes *Jat Wan* (一運), *Ji Wan* (二運), and *Saam Wan* (三運), respectively known as Periods One, Two, and Three. The second era is *Zung Yun* (中元), and consists of *Sei Wan* (四運), *Ng Wan* (五運), and *Luk Wan* (六運), known as Periods Four, Five, and Six. The last era is *Haa Yun*

⁴² *Taai Jyut San Sou*, *Kei Mun Deon Gaap*, and *Daai Luk Jam* are seen as the three classical and authentic Chinese divination techniques.

(下元), and is made up of *Cat Wan*/ Period Seven (七運), *Baat Wan*/ Period Eight (八運), and *Gau Wan*/ Period Nine (九運). Each era covers a sixty-year period and forms a full Sexagenary cycle. Three eras together last for one hundred and eighty years and cover all nine Periods before starting afresh.

The entire cosmos goes through the same changes of planetary influence in each period. From the Fengshui divination perspective, the planetary influence in each period is distinct. That influence governs events on Earth, such as whether there will be peace or war, and what kinds of industry will prosper. Our planet Earth has just been in Period Eight, which started in 2004 and lasted until the end of 2023. Period Eight signifies money, prosperity, and property. In Hong Kong and mainland China, many people became rich through property investment in the past two decades. In 2024 we entered Period Nine. The number nine has a *Ng hang* of fire. A Period of Fire sparks a period of war-fire.⁴³ As often reported by local newspapers and discussed among divination practitioners, the last Period Nine proved to be a time of war, pain, and uneasiness, especially in mainland China, which saw the outbreak of the Second Opium War and the subsequent burning of the Summer Palaces by Anglo-French forces.

As Period Nine approached (since 2022) we had already witnessed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and unprecedented tension in Sino-American relationships after the then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives,

⁴³ The number given to each period of the twenty-year Era carries a different meaning than that of the Flying Star number in Chapter 1. For example, the number nine itself has the *Ng hang* of fire: while this fire element means festivity and love in Flying Star, it denotes war in Period Nine.

Nancy Pelosi, visited Taiwan. Following massive quantitative easing by major central banks to stimulate economic growth in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the second half of 2022 brought a global economic crisis, with rocketing energy prices and inflation rates. Terry's desire to learn *Taai Jyut San Sou* had grown more intense in the past few years. He and other divination practitioners believed that the intensifying geopolitical tension, the global pandemic, and the economic uncertainty were forerunners of the hardship that the world would continue to experience in the forthcoming Period Nine. Fears that events like those of the previous Period Nine would repeat themselves were widespread, especially among divination practitioners. Terry said that, while Period Eight gave us a significant degree of social and economic stability and accumulation of wealth, Period Nine will be about food scarcity, and that food security will be our greatest concern. Terry feared the outbreak of a third world war involving China, given China's tense geopolitical relationships with other countries in the past few years, especially the USA. He wanted to use *Taai Jyut San Sou* to identify a safe place, in terms of both food supply and peace, to which his family could migrate in the event of such a war.

Dei wan exercises a vital influence on one's destiny, as shown in the emic, pyramidal representation of Fengshui divination practitioners's view of forces affecting destiny (see Chapter 1, Figure 1). Terry hoped that by learning *Taai Jyut San Sou* he would be able to improve his family's destiny by moving them to a safe place if war broke out in Hong Kong, China, or the Asian Pacific region in the coming Period Nine. While Big B's attitude of continuous divination learning is client-centred, Terry's

focus, like that of many other participants who do not rely on divination for a living, is self- or destiny-centred.

The foremost reason why Terry learned more than ten divination techniques over the past decade or more was to be able to read destiny better, or even to interfere with it. His curiosity and motivation for continuous learning were driven by his desire to find and master a technique which combines the best accuracy with the least possible *jip lik* impact when applied for other people (see the account of Terry's *jip lik* payback experience below). The reason why Terry has not used *Daai Luk Jam* to perform (Fengshui) divination is because, although the technique offers sixty-four basic outcomes, only four of these are auspicious. Terry was deterred by the extremely high possibility of producing an inauspicious outcome, which might later require corresponding Fengshui divination advice to alter the inauspiciousness, and therefore destiny. By using other techniques, which offer higher chances of an auspicious outcome, Terry wanted to reduce his chance of needing to change people's destinies via divination. All in all, Terry was especially interested in learning and understanding different Fengshui divination techniques because he believed they are valuable means of changing a person's destiny. He wanted to discover how to change someone's destiny with minimal *jip lik* payback.

Experiences of jip lik transfer

The more Terry has learned about divination and its various techniques, the better he understands how destiny and its underlying karmic mechanism work. In the past few years, Terry has reported experiencing heavy paybacks due to karmic credit transfers following his performance of Fengshui divination for other people. He told me: 'Karmic payback can be almost immediate: within an hour after I had done Fengshui divination for my client and been paid my consultation fee, I suffered a financial loss. You would not believe it unless you had experienced the suffering yourself.' Terry said that the onset of his bad luck so soon after performing Fengshui divination was evidence that his divination had worked, and that it helped his clients to receive more good fortune than was warranted by their *jip lik* scores. The improvement of his clients' destinies was facilitated by Terry's unwilling transfer of his own *jip lik* merit. He recalled a business trip to Cambodia to carry out Fengshui divination for a high-ranking local government officer who was in severe financial distress. Arriving back in Hong Kong, he left his backpack on the platform of the airport train station. Remembering the bag after he had boarded the train, he returned to the platform almost immediately, before the train departed, but the backpack was nowhere to be found. Terry was sure someone had taken it within that very short time. The Cambodian client told Terry a month later that his financial crisis was resolved, and he was looking to purchase another property as a holiday home. Terry was convinced that his Fengshui divination had been effective as soon as he lost his backpack,

even before the client's feedback. The client invited Terry back to Phnom Penh to examine the new property's fengshui: Terry turned him down.

Terry was furious. His anger was apparent whenever he recalled the incident, talking about karmic transfer and his loss following divination. Inside the lost backpack, as well as the few hundred US dollars in a red packet he had just received as his Fengshui divination fee, were his passport, Hong Kong identity card, credit cards, some cash, and his two Fengshui compasses. Not only had he ended up performing the Fengshui divination for no gain, since the fee in the red packet was lost, but he also had to purchase two new Fengshui compasses costing nearly 2,000 Hong Kong dollars each. Besides, he had been using the two compasses for years, ever since he started learning divination, and had a great sense of connection with them. In addition, he had to complete the complicated formalities of reapplying for his identity card, passport, and credit cards. Terry was most annoyed about his non-financial losses.

On another occasion, Terry almost lost his life in an explosion, which he sees as a consequence of saving his father's life after advising on the fengshui of his parents' apartment. At the end of 2017, Terry told his parents that the fengshui of their apartment was so inauspicious that it could even be fatal in the following two years. He advised them to move to another apartment to avoid the unfavourable *qi* for that period. According to Terry, his parents' apartment has an irremediable fengshui structural defect because of its shape. He explained that, as the floor plan showed, the north-west part is completely missing from, or 'carved out' of, what would

otherwise have been a regularly shaped space. In Hong Kong, hardly any apartments are fully rectangular or square. From the Fengshui divination perspective, the ideal physical space is square-shaped. Such a space can be divided into nine equal sections, in the positions of north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-west, west, north-west, and centre. A small section that is carved out of the space will do no great harm, but a big missing chunk is inauspicious.

The whole north-west corner space is carved out of Terry parents' apartment. In *Yijing* (whose Former Heaven Sequence is the basis of Chinese cosmology), the Later Heaven Sequence forms the foundation of many Chinese divination systems, including Fengshui divination. In the Later Heaven Sequence, the direction of north-west is represented by the trigram of *Qian* (乾).⁴⁴ The *yin yang* characterization of *Qian* is a father, or the oldest male figure in a household. From a fengshui perspective, an area missing from the north-west of a home symbolizes a problem concerning the father of the household. It can be inferred either that the father is absent or, if present, that he faces severe misfortune. Terry's parents had lived in their apartment for more than thirty years, and Terry was raised there. Terry's father had always worked as a long-distance lorry driver. He was often away from home when Terry was young, spending many nights in his lorry. Terry explained that his father working away from home was a relatively unharmed way of fulfilling the inauspicious fengshui 'symbols'. Had his father not spent so much time away from the apartment, the

⁴⁴ See Smith (2008) for details of the general attributions of trigrams in the Later Heaven Sequence of *Yijing*.

inauspiciousness might have been resulted in his parents' separation and his father moving out, or worse: in his father's death. After his father retired in 2013 and spent more time in the apartment, his health started to deteriorate. He was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes in 2014 and suffered kidney failure in 2015, requiring an urgent transplant.

Towards the end of 2017, Terry warned his parents that the fengshui of their apartment would be extremely inauspicious in 2018 and 2019.

Different schools of Fengshui divination apply different rules to determine the aspects or directions of (in)auspiciousness. In Chapter 1, I introduced one of the most commonly applied Fengshui divination rules,⁴⁵ the Flying Star.⁴⁶ However, Terry did not rely on the Flying Star to predict the calamitous fengshui of his parents' apartment. Diviners or divination participants in Hong Kong who have learnt divination themselves usually know more than one technique. Their choice of techniques to use is affected, not by the popularity of the technique, but by how comfortable and confident they feel when they apply it. Terry usually used his experience of the *jing kei* (應期, literally the 'realization date') to explore when predicted (auspicious or inauspicious) events would happen. *Jing kei*

⁴⁵ In general, Fengshui divination can be categorized into two main schools of thought: *Lyun Tau* (巒頭) and *Lei Hei* (理氣) which Feuchtwang [2002(1974)] called form and cosmology respectively. *Lyun Tau* examines how the external environment (mountains, water, road traffic, construction sites) can affect the auspiciousness of a space. *Lei Hei* analyses the auspiciousness of the space itself, according to the building, grave, or other site's design, orientation, and shape, when it was built, and how the yearly changing (in)auspicious *qi* interacts with the space. *Lei Hei* Fengshui divination involves a heavier calculation component than *Lyun Tau*; the two are based on different mechanisms for determining the (in)auspiciousness of a space. Although they can be applied as the same time to complement each other, the Fengshui diviners I met during my years of fieldwork use *Lei Hei* more than *Lyun Tau*. They explained that this is because Hong Kong is highly urbanized. *Lyun Tau* divination values natural scenery, such as mountains, rivers, and lakes: because such features are mostly absent from the city, and any views of such scenery tend to be blocked by other buildings, *Lei Hei* is more relevant in Hong Kong.

⁴⁶ Flying Star belongs to the *Lei Hei* Fengshui divination principle.

is an important skill for diviners. Fengshui divination can theoretically reveal when an event predicted by fengshui will happen. But different divination techniques can produce different *jing kei* predictions. Therefore, while it is important that the diviner can identify *which* promising or ill-fated events are going to happen, his divination skills will be much more highly rated if he can predict *when* they will happen, and who will suffer most. Although the carved out north-west corner of Terry parents' apartment was 'born to be' (i.e. inherent in the building's structure) and was therefore an irremediable fengshui defect, its harmful fengshui effect does not affect the family every year, nor all year round.

2018 was the year of *Mou Seot* (戊戌) and 2019 was the year of *Gei Hoi* (己亥). On a typical Fengshui compass, the 360 degrees are divided into eight sections, covering the directions of north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-west, west, and north-west. The directions are represented respectively by the trigrams: *Kan* (坎), *Gen* (艮), *Zhen* (震), *Xun* (巽), *Li* (離), *Kun* (坤), *Dui* (兌), and *Qian* (乾). Each trigram of forty-five degrees is subdivided into three *Saans* (山) of fifteen degrees, to enable the identification of a more precise direction. So a Fengshui compass has twenty-four *Saans*. The trigram of *Qian* contains the *Saans* of *Seot* (戌), *Qian* (乾), and *Hoi* (亥). Terry explained that the carved out north-west part of his parents' apartment (covered by the trigram of *Qian*) would be at its most inauspicious during the years of *Seot* and *Hoi*.⁴⁷ That

⁴⁷ *Qian* is not an Earthly Branch, but *Seot* and *Hoi* are two of the twelve Earthly Branches. There is no year of *Qian*, but there are years of *Seot* and *Hoi*, which are commonly known as the years of Dog and Pig respectively.

is, misfortune was most likely happen to the father in those two years. On the other hand, if the north-west area of a space were designed auspiciously from a fengshui perspective, the father would enjoy two highly fortunate years.

All Fengshui divination, of whatever school or technique, holds that the flow of *qi* from the external to the internal environment governs the good or bad fengshui of a physical space. This is how a person's destiny is affected by the fengshui of the environment linked to them via the transformation of *qi* (see Chapter 1). The rotating Sexagenary Cycle and Flying Star pattern reveal the yearly changing directions of (in)auspiciousness; this exemplifies Homola's (2018) concept of *yun* (see Chapter 1) according to which the extent of a person's luck depends on the events, circumstances, and contingencies they encounter across time and space. Homola referred merely to physical space, without assigning any notion of auspiciousness (fengshui) to the space itself, since her focus was on how *ming* and *yun* are captured in the language of fate. Nevertheless, the Fengshui practitioners I met in Hong Kong also regard the yearly changing fengshui of spaces as a factor that can affect their *yun* (see Chapter 1). Locally, as in other Chinese communities in China and elsewhere (as briefly mentioned in Chapter 1) this annually changing *yun* is called *lau nin*. *Lau nin* refers to the unique degree of (in)auspiciousness which a person will enjoy, determined by the interaction between their horoscopic pattern and/or the fengshui of the spaces they use and the *qi* during that specific year. The term equally describes the (in)auspiciousness of *qi*, and therefore the fengshui of a physical space, during the year. So, as

lau nin varies, a person or a place faces a different degree of (in)auspiciousness every year. It is worth noting that, while the *lau nin* of a space (its fengshui) can affect the *lau nin* of a person, the reverse does not apply (see Chapter 1, Figure 1, on forces affecting destiny).

As explained above, Terry discovered that the *lau nin* of his parents' apartment was extremely inauspicious and could even have been fatal for his father in 2018 and 2019. At the end of 2017, Terry warned his parents about this disastrous fengshui. He suggested that they move elsewhere for two years to escape the unfavourable *qi* of their apartment. However, his parents had lived in their apartment for over thirty years and did not think they would feel at home anywhere else. They did not follow Terry's suggestion.

The reason why Terry asked his parents to move out, instead of relying on Fengshui divination to rearrange their flat to prevent the calamity, was that, earlier in 2014, when his father was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, Terry had used Fengshui divination to arrange the apartment as far as possible to counter the fengshui structural defect of the 'carved out' north-west part of the apartment. However, this had not prevented the bad *qi* from affecting his father. In May 2015, his father's diabetes led to kidney failure, and he urgently needed a transplant. There were waiting lists for kidney transplants of several years at both private and public hospitals in Hong Kong. His father eventually had a transplant in Guangzhou, south-east China; this cost nearly all of his parents' savings. The financial and emotional tolls of this medical emergency were enormous. Terry was then

working as an estate agent. He resigned his job and stayed in Guangzhou for some months to help care for his father. Terry felt that the fengshui arrangements he had made in the apartment had not been strong enough to divert the bad *qi*, and that this was why his father was still being affected by it. Given this unsuccessful Fengshui divination experience, Terry did not want to endanger his father's life again in 2018. What if Fengshui divination were unsuccessful again? That was why he asked his parents to move into another place for two years.

In March 2018, his father had a mini stroke, which left his face paralyzed for about two weeks. Terry warned his parents again that the bad *qi* of the apartment would accumulate, reaching a peak in October or November, the months of *Seot* and *Hoi*. He again suggested that they move into another apartment. His mother had second thoughts this time, although his father still insisted they should stay in their apartment. Terry and his mother started property hunting, and viewed six apartments for rent through a local estate agency. Terry examined each of them using his Fengshui compass, but was not happy with the fengshui for the year 2018 in any of them. His mother did not like any of them either, finding the newly built apartments less spacious than her own, even though they were of a similar size. Besides, although they could afford to pay an additional monthly rent, they felt that this expense was unnecessary as they had their own apartment. She refused to view any more properties, and decided they would not move out of their apartment.

Terry was upset, but there was nothing he could do. He inferred that his father must have a heavy *jip lik* debt. Although his father's work had involved nothing immoral or criminal, Terry said one could never know what one's ancestors had done. Terry's paternal grandparents died when his father was five years old. His father was raised in China by his sister who was three years old older than him, but she drowned when she was eighteen years old. Terry's grandfather had been the largest landlord in the village where the family lived, but the family lost all ownership rights during the civil war in China in the 1930s and '40s. Having few or no descendants, and losing one's family heritage, are believed to result from a heavy *jip lik* debt of one's family or lineage. The force behind the *jip lik* mechanism keeps a tally of each person's *jip lik* score, including elements inherited from their ancestors' past lives, and it punishes people for changing their destinies. Terry said his father's heavy karmic debt explained why his parents would not agree to his repeated suggestions that they move home, and why they could not find a flat which was acceptable both to his mother and from the fengshui perspective for 2018. The cosmic force is immutable, and if a diviner reads and interferes with someone's destiny, the diviner will pay his own karmic cost.

In early August 2018, Terry's father suffered a serious stroke while flying back to Hong Kong after a vacation in Europe. He was hospitalized for almost two months; the left-hand side of his body was paralysed, and he could walk only with crutches. Before his father was discharged from the hospital in late September, Terry asked his mother not to go back to live in their apartment because its fengshui (*qi*) would only worsen his father's

health or bring further calamity. Terry's mother then decided to move out of her old apartment. She regretted not taking Terry's advice earlier, and wanted to prevent the bad *qi* of the flat from further affecting her husband's health. However, the bad fengshui of their home was not the only reason why she wanted to move into a new apartment. Terry's father needed someone to help him walk, and the corridors in their apartment block were too narrow for two people to walk side by side. Besides, Terry's father would have to attend physiotherapy sessions three times a week, and there was no direct transport from the apartment to the hospital. Terry's mother wanted to move closer to the hospital, so she could take Terry's father to rehabilitation sessions more easily.

Terry's mother asked Terry to go property hunting with her again. She wanted to live near the hospital, and in a newly built apartment block because their lobbies, corridors, and elevators are usually more spacious than those in older buildings. Terry's father could only walk for a short distance. It was highly likely that he would need a wheelchair to go out, at least until he recovered, and spacious common areas would be more wheelchair-friendly. Terry's mother favoured an apartment in a block right next to the hospital. Terry warned her that its fengshui was inauspicious because its *qi* was affected by the hospital. From a *Lyun Tau* fengshui perspective, numerous people pass away in the hospital every day, creating an enormous amount of *fui gau zi hei* (悔疚之氣, literally the *qi* of regret and guilt) which is particularly harmful to health. These *fui gau zi hei*, in turn, would flow into and affect the fengshui of surrounding buildings, including the apartment in question. However, the inauspicious *fui gau zi*

hei did not prevent Terry's mother from investigating further, and she insisted on viewing the available apartments. In the event, the flats available were too small for Terry's parents.

Terry's mother then looked at three other apartment blocks in the area, this time favouring the block with the most spacious lobby (block B). Although Terry examined the fengshui of each block, he did not comment further. Because his parents had refused to take his earlier advice, and his mother had insisted on viewing the apartment block affected by *fui gau zi hei*, he realized that his mother's decision would not be based solely on the fengshui of the flats. He believed that if a bigger apartment had been available in the block near the hospital, his mother would already have rented it. He found it incomprehensible that his parents had not learned a lesson from the bad fengshui of their own apartment but continued to select a home according to their own preferences. Terry's mother viewed the three flats available in block B, and asked Terry to perform Fengshui divination for each of them.

*Jyun Hung Fei Sing*⁴⁸ is a school of Fengshui divination which examines the auspiciousness of a physical space, such as a building block or grave, according to its geographical orientation and the year when it was built. Following a *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* examination, the physical space is assigned a Fengshui divination (Star) permutation. This permutation shows whether or not the space has good long-term fengshui.⁴⁹ The *Jyun Hung*

⁴⁸ *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* is the *Lei Hei* school of Fengshui divination (see footnote 45).

⁴⁹ The auspiciousness of a space varies every year, that is its *lau nin*. The *lau nin* of a space results from the interaction between its *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation and the annually changing Flying Star permutation. If a space has a very

Fei Sing Fengshui divination permutation is similar to the Flying Star permutation, with a big grid divided into nine directional sections (see Chapter 1, Figures 3 and 4, for examples of Flying Star permutations).⁵⁰ In fact, *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* and Flying Star share the same foundational principle to evaluate (in)auspiciousness of space. Some diviners explained to me that Flying Star is part of the *Jyun Hung Fei Sing*, but ‘extracted’ out and used independently. This is supported by the fact that the Chinese words for Flying Star, 飛星 (*fei sing*), is the same as the last two words of the Chinese term of *Jyun Hung Fei Sing*, 玄空飛星.

Each directional section of the grid in the *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination (Star) permutation contains three numbers (see Figure 11 below). It is unlike the Flying Star permutation in which each directional section of the grid has only one number, which represents the type of (in)auspiciousness each direction will enjoy or suffer during the year. In the *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* permutation, the Star number on the upper left-hand side of the directional section is called *saan sing* (山星) while the Star number on the upper right-hand side is *hoeng sing* (向星). *Sing* (星) is the Chinese word for Star. In Chinese society, ‘prosperity’ refers not only to wealth, but also to having numerous offspring. *Saan sing* reflects the

auspicious *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation then, even in a year when its interaction with the Flying Star permutation is calamitous, the overall inauspiciousness is still limited. On the other hand, if a place has a very inauspicious *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation, if in a particular year its interaction with the Flying Star permutation is inauspicious, this would result in a much worse outcome. The *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation determines the auspiciousness of a space; its fengshui effect is long-term. The fengshui effect of its interaction with the Flying Star permutation, however, is short-term.

⁵⁰ *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* could be applied together with the Flying Star to determine the auspiciousness of a space in each year (see Figure 13 in Chapter 4). Nevertheless, throughout my fieldwork, I often saw diviners using the Flying Star alone as tool to divine the *lau nin* auspiciousness of a space.

‘strength’ of the space to produce progeny and maintain good health.

Hoeng sing, in turn, reflects the likelihood of financial, academic, or career success: it shows the quality of the lives of people using the space. The Star number at the bottom of each directional section is the featured star assigned to each direction according to the twenty-year Period to which the Fengshui divination permutation belongs. For example, the Fengshui divination permutation in Figure 11 belongs to Period Eight. Hence, the number eight is in the central directional section and signals that it is the permutation that belongs to Period Eight. When examining the auspiciousness of the inherited fengshui of a space vis its Fengshui divination permutation, diviners usually study only the corresponding Star numbers of *saan sing* and *hoeng sing* and omit the Star number at the bottom in each directional section.

Figure 11: 八運寅山申向兼甲庚 (*Baat Wan Jan Saan San Hoeng Him Gaao Gang*):⁵¹ The *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation of apartment block B.

9 4 7	5 9 3	7 2 5
8 3 6	1 5 8	3 7 1
4 8 2	6 1 4	2 6 9



Terry applied *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* to examine the auspiciousness and suitability of the three flats in apartment block B. Two (X and Y) were two-bedrooms flats and the third (Z) had three bedrooms. Terry explained that unit X would be the most auspicious in terms of health and recovery, while the fengshui of units Y and Z was not conducive to good health. This was because one of the bedrooms in unit X was located to the east, so had the number 8 as its *saan sing* (see Figure 11). In Period Eight, between 2004 and 2023, the *saan sing* number 8 and the *hoeng sing* number 8 are the two most important ‘stars’ determining the prosperity attributable to a space. *Saan sing* number 8 being located in a bedroom would bring *qi* that was beneficial for both offspring and good health. If Terry’s father slept in

⁵¹ Every *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation is named according to the twenty-year Period in which the building was constructed and its orientation, based on the entrance through which *qi* flowed into the building.

that bedroom in unit X, it would help to restore his mobility. However, Terry's mother picked unit Z, the largest of the three flats.

Terry told his mother that the entrance to flat Z was located on its south-east side. According to *Jyun Hung Fei Sing*, in Period Eight an apartment with *saan sing* number 8 located at its entrance would be extremely harmful to residents' health. *Saan sing* would be best located in a 'static' area, such as a bedroom, while *hoeng sing* would bring the most auspicious *qi* if located in an area associated with movement, such as the entrance. Although Period Nine had not yet started, its *qi* would slowly grow and permeate all spaces. That is, the hidden stars *saan sing* number 9 and *hoeng sing* number 9 had to be considered even in the lead-up to Period 9. Terry explained that the entrance to flat Z was associated with *saan sing* number 9. Although it would not bring any calamitous *qi* until 2024, Terry feared that it would not help his father's recovery and might even damage his health. Terry's mother, however, disregarded this significant piece of Fengshui divination advice. She wanted Terry and his wife to move into the flat with her and his father, so that if anything else happened to Terry's father they would be there to help. She told Terry that a two-bedroom flat it would be too small to accommodate two additional people. That was why she picked unit Z.

Terry's mother's decision clearly demonstrates that she was more influenced by her personal preferences than by the Fengshui divination advice. I visited Terry's mother after they moved into the new flat, and asked why she had not followed the Fengshui divination advice to pick unit

X. She said that Terry's father required assistance to walk, and a bigger home not only allowed her to help him more easily, but also provided more space for him to exercise at home. She added that Terry's father was sad after being half paralysed. She thought the bigger flat was more comfortable and a better living environment for him, hoping that it would raise his spirits. In September 2022, I visited Terry's parents, who were still living in flat Z. Terry's father was no better than when he had left hospital four years earlier. In fact, his mobility had worsened: he could not walk fifty steps, and needed a wheelchair to go out. On some days he could not walk at all, but could only lie on his bed all day. Terry commented that if they had picked unit X in the first place, his father would have better mobility than he did now, but Terry's mother said that the reason why he had not recovered was his failure to practise walking.

Terry's mother has a long history of consulting divination, and is a committed divination practitioner. Before Terry started to learn divination, she had consulted the same diviner for a decade for various types of divination. After Terry learned divination, she started consulting him instead. In fact, her previous diviner had commented, when Terry was still a teenager, that his eight characters horoscope showed he was destined to work as a diviner in future. Terry's mother had been aware of the risks posed by the bad fengshui of their apartment even before her husband's stroke. However, their desire to remain in their long-term home outweighed the potential risk. Terry's parents' decision not to follow Terry's advice was not because they did not believe that their apartment had inauspicious fengshui, nor because they did not trust the divination, but

because they prioritized other factors over concerns about the fengshui of their flat.

After her husband's stroke, Terry's mother asked Terry to perform Fengshui divination again. She was concerned about the fengshui of their home and wanted to avoid further calamity. Despite the outcome of the Fengshui divination, she eventually picked apartment block B, because it had a spacious lobby and flat Z was a bigger apartment. The divination had clearly shown that the fengshui or *qi* of the smaller apartment X would help Terry's father's recovery, while that of the bigger apartment Z, on the contrary, might further endanger his health. But again, her personal preferences and practical factors outweighed the risk suggested by the apartment's fengshui. Throughout my research, I witnessed many cases in which divination practitioners, like Terry's parents, did not follow divination advice. No one follows such advice unconditionally, no matter how committed they are to divination. See Chapters 6 and 7 for a discussion of how preference and/ or practicality affect adherence to divination advice.

While Terry still believed that his father's heavy *jip lik* debt had stopped his mother from picking an apartment whose fengshui would help his father's recovery, Terry did not know that his own *jip lik* payback was awaiting him. He was well aware of the 'exchange' rule of the *jip lik* mechanism. But when payback strikes, it strikes without warning. He thought that his father's stroke was caused by the poor fengshui of his flat, which in turn was the result of his heavy *jip lik* debt, and that all these

factors were determined in the cosmic realm. That was why his parents did not follow his advice. However, Terry did not know that his father's two strokes were *not yet* the punishment for his heavy *jip lik* burden. Neither was he aware that, by repeatedly telling his parents to move out of their long-term apartment, and by their eventually moving into apartment block B when his father left hospital, he had changed his father's life trajectory.

By coincidence, the tenancy of Terry and his wife's home was due to run out in late September 2018. They decided to move into flat Z with Terry's parents. It was unfurnished, and on the day they moved in, they bought a bed for his father and decided to furnish the rest of the flat slowly. Terry and his wife spent a few days looking for a removal company; they packed and moved everything from their own and Terry parents' apartments into the new flat, and shopped for new furniture. Terry's mother was his father's key carer. She slept on the floor until the new beds arrived. She asked Terry and his wife to stay in her old apartment until the new beds were delivered. The couple spent their days in flat Z, returning to Terry parents' previous apartment only to sleep. The beds were delivered after two weeks, and the younger couple then moved into flat Z.

On her way home from work, two days after they moved into flat Z, Terry's wife received a telephone call saying that Terry had been involved in an explosion and was now in hospital. The hospital asked her to come immediately, but hung up before she could ask for further details. At the hospital she waited outside the emergency department. She remembered how shocked she was when she saw Terry on a hospital bed with both of

his arms and his left foot in bandages: 'he was half dead on the bed and could barely talk'. The situation was harrowing.

Terry's wife has a photograph of Terry on his first night in hospital. His face was burned; it was red, blackened, charred, and blistered. Twenty-eight per cent of Terry's skin had suffered second-degree burns and thirty-nine per cent third-degree burns. As well as the injuries, the treatment was also painful. He had a hard time during his six weeks in hospital. His skin was debrided every day by cleaning and removing all hyperkeratotic, infected, and dead skin. The pain of this was unbearable, and Terry was given daily morphine injections for a week, despite the known side effects of the drug. Terry's wife was terrified when she heard Terry screaming in the treatment room. Terry even told her that he had considered committing suicide because he could not bear the pain. Terry's suffering, however, had not yet ended. After a week of debridement, the doctor said the wound on his left foot, the most badly burned section, was not recovering well. He would require a skin graft: surgical excision of healthy skin from an unaffected area of the body, and transplantation into the burned area which could not heal itself. Terry finally went home after weeks of treatment at the hospital, with scars on his face, both arms and hands, and his foot. The scarring is still visible four years later, although much faded.

After two weeks in hospital, as Terry started to recover, he began to ponder over the accident. I visited him in hospital and asked what had happened. He said that he was in his parents' old apartment, cooking instant noodles on an induction hob, when the metal pan caught fire. The

pan exploded, and burning debris was blasted onto his body. First it hit his face and arms, he shook it off and it fell onto his left foot. This time he was not able to shake it off immediately, which was why his foot suffered the worst burns. Terry's body and the pan were the only items that were burned: nothing else in the kitchen had caught fire. The fire went out after it had burned Terry's foot. Firemen later checked the kitchen and found everything to be perfectly safe. They also found it surprising that a pan on an induction hob would catch fire. Looking back, Terry described the whole incident as 'mystical', and could find no explanation of why it happened.

Terry explained that he had been in the new flat Z, unpacking and tidying away his belongings. His mother was out seeing a friend and had left her mobile phone in flat Z. She called Terry, using her friend's phone, and asked him to bring her mobile phone to her in her old apartment. Terry did so, but his mother was not there. He waited for nearly an hour and started feeling hungry. He had left the new flat at noon and not yet had lunch. He found a pack of instant noodles in the kitchen and started cooking. Then the explosion happened. On one hand, he felt lucky that his mother arrived immediately after the explosion, otherwise he might not have got to the hospital in time. His mother helped to cool his burns under running water before the ambulance arrived, which prevented the wound from being worse. But on the other hand, he felt that the whole incident, starting with his mother's forgotten mobile phone, was a cosmic ploy to lure him back into the old apartment.

Terry had some questions that could not be answered. First, why it was him who went back to the old apartment? Usually, if Terry's mother needed someone to run an errand, she would ask her domestic helper. He puzzled about why his mother had asked him to bring the phone and not the domestic helper. Second, why was he cooking at that time? He had thought about going out to get takeaway, as there was no food left in the kitchen except these plain noodles. But his mother had no mobile phone with her, and if she came back while he was out they would miss each other. He felt he was destined to have this accident: 'it seems I was called in to suffer the explosion'. However hard Terry tried, he could not understand how the pan had caught fire. In frustration he asked: 'I was not cooking with gas, how was it possible that there was a fire? And if it was hot enough to cause second- and third-degree burns, how was it possible for the fire to burn itself out?'

Eventually Terry considered these facts from the perspective of a *jip lik* exchange: was his accident a consequence of interfering his father's destiny? This explanation answered all his questions. His accident happened in November. He recalled the outcome of his Fengshui divination for his parents' apartment: that the worst would happen between October and November when the most inauspicious *qi* occurred. He had misread his father's second stroke and paralysis as the predestined consequence of his father's heavy *jip lik* debt which had come earlier than expected. He foresaw that something bad would happen to his father if he continued residing in the old apartment. He estimated the *jing kei* of the calamity. However, without knowing the precise cosmic arrangement, and

at best only guessing what would happen, no one, not even a diviner as experienced and skilled as Terry, could be sure if the severe stroke was all the old man's predetermined punishment. Hence, Terry had supposed that his father's punishment had arrived early because of his parents' failure to move out of their apartment. He did not realize that his *jing kei* prediction for October and November was in fact all too accurate.

Terry's *jip lik* payback, and how the explosion happened, can be understood in two steps. First: by repeatedly advising his parents to move out of their old apartment, and by their actually moving into the new apartment, Terry *proactively* helped his father to avoid the calamitous accident that was to happen in November. From the *jip lik* point of view, Terry, even as the son of his father, was morally responsible for interfering with his father's destiny and violating the cosmic plan. His father's *jip lik* debt had therefore been transferred to Terry, both to punish Terry's intervention and to restore cosmic and karmic balance. Secondly: the carved out north-west section of the apartment brings harmful *qi* to the father of the household. His parents having moved out of the apartment, Terry and his wife, by staying there for two weeks, had become the new householders of the unit, and Terry had become the new father of the household. That was why, when the bad *qi* struck in November, it was he who was adversely affected by the accident.

Terry explained that there is no protection against punishment for a *jip lik* debt. The penalty is only avoidable if the karmic debt is transferred to another person, who then suffers on behalf of transferor. Terry accepted

that his accident was the consequence of him advising his parents to move out of the apartment. He said that, even if he had not been living temporarily in the flat and had not been struck by its bad fengshui *qi*, his payback would still have happened in another form. In fact, Terry saw the *jip lip* transfer mechanism as the *only* possible reason why his accident had happened, because he had read his own eight characters horoscope and horoscopic patterns from other divination techniques many times, and none of these had suggested that he would experience such a disastrous incident. Terry told me about similar *jip lik* transfers and suffering among his divination practitioner friends. One had performed Fengshui divination and healed a cancer patient and then suffered haematochezia (the passage of fresh blood with stools) for three months. One of the masters from whom Terry learnt Fengshui divination had helped a barren couple to become fertile, and two days after their baby was born, the master awoke to find his bed sheet covered in blood. He did not know that he had had a severe nosebleed during the night. Terry said it could not be coincidence that, whenever a client underwent a positive life change following a (Fengshui) divination, then the diviner had a rough time.

The diviner, as an interferer with destiny, may sacrifice his own *jip lik* merit by helping the client to gain something the client desires (such as wealth, health, love, or offspring). However, neither diviner nor client knows whether that gain is permitted by the cosmic realm. That is why, in the view of both diviners and clients, divination consultation can never be provided without some form of compensation. Diviners are reluctant to give free divination consultations except in cases where they feel morally

obliged, for example for family members or people who are in need (see ethnography in Chapter 5). Clients are willing to pay in order to receive the maximum possible benefit from divination. It is essential that the diviner feels sufficiently rewarded, not only for ‘selling’ their fate-changing divination skills, but also for the cost to their own *jip lik* merit. That is why highly reputed Hong Kong diviners normally command a higher consultation fee. The monetary reward must compensate for the diviner’s potential receipt of the client’s karmic debt. It is clear that the exchange is two-fold. On the surface, it is simply a contract for professional divination services, but the fee in fact reflects the transfer to the client of the diviner’s *jip lik* merit as well as the client’s increased luck and change of destiny.

The *jip lik* transfer embedded in the diviner-client relationship involves complex calculations which are cosmically determined and unknowable by humans. Terry’s lost bag was an exchange for the financial gain of the Cambodian government officer, and his accident gave a ‘second life’ to his father. The client’s financial gain led to the diviner’s financial loss; and the damage to Terry’s health counter-balanced an improvement in his father’s health. (See also Chapter 6 on Betty’s miscarriage following her Fengshui divination to cure someone else’s cancer.) Following divination, while the diviner’s loss and the client’s gain are usually similar in kind, the magnitude of each is unpredictable and incomprehensible. Terry estimated the financial cost due to the loss of his backpack and its contents at about 15,000 Hong Kong dollars. He said: ‘No one would ever sacrifice 15,000 Hong Kong dollars so that someone else could make enough money to buy a holiday house. That would not be fair. Of course, I

want my Fengshui to work for him, and for all my clients. All I got was a small red packet. I did not get to share his gain.'

In economic game theory, a zero-sum game refers to a situation in which the gain of one party is equivalent to the loss of the other. It implies that, first, the gain or loss is calculable, and secondly, that the sum of the gain or loss is always constant. While the *jip lik* mechanism might sound similar in nature to a zero-sum game, in fact it only partly resembles the latter. Upon interfering with the client's destiny positively, the client's gain of karmic credit is facilitated and supported by the transfer, and therefore the loss, of karmic credit of the diviner. That is, as with the zero-sum game, the gain of one the client is countered by the loss of the diviner. However, the two mechanisms are different in that the magnitudes of *jip lik* merit transferred or received is unknown, and the extent of the subsequent gain and loss might be unequal, as well as being incalculable.

While the client's gain and the diviner's loss are usually similar in *kind*, it is hard to measure their *extent*: for example, how much deterioration in the diviner's health is needed to support a certain level of improvement in the client's health. This is unlike the zero-sum game, in which one party's gain by is exactly matched by the loss of the other party. Besides, according to my informants' accounts, what makes the *jip lik* mechanism distinct is that it is not known whether the amount of karmic credit transferred from the diviner is equal to the increase in merit in the client's karmic tally. That is, different extents of gain and loss by diviner and client might be facilitated by an unequal transfer/ receipt of *jip lik*

merit, assuming that every unit of *jip lik* credit/ debt means the same to everyone and that everything happening in life is guided by a unique level of *jip lik* credit/ debt. For example, if someone had attained a tally of one hundred *jip lik* credits in this life, they might be destined to become a manager at work or to earn HKD 30,000 a month. In this theoretical calculation of cosmic tallying, a loss of one *jip lik* credit by the diviner might lead to the client gaining one hundred *jip lik* credits. On the other hand, it is probable that the *jip lik* merit transferred by the diviner and received by the client will be equal. However, the extent of gain and loss which each experiences might be different because each inherited at birth a unique *jip lik* tally and ability to ‘buffer’ karmic debt. Diviners might have a greater ability than the client to buffer, to absorb and convert, a client’s *jip lik* debt: the ethnography in Chapter 5 shows how diviners always show good virtues to help and this helps them to build up their *jip lik* debt ‘buffering’ system. Either way, the *jip lik* mechanism is not a simple ‘zero-sum’ game since the karmic credit transferred (lost) by the diviner, and that received (gained) by the client are unpredictable and incalculable.

In recent years, the more Terry performed Fengshui divination for clients, the more he came to believe that his role is that of a facilitator who helps others to change their destinies. Terry believed that he suffered some *jip lik* payback every other time he saw clients, and was often very upset by it. The *jip lik* exchange rule requires a loss for every undeserved gain, and the loss always accrues to the diviner. In this sense, working as a diviner is an extremely perilous career. However, the fact that the extent of the suffering is incalculably irregular kept Terry in the profession, even after

his severe burns. He said that half of the time he walked away safely after divining for clients, with the consultation money in his pocket and negligible suffering. Everyone's *jip lik* score is unknown. The diviner cannot know how much *jip lik* merit is left for him to continue taking the risks involved in divination, nor does he know whether clients have such good *jip lik* scores that they deserve to acquire luck via divination. The diviner never knows if he was destined to be found by the client because the client possessed adequate karmic credit entitling them to a boost of luck, or because the diviner needed to transfer some of his karmic credit to enhance the client's destiny.

Chapter 4: Ethical evaluation before divination

Terry was well aware of the principles of the *jip lik* karmic mechanism and the ambiguous underlying exchange process. He prepared himself psychologically to confront suffering every time he performed divination for other people. For each consultation, he carefully evaluated the extent to which he should help the client to improve their fortune, in order to minimize the *jip lik* debt that he would receive; at worst, this sometimes resulted in him not accepting to divine for the client at all. Because a client's cosmically determined karmic level is unknowable, Terry evaluated it primarily by reference to objective factors, such as the client's and their family's circumstances: for example the medical history and careers of the client and their (grand)parents or ancestors, and the wealth and number of their descendants. The client's eight characters horoscopic sign, and the fengshui of their home or office space, provide further guidance for estimating their karmic score.

Terry explained if someone had a family history of cancer, affecting at least one relative in each generation, he would conclude that the putative client and their ancestors had accumulated a heavy *jip lik* debt which was causing the descendants' suffering. Terry said he had seen many clients from families with a history of cancer whose ancestors had worked as fishermen or butchers. From the karmic point of view, killing is a sin, even if required by one's trade. However, most people in these occupations do not know this karmic rule, nor that they were accumulating a very heavy

karmic debt for themselves and their descendants. In Terry's eyes, not only cancer but also other serious and chronic diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, were evidence that the sufferers had heavy *jip lik* debts. As noted in Chapter 3 in relation to Terry's father, having few descendants and losing one's family heritage are also considered to result from the family's large *jip lik* debt. The fact that Terry's father grew up in poverty in the sole care of his elder sister, and was later orphaned, was seen by Terry to be the result of a heavy *jip lik* debt inherited by his father from his paternal ancestors. That is why Terry was extra careful when performing divination for others: he did not want to increase his own and his descendants' *jip lik* debt.

Terry refused to perform divination for clients or friends if he sensed that they might have a significant karmic debt: he feared the adverse consequences of interfering with their destinies. That was why he refused the Cambodian government officer's invitation to return to Phnom Penh: Terry had suffered from *jip lik* payback and perceived that this official did not have a good *jip lik* score. The official's high position in local government led Terry mistakenly to believe that the former's karmic credit would be supportive of both his career and financial prosperity. No one, however skilled in divination, can precisely estimate a person's *jip lik* score. The best that any diviner can do is to evaluate how life has treated their clients, according to objective criteria, including those listed above, in order to estimate the extent of their karmic debt. Someone with a healthy and happy family, who is making good progress in their relationships and career, even they are not financially well off, is seen as likely to have a

relatively positive karmic score, so that advising them involves less risk for a diviner. Diviners' fear of accumulating *jip lik* payback strongly influences their decisions about whether to carry out divination for clients' specific enquiries. As I show below, anticipation of *jip lik* payback leads diviners both to set and constantly to review the boundaries of what they can and cannot do with divination, and therefore to adjust the services they are prepared to provide for clients.

While *jip lik* estimation is an important factor for diviners when deciding whether to accept a client, diviners sometimes turn down a job immediately if they know that the client has committed acts which they consider morally unacceptable. Diviner Peter, whom I met during my fieldwork, told me that a client once asked him to perform Fengshui divination in order to help the client's defence against a rape charge. Peter said that he was neither judge nor jury, and so was not bound by the legal principle of the presumption of innocence, but that he was entitled to his own view. Believing the client to be guilty, Peter refused to provide Fengshui divination to help the client defeat the criminal charge because this would have risked increasing the *jip lik* debt on Peter's own karmic account. As I show in the ethnographic details below, the diviner's own ethical and moral code is another significant factor in his choice of whether to accept the client, and the level of service to provide. More importantly, this ethical evaluation includes consideration of the *jip lik* transfer mechanism. Performing divination for an immoral or unethical purpose exacerbates the diviner's karmic debt, because divination that lessens the consequences of illegal or immoral deeds for the client causes that karmic

debt to be transferred to the diviner. Interestingly, diviners sometimes perform divination despite knowing that this might incur a *jip lik* payback, for example out of family obligation, such as Terry's Fengshui divination advice for his father, or if they believe that the client's cause is righteous (for example, to alleviate undeserved poverty). *Jip lik* estimation and personal ethics are the two main factors in a diviner's choice about whether to provide divination and about the level of their disclosure or advice to the client.

There is an unspoken principle, shared by all diviners, that if a diviner agrees to perform divination for a client then the diviner is ethically obliged to provide faithful divination: untruthful divination is morally culpable and can itself incur a *jip lik* debt for the diviner. While diviners do not swindle their clients, they do control the level of disclosure of information obtained from divination, and the advice they give. On one hand, given the potential karmic transfer and suffering that follow unmerited life changes for clients after divination, diviners are morally responsible not to violate the cosmic rule by interfering with someone's karmic condition. On the other hand, diviners are also liable for their own destinies and karmic credits. They try to avoid increasing their karmic debt, whose consequences might affect not only themselves but also their descendants. For this reason diviners usually disclose only a limited amount of destiny-related information to new clients. However, they sometimes exercise virtue by voluntarily assuming an increased *jip lik* debt in order to help a client whom they deem worthy of that help (see Chapter 5). Performing divination for others thus requires diviners to calculate the

extent of divination advice to provide, while balancing this against the risk of assuming their clients' karmic debts. Careful evaluation by the diviner is therefore essential before deciding whether to fulfil a client's request. If a diviner believes, after a preliminary assessment, that he would assume the client's *jip lik* debt, and is not prepared to do so, then he will choose not to meet the client's request for divination.

Adjustment and avoidance of divination interference

I have been taught several different divination techniques since I started researching divination in Hong Kong in 2016, but even after all these years I have not mastered any of them. Although I know their fundamental principles, I cannot apply them to perform proper divination, except for the Chinese *I-Ching* tarot. This uses a set of sixty-four cards, each with a picture representing a different hexagram, and requires the diviner only to interpret the pictures on the cards to arrive at the correct prediction. I have seen many beginner-level divination learners pick up and apply other techniques very quickly, within just a few months: I am just not like them. Nevertheless, when I observed consultation sessions I could usually understand why the diviner gave their advice. However, when I shadowed Terry's Fengshui divination for his client, Janet, in January 2022 I was surprised by the advice he gave her about the Fengshui arrangements for her south-facing balcony.

Terry first met Janet at the end of 2020, when he was recommended to her by a mutual friend who knew she was looking for a trustworthy

Fengshui divination master. When a new client requests Fengshui divination, Terry always asks for the client's exact time of birth and the address for which they want the divination. Then he examines the client's horoscopic sign, usually via Eight Characters divination, to get an overall picture of the kind of person the client is, and what their life was or will be like, in order to make a preliminary judgement about whether they are a good or a bad person. A person's eight characters horoscope reveals some of their basic features. For example, what will they look like in later life? Will they have children, and if so of what sex? Are they in good health? It also reveals personality traits: is the client talkative, easily angered, selfish, or ruthless? However, no diviner can know from these seemingly negative personality traits whether a client has committed bad deeds. A ruthless person can be a law-abiding and moral citizen. At most, a diviner could discover whether someone has, for example, had an adulterous affair. Nevertheless, these 'readable' personal characteristics provide some information to help the diviner assess the likelihood of receiving some *jip lik* debt from the client.

The fengshui of a person's residence also provides clues about whether they have been experiencing a thriving or a deteriorating life. The extent of success or failure, as indicated or caused by the fengshui *qi* of a person's living environment, is a trustworthy indicator of their *jip lik* level. It is generally held that if someone can find a highly auspicious apartment to live in, then their *jip lik* score in this life cannot involve too much karmic liability. The extent of fengshui auspiciousness indicated by the Fengshui divination permutation of a building block is largely determined by its

orientation, that is, which direction the building faces. Both the complex street plan and the unconventional architecture in Hong Kong mean that the orientation of one building is often very different from that of another, even from that of a neighbouring building.

In Period Eight, the school of *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* holds that the most auspicious fengshui will prevail for buildings (if built between 2004 and 2023⁵²) with the Fengshui divination (Star) permutation of *Dou Saan Dou Hoeng* (到山到向). One example of a building with an orientation that has the *Dou Saan Dou Hoeng* permutation is *Cau Saan Mei Hoeng* (丑山未向), which faces the sub-segment of *Mei* (未) (between 206.5 and 213.5 degrees around a compass point, starting from the north) and is based on the sub-segment of *Cau* (丑) (between 26.5 and 33.5 degrees around a compass point, starting from the north) of a fengshui compass.⁵³ *Dou Saan Dou*

⁵² A building's *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation is determined by its physical orientation and the year of its construction. Only buildings constructed in Period Eight (2004-2023) would be assigned with the exclusive Fengshui divination permutations of Period Eight. Buildings constructed in Period Seven (1984-2003) were assigned with the unique Fengshui divination permutations belonging to Period Seven. Each twenty-year Period has its own arrangement of Fengshui divination permutations. That is, buildings constructed in different twenty-year Periods are assigned with different Fengshui divination permutations, even if they have the same physical orientation.

⁵³ A fengshui compass divides the direction (three hundred and sixty degrees, starting from the north) equally into twenty-four *saan(s)*, each covering fifteen degrees. The zero degree is at the centered north, that is in *Zi* (子) *saan*, and the one hundred eighty degrees is at the centered south, that is in *Ng* (午) *saan*. Within each *saan*, it is further divided unequally into three segments. For example, the entire *Mei saan* occupies the degree between 202.5 and 217.5. it is further divided into three segments: 202.5 to 206.5, 206.5 to 213.5 and 213.5 to 217.5, giving three unique *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutations. In some cases, the three Fengshui divination permutations within the same *saan* are exactly the same, which its technical term in Fengshui divination is called 無替可尋 (*mou tai ho cam*), embracing the meaning that the difference (in Fengshui divination permutations) is not traceable. But among the three same Fengshui divination permutations, the building orientation belonging to the segment in the middle of the *saan*, for example 206.5 and 213.5 in *Mei saan*, have the strongest ability to channel auspicious *qi*. Besides, it is worth noting that, when determining the orientation of the building, the front and the back of the building, representing how the building is faced and based, are always represented (epistemologically) by the opposite (one hundred eighty degrees) *saan(s)*, for example the segment with 202.5 to 206.5 degree in *Mei saan* is paired with

Hoeng involves the two most important stars of the Period, *saan sing* number 8 and *hoeng sing* number 8, being placed in different directions, allowing the inflow of *qi* that brings residents prosperity in terms of finance, health, and offspring. The next most auspicious Fengshui divination permutation in Period Eight is *Soeng Sing Dou Hoeng* (雙星到向) in which *saan sing* number 8 and *hoeng sing* number 8 are located in the same direction and together bring the best *qi* to generate and accumulate wealth. The third most auspicious Fengshui divination permutation is *Soeng Sing Dou Co* (雙星到坐) in which the two stars are located in the same direction, bringing *qi* that secures health and reproduction. While these Fengshui divination permutations suggest a high level of auspiciousness, this is also affected by the external environment of the building (*Lyun Tau*).

The fengshui of all spaces generally declines when a new twenty-year Period is entered. For example, the auspiciousness of buildings built in Period Seven declines in Period Eight, and those constructed before Period Seven would also bring less good fengshui *qi* in Period Eight. The *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* school of Fengshui divination considers that buildings constructed in, and having a Fengshui divination permutation belonging to, the current twenty-year Period are the most potent in bringing auspicious fengshui *qi*. During my fieldwork in Period Eight, spaces with the Period Eight Fengshui divination permutations of *Dou Saan Dou Hoeng*, *Soeng*

the segment with 22.5 to 26.5 degree in *Cau saan*. Regardless of the designs of the buildings whether they have ‘regular’ shapes or not, the front of the building always determines its orientation and therefore, the corresponding Fengshui divination permutation.

Sing Dou Hoeng, and *Soeng Sing Dou Co* were seen as the most fengshui-
auspicious places.⁵⁴ Occupants of these places are thought to possess high
karmic scores, because otherwise they would not have ‘earned’ that
occupation. During my fieldwork, I witnessed difficulties experienced by
divination practitioners in seeking places with auspicious fengshui, such as
mismatches between the location, rent, and size of the property that the
house-hunters hoped to find, and those of Fengshui-auspicious spaces.

For example, one diviner told me that, taking into consideration the
flow of the yearly rotating *lau nin* Flying Stars and *qi*, he once found the
‘most auspicious apartment’ in which to live in the whole city, in terms of
both *Lyun Tau* and *Lei Hei*, for a particular year. However, he did not rent
the apartment because it was far smaller than where he and his family had
been living, and no one in his family would agree to move into this space,
however auspicious, because it was too small for all their furniture and
belongings. Besides, there were no nearby parking spaces to rent and the
family did not know how they could get to work without their cars. As the
apartment hunting experience of Terry’s parents in Chapter 3 and the
ethnography in Chapters 6 and 7 show, hardly any divination participants
follow divination advice unconditionally without taking into account
practicality and/ or personal preferences: these two factors might well
prevent a person from moving into a highly fengshui-auspicious and
available space.

⁵⁴ There are altogether seventy-two exclusive Period Eight *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui
divination permutations. Eighteen of these are *Dou Saan Dou Hoeng*, *Soeng Sing Dou*
Hoeng, or *Soeng Sing Dou Co*, so that one in four of all buildings constructed during the
period 2004-2023 could be highly auspicious.

As illustrated by the Flying Star permutations (see Figures 3 and 4 in Chapter 1), *qi* from different compass directions brings different types of (in)auspiciousness, and the dynamics change every year. The rotating Sexagenary Cycle, covering a period of sixty years, also features different *Ng hang* elements every year.⁵⁵ That is why the period from November to February, covering the end of one year and the beginning of the next, is usually the busiest time for the diviners, as people seek different kinds of divination to predict and prepare for the new year. Terry first performed Fengshui divination for Janet in December 2020, in order to enhance the auspiciousness of her apartment in 2021. Before referring her to Terry, their mutual friend gave Terry a brief account of Janet's background. Janet was in her late thirties. She had a strong business mind and had been involved in different businesses as and when she spotted opportunities. However, that information was not enough for Terry to decide whether to accept Janet's Fengshui divination request.

When Janet asked Terry to carry out Fengshui divination, he asked for her exact time of birth and the address of her home. Terry read her eight characters horoscope, which identified her as street-smart and highly diplomatic. Terry could tell from that Eight Characters divination that Janet was currently enjoying her most auspicious decade of life, and that her next decade would be much less prosperous. Terry then examined the fengshui of her home. As usual, he first used Google Maps to check the location, structure, and physical orientation of Janet's building. He then estimated the possible Fengshui divination permutations and found that Janet's

⁵⁵ See footnote 26 in Chapter 2.

building would likely be either *Soeng Sing Dou Hoeng* or *Soeng Sing Dou Co*. However, the Fengshui divination permutation of a building can only be ascertained by examining the site in person. After a site visit, Terry confirmed that Janet's residential block had the Fengshui divination permutation of *Soeng Sing Dou Hoeng*, which brings the most auspicious money-making fengshui *qi*.

Terry found that not only was the *Lei Hei* fengshui of Janet's apartment extremely auspicious, but its *Lyun Tau* fengshui, from the block's external environment, was also unusually favourable. The housing estate's swimming pool was located to the south of Janet's unit (see Figure 12). Both *saan sing* number 8 and *hoeng sing* number 8 of Janet's flat were located to the south (see Figure 13). As mentioned in Chapter 3, *hoeng sing* favours movable environments. Water is the most favourable movable environment, bringing financial luck according to many schools of Fengshui divination. The swimming pool brought strongly auspicious *qi* to the already robust and promising fengshui of Janet's home. What is more, the mountain behind the swimming pool (see Figure 12), from the *Lyun Tau* Fengshui divination perspective, acted as a gate to trap the water, so that people enjoying this environment could earn and save much money. The extraordinarily auspicious fengshui of Janet's home convinced Terry that Janet had a high karmic credit, as otherwise she would not have been able to live there. Also, Janet's eight characters horoscope revealed that when she approached Terry she was enjoying the most auspicious ten-year period of her life. Terry therefore decided it was safe for him to perform

Fengshui divination for Janet, believing that the chance of a negative *jip lik* debt transfer to him was low.

Figure 12: Schematic representation of the *Lei Hei* (external environment) of Janet's apartment block

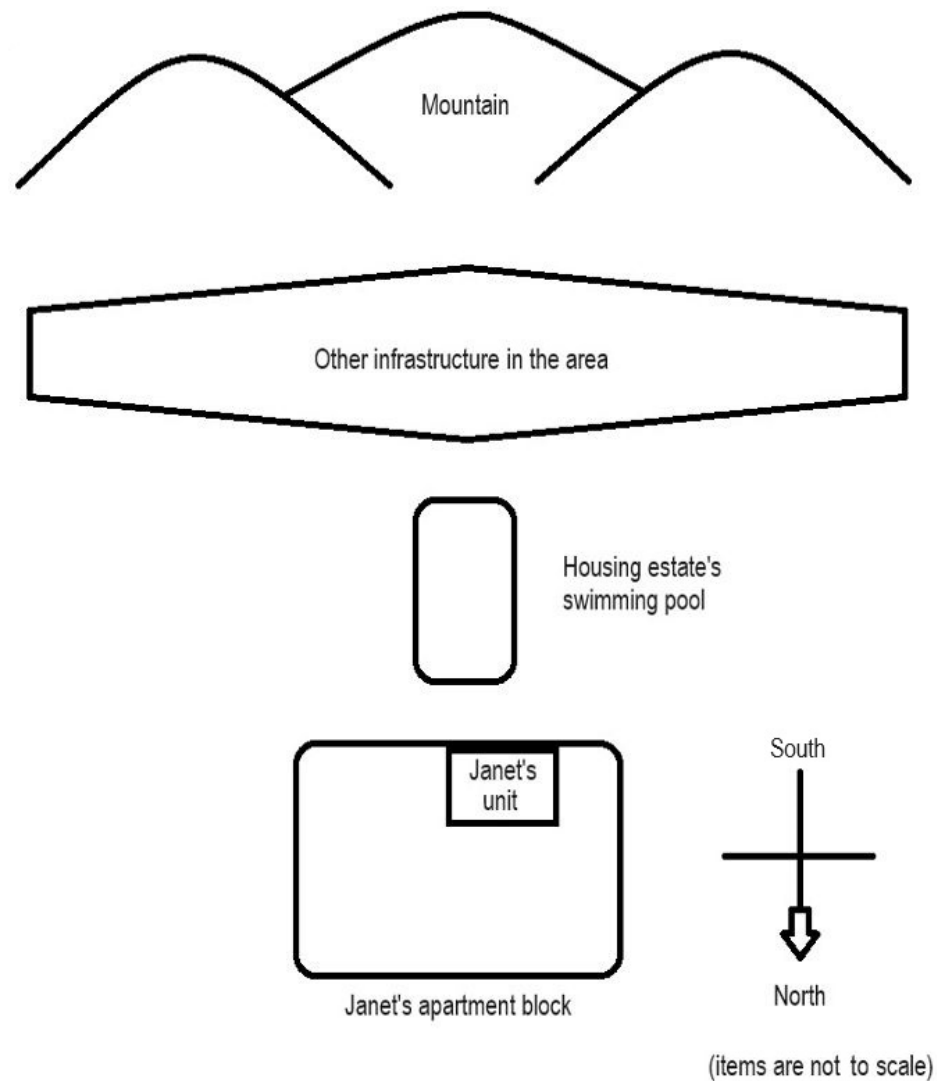
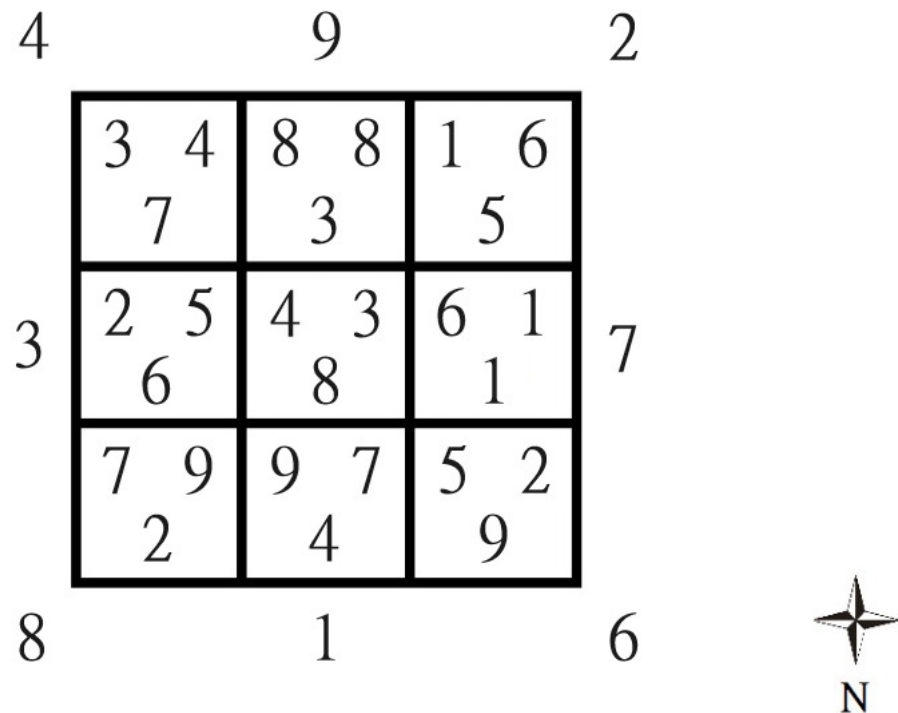


Figure 13: The *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation (八運子山午向, *Baat Wan Zi Saan Ng Hoeng*) of the *Soeng Sing Dou Hoeng* of Janet's apartment block, showing the Flying Stars (*lau nin*) arriving from each direction in 2022



After Terry performed Fengshui divination for Janet in December 2020, she followed some but not all of his fengshui arrangement advice at the beginning of 2021. In August 2021 she telephoned Terry, saying that she had had difficulties in securing funding from the Hong Kong government-backed loan scheme (intended to assist small- to medium-sized businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic). Terry was surprised because his fengshui divination advice should have enhanced the *qi* and attracted benefactors to Janet. Then he learned that Janet had not followed his advice to place a tabletop water fountain near the entrance of her flat. Terry explained that a running fountain could attract and accumulate

auspicious *qi*.⁵⁶ The reason why Janet had not followed this important piece of advice was that there was no electric socket near her front door, and she did not want to run an extension cable to the other side of the living room because this would be both inconvenient and unattractive. Janet therefore kept the tabletop water fountain in its original packing and stored it in a small room in her flat. She also said that she had been too busy to have the fountain fitted with a longer electric cable. (In fact, she had asked a hardware store in her neighbourhood to extend the cable, but the man there said he could not do that.) Janet thus also demonstrated that personal preference and practicality are two important factors in choosing whether to follow divination advice (see Chapters 6 and 7 for a full discussion).

Terry advised Janet to take the fountain to a store in another neighbourhood which could extend its cable. If the water fountain was made to work in the correct position, benefactors would be available to process her loan application instantly. The next day Janet followed his advice and the cable was extended. Her loan was approved by the bank and the government seven days after she had installed the working fountain next to her front door. Two weeks later her loan applications to two other companies were also granted. In total she received more than ten million Hong Kong dollars in September 2021. Following this success Janet went back to Terry at the end of 2021 for Fengshui divination for 2022, hoping for continued help for her business.

⁵⁶ A (running) tabletop water fountain is a fengshui item commonly used to magnify the flow of auspicious *qi* into a space. In the ethnography in Chapter 2, Jacko also used this fengshui item to attract more favourable *qi* into the entrance of his flat.

I was aware of Terry's *jip lik* evaluations of all his new clients. Unless he underestimated the client's karmic debt and experienced *jip lik* payback (as in the Cambodian government officer case in Chapter 3) he was usually happy to continue performing divination for his existing clients. In fact, when he felt there was no risk to him in performing divination, in that no *jip lik* debt transfer had resulted from previous divination consultations, he normally gave stronger fengshui advice to clients on subsequent visits. Terry suffered no *jip lik* payback after his first Fengshui divination for Janet. Specifically, he confirmed that he had not received any karmic debt from Janet at the time when her loan application was approved. As noted in Chapter 3, Terry believed that any *jip lik* payback occurred as soon as his advice was followed. That is, if enhancing the auspiciousness of Janet's apartment went against her cosmically determined destiny, then Terry would have received his punishment as soon as Janet switched on the water fountain next to the entrance. During the three to four weeks between Janet's first call about her problem in obtaining the loan and her second call to share her good news, Terry experienced no financial loss, nor anything else particularly inauspicious. He took this as confirmation of his evaluation that it was 'safe' for him to perform divination for Janet.

2022 was the year of *Jam Jan* (壬寅). According to its Fengshui divination permutation (see Figure 13) Janet's apartment had both *saan sing* number 8 and *hoeng sing* number 8 in the south. Figure 13 also illustrates which *lau nin* Flying Star number (shown outside of the grid) would arrive from each direction in 2022. For example, *lau nin* Flying Star

number 9 arrived from the south. That is, in 2022 the southern part of Janet's apartment contained the (Flying) Star numbers of 8 (*saan sing*), 8 (*hoeng sing*), and 9 (*lau nin*). Likewise, the north of the apartment had the (Flying) Star numbers of 9 (*saan sing*), 7 (*hoeng sing*), and 1 (*lau nin*). While each star number is connected with certain aspects of (in)auspiciousness (see Chapter 1), the *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* school of Fengshui divination uses the pair of two numbers/stars (not a single number or a group of three numbers/stars) to indicate more precisely the kind and extent of (in)auspiciousness for each direction.

The pairs of two (Flying) Star numbers for each direction are produced from a combined reading of the *saan sing* number and the *hoeng sing* number, the *saan sing* number and the *lau nin* star number, or the *hoeng sing* number and the *lau nin* star number. That is, for the south, the possible pairs that will give meaningful fengshui interpretation are 8 and 8 (*saan sing* and *hoeng sing*) and 8 and 9 (*saan sing* and *lau nin*, or *hoeng sing* and *lau nin*). Likewise, for the north, in 2022 the possible pairs from which the diviner would draw meaning are 9 and 7 (*saan sing* and *hoeng sing*), 9 and 1 (*saan sing* and *lau nin*), and 7 and 1 (*hoeng sing* and *lau nin*). The two numbers together clarify the kinds of (in)auspicious happenings to expect. As shown in Figure 13, the directions are represented by nine sections making up the grid, each containing one *saan sing* number and one *hoeng sing* number. Together with the yearly changing *lau nin* Flying Star number from each direction, the numerical pairs that are possible determine the level of permanent and year-long prosperity that will be brought by the fengshui of the space.

In Period Eight, a pair of two number 8s (for example from *saan sing* and *heong sing*) secures prosperity in all general matters, including wealth and health. The pairing of an 8 and a 9 is the most auspicious combination in the Period. It portends a great accomplishment which comes quickly and easy, and highlights exceptional success in financial matters. Of all the possible *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutations in Period Eight, no possible combination of the *saan sing* number and the *heong sing* number provides a pairing of 8 and 9. This exceptionally auspicious combination is only made possible by the interaction of the *saan sing* number and the *lau nin* Flying Star number, or the *heong sing* number and the *lau nin* Flying Star number. Such rare combinations can give rise to extreme prosperity in this Period. In 2022, the south-facing balcony of Janet's home exhibited this exceptionally fortunate fengshui arrangement. Together with the highly fengshui-favourable external environment south of Janet's apartment block, Janet was predicted to make a great fortune in 2022.

I shadowed Terry's 2022 Fengshui divination consultation for Janet. He advised her that different fengshui arrangements were needed in each of the nine compass directions of her apartment. On the south-facing balcony, Terry advised Janet to place a small- to medium-sized columnar aquarium with an air pump (see the example illustrated in Figure 7 in Chapter 2), an ornamental stone tablet, and a colourful table lamp. I was surprised by Terry's suggestion. In Period Eight, a columnar aquarium is commonly used to attract and enrich the auspicious *qi* of *heong sing* number 8. The stone tablet is used to stabilize the *qi* of *saan sing* number 8. And a

colourful lamp is typically used to preserve the fortunate *qi* of *liu nin* number 9. I was surprised because these three items are the fengshui objects standardly used to promote auspiciousness. The rare star interaction for Janet's south-facing balcony in 2022 deserved stronger fengshui advice which could increase the auspicious *qi* attracted by the grouping of numbers 8 and 9. The star interaction in Janet's apartment was much weaker in 2021, but Terry had given slightly stronger fengshui advice to Janet then than he did for 2022. I had seen Terry giving much stronger fengshui advice to a client who had the same auspicious fengshui arrangement.

When I heard Terry's advice to Janet I thought I might have misunderstood the Fengshui divination permutation of Janet's apartment, the direction of the balcony, or the southerly star interaction. I checked with Terry immediately and he confirmed that I had correctly understood the fengshui arrangement of Janet's apartment. After we had left I asked him why he had not given stronger advice about the south-facing balcony. He responded that the mutual friend of his and Janet's had recently told him that Janet had been investing and actively involved in a loan business. He explained that many loan businesses in Hong Kong were partnering with local gangs to collect unpaid debts. The shockingly high interest rates charged by the loan companies made repayment difficult, and gangs often used abhorrent and illegal means to collect payments. Terry feared that if stronger fengshui advice were given to Janet then the loan company would benefit from it. Higher turnover for a loan company would probably lead to a higher number of debtors, who were in turn more likely to suffer from the

appalling actions of the gangs, for example being forced into prostitution or other illegal activities to enable repayment. Worst of all, there were frequent news reports of people committing suicide because of their high debts and persecution by gangs. Such business activities offended Terry's personal ethical code. Promoting such practices, even if only indirectly via his fengshui advice, was not only morally wrong, but could also add to his own karmic debt.

Terry explained that Janet's south-facing balcony would anyway bring her an unproblematic and prosperous year. His advice to place an aquarium there secured *merely* the amount of *qi* that Janet's flat should already enjoy. So his advice would help Janet to receive the benefit she was destined to enjoy by moving into this flat, but no more. As a diviner, he could not leave the auspicious south-facing balcony unornamented, as this would fail to fulfil his duty to his client. However, in light of Janet's recent business activity, he could limit the extent of his fengshui advice in order both to follow his personal ethics and to safeguard his *jip lik* tally in the cosmic realm.

Jip lik payback experience and boundaries for providing divination services

Big B is a full-time diviner. Unlike Terry, who does not rely solely on divination to make a living, Big B cannot easily afford to turn clients away even if he senses that they might have a high karmic debt. To protect both his reputation as a diviner and his own karmic position, Big B tends to give

more conservative advice when performing divination for clients. He is especially cautious when performing Fengshui divination, as this is a means of rewriting someone's cosmically predetermined destiny. As discussed in Chapter 3, altering someone's destiny incurs a *jip lik* payback for the diviner. Big B described his Fengshui divination service as *ngon sam fung seoi* (安心風水), which can be translated as 'Fengshui divination which makes one feel at ease'.

Big B stressed the importance of making *himself* feel at ease by not interfering with others' destinies. He was wary of the unpredictable risk of *jip lik* payback from strong advice that might help a client to achieve more than they deserved. By *ngon sam fung seoi*, he meant providing a safe and standard piece of Fengshui divination advice, which avoids a subsequent transfer of *jip lik* debt. This is why (as quoted in Chapter 3) he said he needed only 'enough' divination skill to handle clients' enquiries. If he possessed a higher level of divination skill, that might lead him to provide stronger advice which could interfere more profoundly with a client's predetermined fate. Big B had been actively divining in Hong Kong for over a decade. Like Terry, he had experienced several instances of *jip lik* payback. His *jip lik* experience not only made him more conscious of the level of advice to give, but also led him constantly to (re)set the boundaries of divination he could provide for clients.

One day after a divination class, Terry, Big B, and I had lunch together. Terry and Big B enjoyed eating together and sharing their

divination experiences. Previously, a trusted and enthusiastic divination practitioner had told Terry how a diviner might shield themselves against *jip lik* payback when applying *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* divination. Terry was eager to share this with Big B and discuss the faint possibility of how this might work. *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* is a widely used divination technique. It can diagnose why a specific event happened, or predict how a specific event will end. Its horoscopic sign permutation can also be used for Fengshui divination, especially when a client wants to ensure or maintain a favourable outcome. If the prognosis is undesirable the client might want to use the Fengshui divination function of *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* in order to produce a different outcome. On the other hand, if the prognosis is positive, the client might still want to apply Fengshui divination in order to ensure the favourable outcome predicted. The former usage is believed to be likely to trigger *jip lik* payback for the diviner.

During my fieldwork I have heard many other divination participants praise *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* as a highly effective Fengshui divination technique to achieve a desired outcome. I have also heard as many voices describing the inevitability of *jip lik* payback affecting diviners following their performance of *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* divination for clients (see Chapter 6 on Betty's miscarriage following her use of *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* to cure her relative's cancer). Terry's trusted diviner friend told him that, if the diviner follows certain steps when performing *Kei Mun Deon Gaap*, the diviner will be spared from punishment for altering someone's destiny. Terry was doubtful about the possibility of avoiding *jip lip* debt transfer. He discussed this with Big B and questioned where the

karmic debt would go if the diviner were shielded. Their experiences had convinced them both that, when altering someone's destiny, karmic payback is inescapable.

In the cosmic realm, one's *jip lik* score in this life is determined by one's virtue in this and previous lives, and by the virtue of one's ancestors. That karmic score can *only* be altered by the holder. With a kind heart and willingness to help others, one can improve one's (unknown) karmic level in this life, adding to one's *jip lik* credit tally, although the enjoyment of that increased credit might be postponed until the next life. Similarly, one can increase the debt in one's own and one's descendants' longitudinal karmic accounts by committing bad deeds. No outside force, such as a diviner's revelation or advice, should affect one's karmic level. The cosmic realm has a 'conservation' system which monitors everyone's *jip lik* score and automatically transfers the holder's debt to anyone exercising forbidden external force to alter the holder's destiny. Both Terry and Big B doubted the effectiveness of the measures claimed to avoid payback when administering *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* divination.

Big B had a very bad *jip lik* payback experience after performing *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* divination for a client. He commented that the *jip lik* payback from *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* is the most severe of all: 'If you used *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* to alter someone else's destiny, you would lose twice the amount of (karmic) "strength" required to facilitate the illegitimate change in that person's life'. He remarked that the reduction of the client's karmic debt is the reason, or facilitator of, why the client would have a

positive change in destiny. Any reduction of the client's karmic debt achieved through *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* results, not from the holder's own virtuous effort, but from the external force of divination revelation and the cosmic system to recalculate the *jip lik* score between the client and the diviner. The transfer of *jip lik* debt is discussed in Chapter 3. What Big B was emphasizing was the much greater *jip lip* payback for the diviner compared to a lesser gain by the client.

As shown in the preceding ethnography, the karmic debt transferred to a diviner and the consequent payback usually manifest as misfortune lesser than, or at worst equivalent to, the benefit gained by the client. For example, if a client illegitimately gained a thousand dollars, the diviner might expect to lose a tenth of that amount as his payback. Big B explained that, although diviners are well aware of the *jip lik* mechanism, they are not deterred by it because they can usually absorb clients' *jip lik* debts, experiencing only a lesser ill. Diviners engage continually in various activities to boost their virtue. Many diviners I met in the field regularly give generous donations to charities, engage in volunteering works, organize fund-raising activities, and so on. Such virtuous activities bolster their karmic credit and create a 'buffer' which reduces the impact of *jip lik* payback. However, diviners still need to evaluate carefully how much of the information obtained from divination they will disclose to the client, and whether to turn down a prospective client altogether. This self-made buffer system can only reduce *jip lik* payback: it cannot prevent it altogether. Big B's experience was that, even when he used such buffering to the full, it could not even reduce the *jip lik* payback from *Kei Mun Deon*

Gaap divination: payback from this form of Fengshui divination is usually greater than expected and might be greater than the client's gain.

A broken finger

Big B described an awful *jip lik* payback experience which he suffered after performing *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* divination. It was not the worst suffering he had experienced, but the most chilling, and bitterly memorable. Amy, an existing client, rang Big B and complained that her co-worker had been bullying her at work. The co-worker had been Amy's line manager in her previous workplace, and Amy had left that job because the manager unreasonably made her work overtime every day. After two years in the new company, Amy was promoted to line manager. The company then split Amy's team into two smaller teams due to rapid business expansion, and these two teams were required to collaborate, to promote business effectiveness. The company hired Amy's much disliked previous manager to head the other smaller team, and the two were required to collaborate closely. Although they were now at the same managerial level, this new co-worker showed Amy no respect, and started bullying Amy again. Amy had to perform work for which she and her team were not responsible, and her co-manager even shouted at her in front of colleagues. Amy was committed to this company and did not want to quit again because of this behaviour.

Amy asked Big B whether there was any divination which could help her to improve this difficult situation. A few days before Amy's call, Big B

had been in touch with Eagle, another trusted divination practitioner friend. Eagle had taught Big B how *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* Fengshui divination could be used to achieve an auspicious or desired outcome involving a specified third person who had no connection with the space. All Fengshui divination, regardless of the school of teaching or technique, is used to channel auspicious *qi* and avoid inauspicious *qi* on a general level. The different levels of advice given by the diviner lead only to different degrees of effectiveness being achieved by the client's adherence to the advice. However, Eagle revealed that *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* Fengshui divination, via a little known secret application, could achieve a desired outcome relating to a particular third party who does not occupy the space.

As illustrated in the Chapters 1 and 2, Fengshui divination practitioners use different objects, according to their features, colours, *Ng hang* and so on, such as a columnar aquarium, an ornamental stone tablet, a colourful table lamp, a gourd, a metal horse, and so on, to promote good fortune and avoid bad. Fengshui divination aims to channel favourable *qi* into a space. Anyone residing or working in that space would benefit from the auspicious *qi*. As described in Chapter 1, *qi* permeates from the external to the internal environment and then into the human body, thus affecting people who spend time in that place. Fengshui divination practitioners enjoy being surrounded by, and therefore benefiting from, auspicious *qi*. While the effectiveness of fengshui advice depends on the level of advice given, it is hard to determine or control which of the people sharing the space will benefit most. For example, in a typical Hong Kong household, comprising a grandmother, father, mother, two children, and a foreign

domestic helper, financial good fortune achieved for the apartment via Fengshui divination might benefit mainly the domestic helper.

Wanting clients to feel that Fengshui divination is worth the fee, diviners sometimes advise how a client might be able to direct the majority of auspicious *qi* to themselves. This, of course, is much higher-level advice. It is usually given only after careful *jip lik* and ethical evaluations of the client, or with a higher consultation fee to compensate for the likely *jip lik* payback. This is a dangerous tactic because, given the cosmic mechanism, the diviner never knows whether the client has sufficient karmic credit to deserve such favourable *qi*. Big B and Eagle are both familiar with techniques to direct auspicious *qi* to a particular inhabitant of the space. Throughout my years of fieldwork in Hong Kong, I have attended many classes for different (Fengshui) divination techniques, and I know of several ways to direct auspicious *qi* to a particular person. One way is to use a personal item owned by the intended recipient, such as a key or wedding ring, placing it in the most auspicious position. No physical barrier can stop *qi* from permeating a space: the item absorbs the positive *qi* and passes it to the owner as they carry it about with them.

Eagle explained to Big B that a personal item can operate, not only as a medium for receiving and transmitting the *qi*, but also to represent the person. When such an item is placed in an auspicious position, the good *qi* absorbed benefits its owner immediately.

Kei Mun Deon Gaap can reveal how current events will develop over the coming months.⁵⁷ Its additional function as Fengshui divination gives a ‘follow-up’ solution to an inquiry. If such divination is performed to discover information not only about the client but also about a third party (such as Amy’s co-manager), then the incident and the two persons involved would be represented by different Heavenly Stems and horoscopic signs (see footnote 41 in Chapter 3) in the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* permutation. Most Fengshui divination promotes overall goodness (in terms of career, money, health, relationship prospects) for the people living or working in the space, although higher-level advice could direct auspicious *qi* to a specific person or persons who use the space regularly. It is worth noting that the fengshui or *qi* of a space usually affects only people who use the space regularly. *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* Fengshui divination, on the other hand, can be used to facilitate a specific outcome. Moreover, by using a secret trick, good or harm can be caused to specified third parties who *do not* occupy or use the space, and who neither know of nor consent to the divination.

The time at which *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* is performed determines which corresponding horoscopic sign permutation is obtained, and therefore the divination outcome. Matthews called this the manifestation of the ‘written destiny’ of the cosmos (W. Matthews 2017). For example, the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* permutation resulting from an enquiry about an incident would reveal what happened, the people involved, why it happened, and how it will end. The Fengshui divination advice would then be based on such

⁵⁷ *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* is not capable of accurate prognosis more than six months ahead.

horoscopic sign permutations. Any Fengshui arrangement made later might alter how the incident was supposed to end. Eagle explained the secret trick: since someone's personal item *is*, or represents, that individual. Hence, if a diviner includes the third party's personal items as part of the fengshui design of the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* permutation obtained (since the permutation already involved and represented that third party by different horoscopic signs), it is possible to 'drag' this third party into the *qi* of a space which they do not inhabit, bringing them unwittingly and unwillingly under the influence of its (bad) *qi*.

Big B asked if Eagle had tried this tactic. Surprisingly, Eagle said no. Neither could he recall where he learned it. Big B was eager to try it, and when Amy told him about her problem he performed *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* divination for her. The resulting horoscopic sign permutation showed that the situation would remain unchanged, and that Amy would continue to be bullied for some months to come. Big B decided that this was an opportunity to try Eagle's secret tactic. He immediately planned an entire Fengshui divination arrangement for Amy, based on the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* permutation obtained. He asked Amy to take a pen from her co-manager, explaining that it was needed for the Fengshui divination process. He emphasized that the pen must belong to and have been frequently used by her co-manager. Without asking exactly what the pen was for, Amy promised to provide it.

That night, Amy texted Big B that she had taken a pen from her co-manager's office table. Big B then told her the rest of the fengshui

arrangement. He asked Amy to bind up the pen in wire, then bury it in a flowerpot filled with soil. He explained that the pen represented the co-manager, and that the wire and soil would ‘restrict’ her behaviour. Big B advised when and in which direction Amy should place the ‘buried pen’ in her own office unit. Amy followed all his advice precisely.

The very day that Amy placed the ‘buried’ pen in her office unit as advised by Big B, she reported that her co-manager had shown a ‘one-hundred-and-eighty-degree’ change in attitude towards her. The long-term ‘enemy’ not only treated Amy respectfully in team and department meetings, but for the first time she bought Amy lunch! This positive attitude continued for a few days. Then, on the fifth day, their supervisor became angry with the co-manager and moved all her team members to Amy’s team. The co-manager almost cried in front of Amy. Amy rang Big B and recounted these events with much excitement. The stripping of managerial power from the co-worker exemplified how her subordinates (helping hands) were restricted (bound up): this metaphorically paralleled the fengshui arrangement in which the pen (co-manager) was trussed up (without (helping) hands). Amy praised Big B’s Fengshui work. But Big B’s excitement at this successful test of the secret Fengshui divination trick was tempered by his concern about the similarity, on the metaphorical level, between the fengshui arrangement and the suffering of the co-manager.

The next day, Big B drove to work, parked his car, then went to retrieve his backpack from the back seat. Knowing that the backpack was almost empty, he used his little finger to lift it by its handle. He then heard

a loud cracking sound: he had broken his little finger! He consulted a traditional bone-setting practitioner⁵⁸ who bandaged his broken finger with some herbs. Looking at his broken finger, Big B was reminded of the trussed up pen which he had told Amy to make: finger and the pen were both small, thin, and tubular; as the pen was buried in soil and wrapped with wire, so the finger was coated in brownish herbs and wrapped in a bandage. He realized that something must have gone wrong with his *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* Fengshui divination for Amy, and that the fracture was his *jip lik* payback. Big B believed that he had suffered from his own fengshui design.

Big B sensed some abnormality in this particular Fengshui divination, and feared that the broken finger would be followed by something worse. When he left the bone setting clinic, he rang Amy and asked her to remove the ‘buried pen’ from her office immediately. He explained that something had gone wrong with the Fengshui divination advice and arrangement, and that the entire setting needed to be stopped immediately. Big B believes that his own *jip lik* payback is usually less than his client’s gain. He had intended his fengshui arrangement to help Amy by restricting the behaviour of her co-manager, but had not intended any harm to that co-worker. He was prepared for some *jip lik* payback for performing the divination, but expected only some relationship disharmony. Big B believed that the unexpected broken finger, being so symbolically similar to his specially designed object for the fengshui arrangement, was a clear

⁵⁸ Traditional bone setting is a Chinese folk practice in which herbal massage is used to heal dislocations or fractures.

message that the secret trick was reprehensible in the cosmic realm, and offended against the karmic order.

Big B believed that there were four reasons why he might have suffered *jip lik* payback. First, the co-manager had a stronger personality than Amy and was therefore still able to bully her. Big B thought that the two women had some connection known only in the cosmic realm. By ‘punishing’ the co-manager, while in the cosmic calculation Amy deserved the ‘punishment’ of being bullied, Big B had interfered with Amy’s predestined fate. Secondly, the secret trick was intended to achieve a purpose outside of the reach of Fengshui divination. As explained above, the fengshui or *qi* of a space only affects people who regularly inhabit that space. The co-manager did not use Amy’s office unit, so would not be affected by any fengshui arrangement there. By using her pen to coercively drag her into the *qi* of a space unrelated to her, the diviner had challenged the whole cosmic order.

Thirdly, the underlying divination was highly unethical. The co-manager suffered because of Amy and Big B’s fengshui arrangement, which she neither knew about nor consented to. Last but not least, the solution Amy sought was to prevent her colleague’s bullying. She did not know that divination was capable of stripping the colleague of her managerial power. Big B also did not expect his advice to bring so much harm to Amy’s co-worker, thinking that the fengshui arrangement would only restrict her bullying. Certainly, Amy was morally and legally wrong to steal the pen, but she was ignorant of the harm this would bring. Big B

was fully responsible for that harm, even though it was unforeseen.

Undoubtedly, this morally wrong divination required a harsh punishment to make Big B remember the lesson and never to cross that line again.

Big B proved that it is possible to use the *qi* and fengshui of a space to affect someone unrelated to that space. On one hand, the experience advanced his divination skill. On the other hand, the payback experience caused him to constantly consider the boundaries between what should and what should not be done with divination. As soon as he sensed that his divination might be reprehensible in the cosmic realm, he asked Amy to reset the *qi* in her office. Big B said that, because it was the first time he had tried this tactic, he had been extra careful to pick an auspicious date and time for Amy to place the ‘buried pen’ in her office. He hoped that at least the co-worker might benefit from the favourable *qi* at that moment and that they could build a better relationship. He again emphasized that he had not anticipated his advice harming Amy’s colleague.

Big B had to keep seeing the bone setter for almost two months before his finger fully mended. Amy’s co-worker regained her managerial power soon after Amy removed the fengshui arrangement. Amy called Big B a few times, asking him to set up another fengshui arrangement to resolve her problems with her colleague: Big B refused without hesitation. He did not want to interfere with Amy’s predetermined fortune and experience more *jip lik* payback, and certainly did not want to risk breaking another finger.

After Big B's finger had mended, he told Eagle how the fengshui arrangement was designed and what had happened after the arrangement took effect. During the call, Big B was reassured that he had been right to ask Amy to remove the fengshui arrangement as soon as he sensed his wrongdoing. This was because Eagle told Big B that he had suffered a very painful boil on his hip two weeks after he had told Big B about the secret trick of using a third party's personal belongings. The boil had lasted for three weeks, during which he had difficulty walking and sleeping. When Big B described the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* Fengshui trick and the payback he experienced, they agreed that the boil was Eagle's *jip lik* payback. By telling Big B about this impermissible fengshui trick, Eagle had assumed *part* of the responsibility for Big B's wrongdoing. Big B, wondering what might have happened to him, Eagle, and the work colleague if he had not asked Amy to remove the fengshui arrangement, was glad that at least he had corrected the mistake before any irremediable harm had occurred.

Diviners are responsible for the consequences of their divination. Clients paying a divination fee in the hope of obtaining better fortune might be ignorant of the ethical and karmic calculations in the cosmic realm. This is why diviners need to evaluate carefully the level of consultation advice they give, in order to avoid violating the cosmic rules. In addition, while *jip lik* payback is their punishment for interfering in the client's destiny, it is also a learning opportunity, allowing diviners to refine their sense of what is acceptable when divining for clients. Nowadays Big B avoids using *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* for Fengshui divination: its use in Fengshui divination is so powerful that a diviner could easily overstep the

boundary of permissible practice. What is more, after Amy's case Big B decided never again to give Fengshui divination advice which might expose a third party to the influence of the fengshui of a client's space.

Chapter 5: The diviner's ethical dilemma: altruism versus self-preservation

A marriage almost destroyed

Diviners must carefully evaluate the potential for *jip lik* payback, not only when performing divination consultations, but also when teaching divination techniques. Diviners' experiences of *jip lik* payback cause them constantly to review the boundaries of acceptability in divination. They share a fear of passing on secret knowledge, such as that which Eagle taught Big B, and of consequently suffering an increased karmic debt, with unpredictable consequences.

One summer, Sam started a new class, teaching a rarely revealed Fengshui divination technique which can help single people to become romantically attached. Aries's application of this special technique demonstrates its efficacy. Aries is one of my interlocutors; I met her in 2016 when I began my research on divination in Hong Kong. She is a very well educated professional, now in her mid-thirties. Aries had been single for five years when I met her. Sam, our mutual friend, taught Aries, in a consultation, how to use a form of Fengshui divination to enhance her fortune in love. A month after Aries performed the divination she was in love, and the couple married two years later. Coincidentally, Aries's partner had used the same form of divination to find romance, having consulted a

different diviner before he met Aries. Sam was going to reveal this technique in the new course.

When I heard that Sam was going to teach this Fengshui divination technique publicly, I suggested to my friends Apple and Orange, both divination practitioners, that they attend Sam's class. Both were in their late thirties, had been single for a few years, and both were looking for a partner. They were amazed by the story of Aries and her partner using the same Fengshui divination technique and finding each other. They wanted to learn and apply the divination skills themselves and to find life partners, as Aries had done. They both attended Sam's class, and both met a new boyfriend after performing the divination. Apple's relationship broke up after about a year, but she repeated the Fengshui divination and was soon happy in a new relationship. Orange and her partner are now planning to marry. I am glad that I introduced them to Sam's course.

This Fengshui divination for romance is highly effective. My interlocutors and I often talk about our own and other people's experiences, discussing which form of divination was used and why, and its outcome, and which techniques are 'powerful'. Because this specialized romantic Fengshui divination is so effective, it is the technique I am most likely to discuss with my interlocutors. Some time later, I recounted the successful love stories of Aries, Apple (who was still with the boyfriend she met after first performing the technique), and Orange to Fish, another divination practitioner friend. Fish became interested in learning this powerful form of divination, and asked me when Sam would be teaching the course again.

This technique can only be applied at a specific time of year, at around the time when Fish and I had that conversation, so I contacted Sam.

Sam said that Apple and Orange had told him their good news, and that a few of his other students had also achieved positive romantic outcomes following his teaching of this specialized technique. His class had proved a big success. I told Sam that my friend Fish, having heard Apple and Orange's accounts, now also wanted to learn this form of divination. I asked Sam when his next class would be, and if he was going to deliver these skills to a larger population, given its amazing efficacy. His answer was a resounding no. He said that he had already suffered enough (*jip lik* payback) for teaching the technique in class just *once*, and that he would never teach or use it again.

Sam's relationship with his wife had deteriorated badly over the last few months. They had been married for more than a decade and, according to Sam, their relationship had always been stable, trusting, and openly communicative. However, soon after Sam started the new class on this specialized romantic Fengshui divination, he and his wife started arguing almost every day. Small arguments, which would previously have been resolved in a few minutes, turned into substantial disagreements which neither of them could let go. There were many moments when Sam's partner wanted to end the relationship.

When these arguments started, Sam just thought that their 'honeymoon period' had finally run out. While Sam was puzzled about why he and his wife were fighting over almost everything, one of his students called and

said that, amazingly, he had started a relationship with a friend from primary school after meeting up again at a gathering. Sam said that this student was in his early forties and had never before been in love or romantically attached. The student had called to thank Sam for teaching him the specialized divination technique. Sam said: ‘When the student said he was really grateful as it was so *rare* (emphasis in original) that any diviner in the market would be generous enough to share such an authentic and powerful divination technique, that was the lightbulb moment when I realized that the souring of my relationship with my wife was in fact my *jip lik* payback for revealing the technique to other people’.

Sam understood that the recent souring of his relationship with his wife was *jip lik* payback for improving his students’ love lives. He was clear that the arguments were not caused by the relationship *per se*, but were a cosmic punishment. Believing himself to be solely responsible for the strained relationship, he became more compromising towards his wife in order to save their marriage. After some time, their relationship began to improve, and Sam said that he had learned his lesson. He not only decided never teach or apply this divination technique again to practitioners seeking romantic relationships, but also asked his students and clients not to pass the technique on to others, since he might later be held responsible for any subsequent interference with those other people’s destinies (like Eagle in Big B’s case). He did not want to risk his *jip lik* credit and his marriage any further.

By teaching this highly effective Fengshui divination technique, Sam had interfered with his students' destinies by enabling them to practice the technique and secure a romantic relationship. If Sam had not taught the technique, the students might have remained single. If their own *jip lik* had not entitled them to such fortune in love then, by passing on the knowledge, Sam had made himself morally responsible for all the undeserved changes in their lives. At the cosmic level, Sam's positive *jip lik* credit was transferred, increasing the *jip lik* tallies of his students and leading to their romantic affairs. The corresponding reduction in Sam's *jip lik* credit almost destroyed his marriage.

Sam had long been aware of the *jip lik* mechanism and was careful with the divination advice he gave to clients. Nevertheless, like Eagle, he underestimated the consequences of passing on knowledge of a powerful divination technique. He had thought that only the person applying the divination would be responsible for its consequences. He was not aware that, as the possessor of knowledge, he was also morally responsible for passing it on. What if the knowledge were passed to the wrong people? Divination knowledge (especially concerning powerful techniques like the one Sam taught) is a double-edged sword and can have both constructive and destructive effects for practitioners and others. It is problematic for a diviner to use their knowledge to improve someone's destiny: this can result in the deterioration of someone else's destiny (for example the diviner themselves or, in Big B's case, Amy's ex-line manager). It is ethically even worse if a diviner deliberately uses their knowledge to damage someone's destiny. Nevertheless, the key concern is that a pupil will use

the technique, not to do bad things, but to do things in ignorance of the consequences, such as helping someone to change their destiny at any cost.

Inexperienced practitioners who are not aware of the cosmic *jip lik* mechanism, and who perform divination for anyone who requests it, will experience *jip lik* payback. When these practitioners later become aware of the recalculating and rebalancing consequences of the *jip lik* tally, it will be too late to avoid, not only their own suffering, but also that of the teacher who passed the knowledge to them. As demonstrated in the ethnography in Chapter 4, diviners make careful ethical evaluations about whether it is safe to perform divination for prospective clients, and the level of advice to provide. Eagle's and Sam's cases show that diviners are also morally accountable for making ethical evaluations about those to whom they can pass on powerful divination knowledge. Those who teach powerful divination techniques also share responsibility for the altered destinies of students who perform such divination for themselves and the others.

The cosmic rules are not known to everyone. Hong Kong divination practitioners believe in the transferability of *jip lik* between unrelated persons. Only by continuously analysing what divination could achieve, for whom the divination is to be performed, and the potential *jip lik* payback, can diviners understand when it is cosmically permissible to perform divination for others, such that it will not cause the diviner's *jip lik* credit to be transferred to a client. The suffering caused by *jip lik* payback is an essential part of a diviner's learning process. Since every client has a different background and different needs, every divination consultation is

unique. Diviners might suffer several *jip lik* payback experiences before they learn how to distinguish between cosmically acceptable and cosmically unacceptable divination practices. The *jip lik* experience that a diviner accumulates is an indicator of their progress on the learning trajectory of ethical evaluation. Such experiences constantly add to the diviner's knowledge of where to set boundaries for their services. On one hand, this helps them comply with the cosmic proscription against interfering with someone's destiny; on the other hand, it protects the diviner's own *jip lik* tally.

Jip lik credit is transferable between unrelated souls: this includes not only diviners and their clients but, as shown in the above ethnography, also the teachers of diviners and their pupils. I have heard several older diviners say that their masters would rather take secret or powerful divination knowledge with them to the grave than pass it on to their pupils. These holders of powerful knowledge might choose to allow knowledge to be lost entirely rather than bearing the consequences of it being passed into the wrong hands. Informants told me that not only the teacher of a diviner but also that teacher's teacher might bear responsibility for altering destinies by divination. More importantly, any reduction in *jip lik* credit or increase in *jip lik* debt following interference with someone's destiny can affect, not only the diviner, their teacher, and their teacher's teacher, but also the descendants of all of them. A diviner can control, at most, only which *next-generation* diviners inherit the technique: they cannot know who will learn the skills in subsequent generations. Diviners' fear of *jip lik* tally recalculation therefore limits the transmission of powerful divination

knowledge. Knowing the power of these techniques and the possible consequences of their practice, a wise diviner might refuse to hand down knowledge in order to protect their descendants from bearing the cost of unintentionally changing someone's destiny, even after the diviner's death.

Voluntarily assuming jip lik debt

Big B usually offers his clients a standard and 'safe' Fengshui divination technique, *ngon sam fung seoi*, to avoid undertaking their *jip lik* debt by giving more advanced divination advice which could change their destiny. However, he has occasionally set aside this reservation and given higher-level advice, despite the likelihood of *jip lik* payback, because he thought that it was morally right to do so.

Big B described a divination consultation by Minnie. Usually, he saw clients only by appointment. He did not have regular business hours, and was not in his office every day, sometimes providing Fengshui divination in his clients' offices or homes. On other days he worked from home, studying a client's horoscopic pattern or floor plan in preparation for a consultation. Minnie first showed up outside Big B's office one afternoon without an appointment, having heard about Big B from a friend of friend. Big B was surprised when he walked out of the elevator and found a stranger waiting for him outside his office door. Nevertheless, even someone unknown to a diviner, like Minnie, might touch the diviner's moral sentiment and lead him voluntarily to assume *jip lik* debt for a stranger as a virtuous deed.

Big B invited Minnie into his office and asked how he might be able to help her. She told him she had recently lost her job, and that her husband had a long-term illness requiring regular treatments, which were not cheap. She had been jobless for three months and was worried about her lack of employment. Her husband could not work because of his health condition, and Minnie was the sole breadwinner of the household. She asked Big B for divination advice about when she would get a new job. Big B performed *Kei Mun Deon Gaap*, whose outcome suggested that the coming six months would not produce an improvement in her career. It was unlikely that Minnie would secure a job easily. However, the outcome also suggested that there might be a breakthrough if she tried something different: Big B therefore suggested that she look for a job outside of her experience or expertise.

Big B also advised Minnie to have Fengshui divination performed for her flat, as this might help both her career and her husband's health prospects. Minnie said that, although she really wanted to do this, it was not possible. She tearfully explained that her husband's medical expenses and routine household expenses in the past three months had used up nearly all her savings. They lived in government-subsidized housing and had no valuable assets which they could sell to raise cash. She also said that it had taken her much courage to visit Big B. She had thought about it for some time because she now needed to be extra careful about spending money. But she really wanted to know whether her situation would soon improve, so she decided to consult Big B.

Big B was moved by Minnie's reply. He had not expected her situation to be so desperate. He did not immediately know how to respond, but once he had taken in her situation, he decided to provide Fengshui divination advice for free. He opened his cabinet, took out a new fengshui object, gave it to Minnie, and told her to place it in the south-east of her apartment. He explained to Minnie, based on the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* horoscopic sign permutation obtained by his divination, why and how the fengshui item might help her find a job quickly and relieve her immediate financial pressure. He also reassured her that he just wanted to help and was not going to charge extra for the Fengshui divination, only for the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* divination she initially requested. Big B said, 'I could not bear her tears and her sad story'. His sympathy led him to provide free Fengshui divination which might change Minnie's destiny, and a free fengshui item. Minnie gave him nothing in return for the chance to change her destiny.

Later that evening Big B promptly received his *jip lik* payback: a car accident as he was leaving a petrol station. An old woman, who was collecting cardboard from rubbish collection points, crossed the road outside the petrol station without looking, and bumped her dilapidated trolley into Big B's car. The headlight, bumper, and other parts of the car were damaged. The trolley was broken into pieces and pieces of cardboard were all over the place. Luckily, neither the old woman nor Big B was hurt. The woman apologized to Big B and handed him HK\$ 300 as compensation for the damage to his car. She explained that this was all the money she had, and she could pay no more. She hoped that Big B would accept this, let her go, and not call the police. It was clear to Big B that she

was poor. More importantly, he was sure that the accident was his *jip lik* punishment for the Fengshui divination advice he had given to Minnie that morning. Big B returned the money to the old lady, told her he realized it was just an accident, and let her go. He ended up spending over HK\$ 10,000 to fix his car: approximately what Minnie would have paid for the divination and the Fengshui object if he had not given them for free.

In this instance Big B had acted against his (and many other diviners') usual practice of estimating the right level of advice to give, respecting the cosmic rule not to interfere with someone's destiny, and thereby protecting his own *jip lik* tally. This case demonstrates that whether or not destiny-changing divination advice is given is completely the diviner's *reflective choice*. Although the usual rule is not to interfere with a client's destiny, diviners sometimes choose not to follow it. Of course, if a diviner chooses to interfere with a client's destiny then they must be prepared for *jip lik* payoff. I next explain how a diviner's ethical principles can lead them to take the courageous decision to bear the loss of karmic merit and, more importantly, how such ethical decisions are commonly faced by diviners.

As shown in this and preceding chapters, diviners usually require some form of compensation for providing divination advice which might result in the transfer of *jip lik* credit from diviner to client if that advice changed the cosmically determined trajectory of the client. The compensation is intended to cover both the diviner's divination skills and their potential loss of karmic merit. However, Big B had not been paid to experience the car accident, since the advice he had given to Minnie was free. It is worth

noting that this *jip lik* payback was the result of the effectiveness of his advice,⁵⁹ not because he had given it free of charge. Big B voluntarily assumed the risk of the cosmic recalculation of *jip lik* tallies between himself and Minnie, not because of a selfish calculation of economic gain, but for altruistic reasons. Big B expanded his moral responsibility beyond himself and his descendants to include a tragic outsider, and thus took on an external and unnecessary obligation. This exemplifies the ethical dilemma, typical among diviners, of choosing between altruism and self-preservation.

Some diviners offer more advanced or powerful (Fengshui) divination at extremely high prices. The price is set very high, first because few diviners know about these techniques, due to the moral restriction on transmission noted above, and secondly, because the higher efficacy of the techniques might bring more life-changing opportunities for clients, and hence greater *jip lik* payback for diviners. Although some diviners are prepared to suffer such payback if they are paid well enough I was told that people with high *jip lik* debts usually live uneasy lives. Clients who are able to pay for such expensive consultations are deemed likely to have a relatively low *jip lik* debt: someone with a high karmic debt would be unlikely to have the financial means to do so. Diviners also asserted that if anyone sought (Fengshui) divination advice from them for immoral, or even potentially immoral, purposes (concerning, for example, abortion, accusations or suspicion of murder or rape, or harming others physically or

⁵⁹ Although Big B did not ask Minnie after the consultation whether she got a new job, he was convinced that his Fengshui advice must have worked because otherwise he would not have been struck by the *jip lik* punishment.

mentally⁶⁰) they would turn down the applicant without a second thought, even if a temptingly high price were promised.

Big B's altruistic decision to help Minnie despite the potential *jip lik* payback was based, not only on his sympathy for Minnie, but also on the philosophy, common among diviners, of wanting to help people whenever possible. Big B explained that diviners have a duty to use their divination skills to help people. 'There was a reason why I was destined to be a diviner. There are many other people out there who want to learn the skills but could never understand and apply them. So why me? Because the cosmos trusts that I will use divination to help people, and therefore grants me the wisdom to master the skills.' I asked him about the *jip lik* payback he experienced and the karmic merit he had lost. He responded that, on one hand, the *jip lik* mechanism would reduce his *jip lik* tally because he had interfered with Minnie's destiny. On the other hand, the *jip lik* mechanism might reward his virtuous behaviour by increasing his *jip lik* tally, although he might not receive that merit in this life. However, Big B stressed that, when making this decision, he was concerned only about whether he could help Minnie, not about whether this would earn him karmic credit.

Big B explained that *jip lik* payback would strike soon after he gave Fengshui divination advice. Therefore, if he experienced any (*jip lik*) suffering after performing divination, it could be seen as evidence of his advice taking effect. As shown in the case of Big B's consultation with Amy, *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* is a powerful divination technique. As Big B

⁶⁰ It is possible to use Fengshui divination to intentionally harm others, but of course the diviner and/or whoever initiated the idea would suffer *jip lik* payback.

and other diviners often commented, because the technique is more powerfully effective than other divination techniques, it entails more serious *jip lik* repayment for the diviner. As an experienced *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* diviner, Big B was prepared for some *jip lik* punishment as soon as he gave the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* advice to Minnie. He could just have explained the divination outcome to her without giving the destiny-changing Fengshui divination advice: he would then have risked no *jip lik* payback. But because of his understanding of the cosmic mechanism, he believed that it is crucial to perform good deeds continuously in order to accumulate as much karmic credit for himself as possible. Big B's personal ethics, particularly his wish to do good, outweighed his fear of *jip lik* punishment.

Another Hong Kong diviner, Napoleon, used what Matthews (2021b) called the 'agentive ontology' technique in his practice. When an inquiry was put to him, and after touching the inquirer's hand, Napoleon relied on an agent (rather than a calculation based on constant principles) to communicate the answer. However, even Napoleon himself did not know who or what this agent was that lent him this special talent. He had no idea how he acquired the skills, assuming it to be an innate ability. Although he discovered this 'sixth sense' at an early age, he only learned how to channel and apply it in the last few years. He said that he does not always

receive or read messages easily, so he constantly meditates to maintain and enhance his spirituality.

I was discussing *jip lik* payback with several diviners, including Napoleon and Noah, when Napoleon described a consultation with Alexia, who had been diagnosed with stage four cancer. Alexia wanted to know how much time she had. When she was first diagnosed, the doctor told her she had at most three months to live. Three months later, the doctor told her just to live every day as if it were her last. She knew from her physical condition that she was going to die, but she wanted to know how much time she had to spend with her family, especially her young child. The hopeless mother then turned to a diviner, rather than a doctor, for an answer.

Alexia approached her friend Noah for divination advice. However, he could not tell from her horoscopic pattern how much longer she would live, and the divination he performed gave no definite answer. Noah explained that no one can know when they will die: at best, their horoscopic pattern might indicate when they would experience ill health or bad luck. The time of one's death is determined and known only by the cosmos. Alexia had asked a forbidden question, so hardly any form of traditional divination could provide the answer. Noah had experienced Napoleon's agentive divination before. He told Alexia that Napoleon might be able to reveal something that conventional divination could not, and suggested that she consult Napoleon.

Noah told Napoleon about Alexia's situation, and Napoleon rescheduled other clients to give Alexia the earliest possible appointment. During their consultation, Napoleon gave Alexia a few numbers that hinted at the time when she might pass away. A few months later, Noah told Napoleon the sad news of Alexia's death, and said that she died at exactly the time suggested by the numbers Napoleon had given her. Napoleon confessed that he should not have revealed those numbers because doing so seriously violated the cosmic prohibition against disclosure. Hinting when Alexia's life would end had revealed the secret cosmic arrangement. Moreover, the disclosure might have changed the destinies of the mother and her family. It was possible that the dying mother might engage in unethical or criminal activity to make money for the toddler's future. Napoleon believed that he had incurred a heavy additional *jip lik* debt by giving these hints.

Nevertheless, Napoleon did not regret doing so. He could see that Alexia was a virtuous person and a good mother. He explained that, certainly, Alexia could not change the course of her disease by knowing when her last day would be. But knowing how much time she had left gave her the opportunity to spend as much time as possible with her family, especially her toddler. This also allowed the child the longest possible time with its mother.

This was why Napoleon had broken the cosmic rule. When he had touched Alexia's hand he knew, via the agent, when her last day would be. He believed that if he did not give her those clues he would later regret it.

He said he would not have revealed this if Alexia had had longer to live. He felt sorry for the toddler, and could not imagine how it was going to grow up happy and healthy without its mother. Napoleon knew he should not disclose the time of Alexia's death, and that her short life was the result of the *jip lik* tallies of both her and her toddler. Nevertheless, Napoleon's personal ethics compelled him to reveal the secret: he thought it was the right thing to do. He trusted that Alexia would not use the knowledge unwisely but only to realize her motherhood as far as possible. He chose to bear the unnecessary *jip lik* debt and receive the *jip lik* punishment for the toddler's benefit, rather than obeying the cosmic rule and creating regret for himself and Alexia's family.

Hong Kong diviners' ethics of virtue

In Chapter 2, I suggested that the *jip lik* mechanism is more complex than the 'zero-sum' game described in economic game theory. Using divination, diviners might interfere with someone's destiny. As a result, they might receive a transfer of karmic debt from the client, although the amount of credit transferred is inestimable. The incalculable nature of the *jip lik* mechanism could be seen as making divination an unfair exchange for diviners, since they might always be seen as exchanging their own karmic credit for financial gain. A diviners' *jip lik* credit might become overdrawn if they do nothing to preserve their *jip lik* tally.

By voluntarily embracing additional karmic debt from clients, as Big B and Napoleon did for Minnie and Alexia, diviners demonstrate their

virtue: providing clients with extra help despite knowing that this violates the cosmic rule. While on one hand they risk diminishing their own *jip lik* merit, on the other hand their righteous acts might be recognized and rewarded at the cosmic level, increasing their (present and future) karmic tally. It is important to note that diviners exercise virtue, not in order to receive more karmic credit, but because they believe it is the right thing to do. However, they know that as long as they keep doing what is right they will sooner or later be rewarded with the appropriate amount of *jip lik* credit. That is, diviners do not give in order to gain reward, but they trust that reward will come if they give enough. This altruistic philosophy again demonstrates that the *jip lik* mechanism involves more than a ‘zero-sum’ game. Not only are the loss of diviners’ and the gain of clients’ karmic credit incalculable, so too is the possible gain of diviners’ credit.

Diviners who understand the cosmic order and have experience of *jip lik* payback act constantly to show their virtue. As explained above, diviners engage continuously in philanthropic activities in order to accumulate more goodness in their lives. Karmic credit earned in this way can build up the ‘buffering system’ that allows them to absorb the impact of any *jip lik* payback. Diviners’ practice of virtuous deeds not only shows their understanding of how the *jip lik* mechanism and destiny work but, more importantly, is a crucial factor which facilitates and supports their continued practice of divination.

Diviners sometimes refuse to divine for a client whom they suspect of bearing a heavy *jip lik* debt. A prospective client will always be asked

about their reasons for consulting divination. In some cases, a diviner can tell that a client has a very hard life, such that the diviner's ethical code obliges them to perform divination for the client and to give higher-level advice than the client pays for. On the other hand, they might refuse to perform divination for poor clients if they feel that divination would not help, not wanting to profit from someone without being able to improve their situation. However, this does not mean that they offer no help at all to these clients.

Terry was approached by a client, Neil, seeking Fengshui divination. Neil had been diagnosed with cancer and was the family's sole breadwinner. He ran a small online shop, but the business had not grown as many other online shops worldwide had done during the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone remained at home and ordered their shopping online. He wanted Terry to perform Fengshui divination to restore his vitality, to help him fight against the cancer. Terry went to Neil's home and examined the orientation of his apartment block to obtain the initial information needed to perform Fengshui divination. Based on the year in which it was constructed, he analysed and found out the *Jyun Hung Fei Sing* Fengshui divination permutation of Neil's apartment block.

Terry found that the fengshui of the apartment contained one of the worst possible *Lei Hei qi* effects. In *Jyun Hung Fei Sing*, the numerical groups of the (Flying) Stars numbers 5 and 7 signal serious illness, and cancer is often cited as the worst possible effect of the pairing of those two

numbers.⁶¹ The pairing is made possible through the matching of *saan sing* and *hoeng sing*, *saan sing* and the *lau nin* star number, or *hoeng sing* and the *lau nin* star number. Among the three possible ways of obtaining the combination of the (Flying) Stars of 5 and 7, the pairing of *saan sing* and *hoeng sing* is the most severe because its effect is permanent. (By contrast, the pairings of either *saan sing* or *heong sing* with the *lau nin* star number produce effects which usually last only for a year.⁶²) Terry explained that Neil's apartment was located on the southern side of the block. The two Stars (*saan sing* and *heong sing*) located at the south of the building's Fengshui divination permutation were 5 and 7. This meant that the fengshui of Neil's apartment had the structural inauspicious *qi* of serious illness. What was worse: not only was Neil's bedroom in the south of the apartment, but his bed was in the south of the bedroom. This combination of southern arrangements made it clear to Terry why Neil was suffering from cancer.

Terry explained how Neil's health might have been affected by the exacerbated inauspicious southward *qi*. He said that, even if he arranged the flat to reduce the inauspicious *qi*, only a tiny amount could be diverted, because the strength of the inauspicious southward *qi* would grow exponentially. To deflect a small amount of bad *qi* by installing fengshui arrangements would not help Neil to recover from the cancer. Therefore

⁶¹ See Chapter 4 on how two (Flying) Stars are paired together at one compass direction in the Fengshui divination permutation (and in the Flying Star permutation) to give a more precise piece of information about the (in)auspiciousness of that compass direction of a space.

⁶² In *Jyun Hung Fei Sing*, the worst possible effect of the (Flying) Star numerical combination of 5 and 7 occurs when any one direction of the space's Fengshui divination permutation contains the permanent *saan sing* and *heong sing* numerical pairing of 5 and 7, and when in the same year the *lau nin* star numbers of either 5 or 7 also occur in the same direction, strengthening the inauspicious effect.

Terry declined to divine any further for Neil after his initial Fengshui divination, and advised him to look for and rent another apartment. Terry commented that he did not wish to make money from a consultation which he knew would not help the client. In addition, he did not want to become involved by interfering with Neil's destiny. By advising the client to move into another apartment, Terry directed the client towards the opportunity of living somewhere with less inauspicious fengshui, which might in turn improve his health. Terry further commented that, if Neil's illness and the terrible fengshui of his apartment were the cosmically determined consequence of his *jip lik* tally, then his destiny factor might remain strong so that he would end up not moving into a new apartment, or if he did, he might move into an apartment with equally inauspicious *qi*.

By giving Neil a possible solution, rather than simply refusing to provide further Fengshui divination, Terry not only avoided any *jip lik* credit transfer between himself and the client, but also demonstrated his virtue by doing good and helping within his limit. Terry believed that the compounded southward *qi* was at least partly responsible for Neil's poor health, and so he advised carefully while keeping his hands clean. I have also seen other diviners, faced with clients who could not afford to pay for divination, point clients towards trustworthy temples, and teach them to perform stick divination and seek advice from a god or goddess instead. Rather than turning clients away with no help at all, the diviners virtuously directed them towards another path which might offer help.

The role of diviners' ethics

'[E]thical considerations pervade all spheres of human life' (Laidlaw 2013:2). Since ethics refers to the 'actual and circumstantial' (Lambek 2010:4) Lambek proposed to look beyond the religious sphere, at ordinary and everyday issues, to acquire a deeper understanding of people's ethics. My ethnography here and in the preceding chapters sheds light on Hong Kong diviners' ethics. Laidlaw (2013) argued that, although ethical considerations seem to suggest that people choose to do right most of the time, the anthropological study of ethics 'is not an evaluative claim [about whether] people are good, [but] it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative' (2013:3). Two evaluative aspects of diviners' ethics are shown in the above ethnography.

First, on the transmission of powerful divination knowledge, while some masters might choose to take such knowledge with them to the grave rather than passing it on to the next generation of diviners, others carefully select as recipients of that knowledge people whom they trust to use the technique righteously and transmit it only to responsible others. Different masters evaluate the ethical position of their disciples differently, and these different anticipations affect the subsequent ethical considerations and actions of the masters. The dilemma faced by masters who must decide whether to pass down such knowledge is similar to that faced by early nuclear scientists when they realized the terrible potential of their science.

MacKenzie and Spinardi (1995) studied the knowledge required to invent and create a nuclear weapon. They argued that tactical knowledge,

such as judgements about the vagaries of fission/ production processes, which is local, person-specific, and private in nature, is essential in the history of nuclear weapon development. This contrasts with the conventional belief that explicit nuclear weapon knowledge, which is universal, independent of context, and impersonal, is the only form of knowledge required for nuclear weapon development. It was documented that explicit nuclear weapon knowledge was first made available to the public by the US government in 1945. Later, other countries, such as Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, acquired details of the US weapon design (i.e. explicit knowledge) via different sources, but this was insufficient for their laboratories to duplicate or further develop the American design. Mackenzie and Spinardi (1995) argued that the use of explicit knowledge alone was not sufficient to duplicate or re-create the weapon, which also required tactical knowledge, e.g. from experts in the commercial nuclear power sector.

Powerful divination knowledge is also a kind of tactical knowledge, passed down from person to person. Although Mackenzie and Spinardi (1995) did not look at how tactical knowledge was passed down, they documented that when specialists in the nuclear weapon laboratory obtained harm assessments after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they were shocked to ‘face (often for the first time) the full human meaning of what they had done’ (1995:58), and many eventually left promising jobs to resume their academic careers. Those nuclear specialists who questioned whether to continue engaging in nuclear research and development shared the same worries as experienced diviners

who want to channel knowledge positively and to harm no one. Both diviners and nuclear scientists feared the loss of control that might result from the genie escaping the bottle.

As a risk-averse diviner might seek to safeguard his and his descendants' *jip lik* tallies by restricting the knowledge they pass down, so a risk-averse nuclear scientist might refuse to disclose their science, in order to protect mankind from the use of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, more optimistic diviners and nuclear scientists might explain the potential risks of knowledge transmission to their disciples and trust them to use the knowledge wisely. Their ethical considerations will include their judgments of, first, how their actions might affect themselves and those close to them and, secondly, how their disciples might use the knowledge.

The second evaluative aspect of ethics revealed by the ethnology described above is the diviner's consideration of divination's likely utility (to both client and diviner). Before agreeing to perform divination, diviners must consider whether to accept the client's request, and if so how much of the results to disclose. Careful inquiry into the client's reasons for requesting the divination and their background is essential. Diviners seek to avoid, not only performing divination for morally wrong purposes, but close involvement with clients who act immorally, or even potentially immorally, in either their private or their business lives. Given the impossibility of knowing anyone's cosmically determined karmic tally, a client's immoral behaviour is an important indicator that *jip lik* payback is likely to afflict the diviner after divination. A client's behaviour might also

suggest that they do not deserve the opportunity to use divination to improve their life. More importantly, as shown in the preceding ethnography, *jip lik* payback experiences accumulated by diviners help them to constantly review and redefine the permissible boundaries of divination. This reveals an important feature of diviners' ethics: it is not fixed but dynamic, being conditional on diviners' changing understanding and acceptance of karmic repayment.

Another ethical consideration for diviners is the level of divination disclosure they should provide to a client whose plight they pity. Minnie and Alexia's situations might have been more heart-rending to Big B and Napoleon than to other diviners; different people's stories might touch the hearts of other diviners but not Big B and Napoleon. It is also possible that, if the same diviners heard a similar account for the second time, they might be less strongly moved. Surely, diviners weigh up the responsibility and probable outcome for themselves if their consciences encourage them to help. Minnie and Alexia's divination consultations demonstrate the typical ethical dilemma of choosing between altruism and self-preservation. When a client's situation touches a diviner's conscience, the diviner might shift away from self-preservation and towards altruism. Diviners must choose between potentially sacrificing their own karmic credit to give higher-level advice and preserving their *jip lik* tally to give less precise advice. However benevolent they are, they do not always choose altruism over self-preservation. Besides, as noted above, diviners' accumulated *jip lik* payback experiences encourage them to constantly review the boundaries

of permissible divination. So diviners adjust the extent of their benevolence case by case.

Menin (2020) considered how a young Moroccan woman took responsibility for her own destiny. In Islam, God's omnipotence might seem to leave no room for free will, but Menin argued that a person's responsibility for her own destiny is centred on, and made possible in, the incommensurability of divine and human knowledge. In my ethnography, Hong Kong diviners are responsible, not only for their own, but also for their descendants' destinies, and therefore try (most of the time) not to interfere with the destinies of others. Accurate computation of a client's *jip lik* tally is impossible: at best, diviners can roughly estimate it, based on how life has been treating them and on the fengshui of their living space. Therefore, diviners have to take responsibility for their own destiny by deciding on the level of divination service to provide, in order to avoid harming their own and their descendants' destinies. Menin's study, focusing on the relationship between the informant and God, did not look at how a person might act to fulfil their responsibility for the destiny of others. My ethnography demonstrates a key factor in diviners' ethics: that they need to take responsibility, not only for their own destinies, but also for those of others.

Laidlaw (2013) suggested in his book, *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*, that the concepts of virtue, character, freedom, and responsibility are useful in the anthropological analysis of ethics. However, he referred only to responsibility for events that have

already occurred: how someone might be held responsible for something they did not do, or not held accountable for what they did. Laidlaw did not consider responsibility for actions *not yet* taken, nor the anticipatory responsibility attached to prospective action. Both divination masters and nuclear scientists anticipate possible consequences, including their responsibilities for themselves and others (their families or mankind) before deciding how to use their expertise and whether to pass on divination or nuclear knowledge. More importantly, both divination masters and scientists must also weigh up how their disciples might fulfil *their* anticipatory responsibility on receiving the powerful knowledge: will disciples use the knowledge safely and ethically?

Anticipatory responsibility has been central to debates concerning the ethics of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are seen as one of the biggest existential threats to humankind. Their development, possession, and use are key concerns within those ethical studies. ‘The rationality issue of possessing nuclear weapons boils down to that of their effectiveness as deterrents’ (Dupuy 2021:129). Scholars such as Dupuy (2021) and Nye (2023) have suggested that nuclear deterrence is the crucial factor which maintains the current global (seemingly) peaceful dynamic between the nuclear powers. Others, such as Rohlfing (2023), argued that nuclear deterrence is an insufficient strategy to prevent nuclear weapon use, because of the inevitable possibility of human mistakes or technical failures leading to unexpected nuclear explosion. Nevertheless, whether or not scholars support the concept of nuclear deterrence, they *anticipate*

possible future consequences, taking anticipatory responsibility extremely seriously.

Anticipatory responsibility is also a crucial element in the ethics of Hong Kong diviners. In the field of moral reasoning or philosophy, the anticipation of outcomes, or consequentialism, is often a key criterion for action (Nye 2023). Diviners' anticipation, both of their responsibility for others and of the responsibility assumed by those others, is a vital part of diviners' ethics. This echoes Keane's (2017) idea of 'ethical affordance'. He argued that, when making ethical decisions, one should not assume the outcome to be predetermined, but instead, as the word affordance indicates, one should expect it to be a more open-ended. The open opportunity, Keane suggested, is propelled by people making ethical evaluations about themselves, related persons, and their circumstances. This reflective feature embedded in ethical decision reflects Foucault's (1997) idea of ethics being a form of freedom that is informed by reflection. To stretch Foucault's point further, this aspect of ethics includes reflective consideration, not only of the self, but also of others.

The shifting ethical boundaries of Hong Kong diviners contrast with Durkheim's ([1925] 1973) theory of ethics or morality, which sees it as an authority or a set of social regularity which is intrinsically fixed. Dyring (2018) suggested that Durkheim's ([1925] 1973) omission of freedom from the discussion of ethics, reduced moral possibility to moral reality. Dyring added that the moral possibility of action should take precedence over reality. By moral possibility Dyring referred, not to the

(potential) freedom that is made possible by cultural conditions, but to the practical necessity arising ‘from inherently unsettling experiences of an impending, ungraspable, uncontrollable formlessness encroaching on finite human being’ (2018:233). Dyring suggested that ethics should be understood from the viewpoint of how humans make decisions, especially from a ‘new humanist’ approach which looks at the existing aporia inherent in human finitude. This perfectly reflects the ethnographic material on Hong Kong diviners’ ethical considerations when undertaking divination: the variations of personal, or diviner’s, limits over time and the diviner’s dilemma of altruism versus (self-)preservation result in the different corresponding ethical actions, which lead us to rethink or understand how ethical decisions are made within personal limits.

I do not intend to elaborate here the ethical dilemmas involved in, or the variations between diviners’ ethical evaluations of, each divination consultation, nor the level of disclosure subsequently chosen. This thesis is less concerned with variations in diviners’ personal ethics than with their shared ethics, which involve constant boundary review, anticipatory responsibility, and ethical affordance. I argue that these not only guide their divination practices, but are in fact the essence of the embodied personhood of Hong Kong diviners. These ethical considerations are the fundamental elements which diviners, whether or not they are divining commercially, must adopt and internalize when practising divination. These ethical considerations reflect diviners’ understanding of the cosmically determined *jip lik* mechanism, which is key to comprehending the workings of destiny.

Chapter 6: Use of divination by parents before and after childbirth

‘[In Taiwan] this atmosphere of “competition” in which everybody tries to secure as many advantages as possible has a surprising effect: many women decide to give birth by Caesarean section in order to choose the birth date and consequently the *bazi* [eight characters horoscope] of their child’ (Homola 2013:135)

The consultation of diviners by expectant parents, identified by Homola in Taiwan (2013; 2015), is just as common in Hong Kong. An auspicious birth date and time are held to ensure good destiny for the child, and parents with sufficient money can achieve this by arranging for the baby’s delivery by Caesarean section. However, this does not fully explain why expectant parents in Hong Kong choose to give birth by Caesarean section.

During my fieldwork I was pregnant and became a mother; this allowed me to become part of the (expectant) parents’ community and to study at close hand how divination is used in relation to parenthood. As well as seeking advice before the baby is born on an auspicious birth date and time, after the baby is born some parents also seek divinatory advice

on a name: that is, for a nominative analysis according to the moment of birth. I studied a large group of expectant parents, with about 280 pregnant women at any given time, for over fifteen months. I discovered that expectant parents opting for birth by Caesarean section did so, not primarily to obtain good destiny for their child, but for other reasons. Many expectant parents only visited diviners to pick an auspicious date *after* they had decided on childbirth by Caesarean section: this contradicts the widespread but mistaken belief that many people *first* consult divination about an auspicious birth date and time⁶³ *and then* use the results to choose a time for a Caesarean section.

Not every expectant parent in Hong Kong who decides to have a Caesarean section consults a diviner to pick an auspicious birth date. Homola (2013) stated that in 2012 about one-third of women who gave birth in Taiwan did so by Caesarean section. In Hong Kong in 2015 41% of all births were Caesarean deliveries, and two-thirds of babies born in private hospitals were delivered by Caesarean section (Lo 2015). Of the expectant mothers I met, about one-fifth gave birth in private hospitals: 88% of these opted for a Caesarean section and the remaining 12% for natural delivery⁶⁴ (see Table 1). About 60% of expectant mothers who had

⁶³ Both the date and time of birth are significant; references throughout this chapter to one or the other should be read to mean both.

⁶⁴ I believe that the discrepancy between the reported Caesarean rate (66%) and my observed rate (88%) is caused by sampling differences. The reported rate probably refers to all expectant mothers giving birth in private hospitals, regardless of nationality and of whether they have permanent Hong Kong citizenship. That rate may therefore include, not only foreigners working in Hong Kong, but also partners of Hong Kong permanent citizens who have not themselves yet obtained that status. Many non-permanent Hong Kong citizen mothers are from mainland China. In Hong Kong, expectant mothers can only give birth in public hospitals if they are permanent Hong Kong citizens. Otherwise they can only use private hospitals. Many of these families cannot easily afford private hospital charges and therefore might choose natural delivery because it is cheaper than a

a Caesarean section in a private hospital had consulted divination to pick an auspicious birth date and time: this suggests an overall divination consultation rate of about 10.3% of my sample population.⁶⁵

The rate of divination for an auspicious birth date might seem surprisingly low, given the general prevalence of divination in Hong Kong. That rate depends on two factors: deciding to give birth in a private hospital, and deciding to have a Caesarean section. In public hospitals Caesareans are not usually an option, and expectant mothers cannot choose the time of delivery. The fact that only about one-fifth of babies are born in private hospitals might be expected to affect the consultation rate significantly. However, over 70% of my parent informants (regardless of hospital choice) consulted divination for nominative analysis (See Table 2 in Chapter 7). This issue is not conditional on any external factors but depends solely on parents' desire to secure better fortune for their children. The use of this type of divination is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Caesarean section. On the other hand, all my informants are Hong Kong Chinese, most of them permanent citizens who were born in Hong Kong. The difference in social and economic backgrounds of the two sample populations probably explains the discrepancy.

⁶⁵ In Table 1: Numbers of expectant mothers who gave birth in private hospitals via C-section and consulted divination/ Total population = 29/280= 10.3%.

Table 1: Choices of hospital type, mode of delivery, and divination consultation by expectant parents

Total population of expectant mothers = 281 (100%)			
Hospital type			
Public hospitals= 225 (80%)		Private hospitals= 56 (20%)	
		Mode of delivery	
		C-section= 49 (88%)	
		Natural delivery = 7 (12%)	
		Consulted divination for auspicious date and time?	
		Yes= 29 (60%)	No= 20 (40%)

The figures in Table 1 support the argument that many parents who choose to give birth by Caesarean section are not motivated to do so primarily by the desire to secure good destiny for their child. Many people in Hong Kong, especially regular divination practitioners, mistakenly assume that divination by expectant parents always leads to childbirth by Caesarean section. In Teh's (2017) newspaper article about local customs and pregnancy in Hong Kong, she attributed the high rate of Caesareans to diviners' advice on auspicious birth dates and times. Mikiki, a diviner who had just started his career in divination when I first met him in Hong Kong in 2016, and who later became one of my key informants, commented that expectant parents who decide to have a Caesarean section without having visited a diviner to identify an auspicious birth moment are being

‘irrational’ and ‘nonsensical’. He added: ‘why don’t they spend a little more money on divination to ensure that their child has a good date and time of birth?’ Later, when I discussed my findings with two other informants who are also regular divination practitioners (but not diviners), they were very surprised that any expectant parents would plan to have a Caesarean without divination to identify an auspicious time. I discuss below why some mothers choose to have a Caesarean without consulting divination. In analysing how divination is used by expectant parents in Hong Kong, I found that most of them, after paying HKD\$ 800 – 4,000⁶⁶ for a divination consultation to discover an auspicious birth date and time, eventually chose *not* to follow that advice.

My previous fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 focused on all types of divination participants, presenting their accounts of the reasons why they used divination in their everyday lives. My informants included a few expectant mothers who had paid diviners to identify the most auspicious date and time for a Caesarean section. However, informants’ accounts often left out *how they used* that advice. Having discovered during fieldwork for this thesis that expectant parents seldom follow their diviner’s advice on auspicious times for a birth, I asked two of my previous informants whether they had followed their diviners’ advice. Neither of them had done so, but they had not originally told me this. The extended-case method can help to reveal why people consult divination, how they

⁶⁶ Some diviners charge even more. One of my informants, a full-time diviner, charges around HKD\$ 13,000 for a divination consultation for auspicious Caesarean dates and times.

view divination advice, and what might prevent them from following that advice.

Medical choices

Hong Kong residents with a permanent Hong Kong identity card can give birth in any local public hospital for a fixed fee of HKD\$ 120 per day. This rate is all-inclusive, and covers any unexpected treatment needed during childbirth. Hospital stays for childbirth usually last three to five days, and cost less than HKD\$ 1,000. However, expectant mothers cannot choose the mode of delivery: natural delivery is the norm. Caesarean deliveries are discouraged because the medical profession views natural delivery as being better for both post-partum recovery and establishing breastfeeding, and because vaginal birth allows the baby to receive beneficial bacteria and helps clear fluid from its lungs. Caesarean sections in public hospitals are only available for medical reasons: even then, an expectant mother cannot choose the time of the Caesarean, which is determined by the hospital.

Labour is a very intense process. Public hospitals use a wide range of pain-relief methods, including relaxing music, birthing balls, emotional support from a partner, analgesic injections, nitrous oxide (laughing gas), and epidural anaesthesia. While unmedicated pain-relief methods are encouraged in public hospitals, medication is seldom prescribed, even upon multiple requests by women in extreme pain. Some hospitals especially avoid giving pain relief medication to the mother in case it causes drowsiness in the newborn. After delivery in a public hospital, the baby is

usually placed next to the exhausted mother in a room shared with seven other mothers and newborns. It is the mother's responsibility to look after the newborn, however little experience she has: very little help is provided by nurses.

Given the very basic care provided in public hospitals, many people with sufficient means choose to give birth in a private hospital. Going private allows parents to choose their preferred mode of delivery. A Caesarean section can be booked at any time between the thirty-eighth and fortieth weeks of pregnancy. If natural delivery is selected, mothers can request whatever pain relief methods they desire, whether unmedicated or medicated. After delivery, the newborn will be taken care of by specialized nurses in a separate room, allowing the fatigued mother some rest.

All this care in a private hospital comes at a high price: usually HKD\$ 50,000–100,000 for the birth of a single baby, depending on the doctor, hospital, and room type. The birth of twins usually costs considerably more. This largely explains why, among the group of expectant parents I studied, only about 20% gave birth in private hospitals. Affordability is a significant factor in expectant parents' choice of hospital type. Kacey paid around HKD\$ 70,000 to have her first baby in a private hospital. After the expenses of raising this child, she opted for public hospital care when giving birth to her second baby, for which the total bill was HKD\$ 500. Expressing her delight at the lower public hospital charges, she said: 'I can give birth to a hundred babies in public hospitals for the same amount that a private hospital would charge me for delivering one'.

Some parents who could afford to give birth in private hospitals choose not to do so. This may be, not because they do not think private hospital care is worth the money, but because they prefer to spend that money on other expenses associated with childbirth or childcare. An example is the hiring of a maternity nanny to provide care to the new mother and baby. The average monthly salary for a maternity nanny working from 9am to 6pm is about HKD\$ 20,000. Some parents choose to hire a nanny for two months, to help the mother and newborn settle into their new regime, rather than spending the money on private hospital care.

Reasons for having a Caesarean section

As noted above, ensuring a good destiny for their child is not the main reason why expectant parents in Hong Kong choose to have a Caesarean section (although, as I show below, parents in general do want to give their children a good destiny). So, what are the reasons that drive that decision, despite the fact that natural delivery is known to be a better medical option for both the baby's well-being and the mother's post-partum recovery? Most expectant parents do not trust public hospitals to provide a decent obstetric service. Stories circulate about mothers being mistreated in public hospitals during labour, for example being refused pain-relief medication, or having a perineal tear repaired so badly by a junior medic that it required restitching by a senior doctor. However, this explains only why expectant parents prefer to give birth in private hospital: it does not explain why

Caesarean sections are chosen. Below I present the reasons given by some mothers for that choice.

Bambi was pregnant for the second time. As with her first child, she decided on delivery by Caesarean section. She explained:

‘I can’t stand any pain. I can’t imagine how painful it [natural delivery] is. I am afraid that I won’t know how to give birth [push]. People have told me that labour lasts for hours and even days. That sounds very scary. Others said there are lots of problems after giving birth [by natural delivery], such as incontinence.’

Bambi’s low tolerance or fear of pain is shared by many expectant parents. When I asked Bambi who had told her about labour pain and post-partum problems, she told me she had got this information from the internet. There are a number of popular local websites and online forums where (expectant) parents can exchange information about pregnancy and parenting. One perennially popular topic is: how painful is natural delivery? Is it really unbearable? Another is: which is more painful, contractions during natural delivery or a Caesarean operation? Nearly all discussants say that the latter is far less painful and more convenient. These online platforms have a huge impact on expectant parents who are financially able to opt for a Caesarean section.

The potential problems associated with natural delivery are another common reason why parents choose a Caesarean section. Asamu told me:

‘My husband asked me to make up my own mind whether to give birth by natural delivery or Caesarean section. But he said if I go for the latter, I will not need to suffer extreme pain. If I go for natural delivery, what if I can’t push the baby out? My friend told me that she had a friend whose baby was delivered with the aid of a vacuum. Now the child is three years old and she still has a dent near one of her eyes. The doctor said the dent will be permanent, and the girl will need cosmetic surgery to correct it when she grows up . The risks associated with natural delivery are too high: I’m too scared to give birth by natural delivery.’

While expectant mothers might take into consideration their own medical or physical condition when deciding their preferred mode of delivery, another frequent concern is the outcome known locally as 食全餐 (*sik cyun caan*). This is the situation in which a woman, after hours of labour, fails to give birth naturally and has to resort to a Caesarean section. The term, literally ‘having a full meal’, means suffering the pain of both modes of delivery during the same birth. Yumiko told me:

‘My family has a medical history of gestational diabetes. My grandmother, mother, and aunt all had it. Since you do not know if you have it until you reach the second trimester of pregnancy, I am afraid that I will get it too. If I give birth by natural delivery, I will face a higher risk of *sik cyun caan*, since the baby might be too big for vaginal birth. That is why I prefer to give birth in private hospital, so I can choose to have a Caesarean straightaway. Also, my husband thinks that he can

manage and arrange the time [paternity leave] better, to spend as much time with us as possible before returning to work.'

Practical considerations, such as time management and scheduling post-partum care and recovery, are another factor in favour of Caesarean sections.

The physical process and conditions of childbirth and pragmatic post-partum planning are the two main reasons for the popularity of Caesarean sections in Hong Kong. Very rarely, expectant parents do decide to have a baby delivered by Caesarean just to achieve an auspicious birth date and time. Bambi said, 'I have decided to have a Caesarean. I would like to pick a good birth date for my baby. But that is not the reason why I wanted to have a Caesarean.'

Does everyone want to achieve a good destiny?

While it is common for expectant parents who have decided to give birth in a private hospital to consult a diviner about an auspicious time for a Caesarean delivery, my evidence suggests that they seldom follow that advice. Although I was unable to check every expectant mother I met who had consulted divination to see whether they eventually gave birth at the specified time, I asked 20 of them (more than half of the relevant sample) and, to my surprise, *not one* of them had done so. Some of them could have arranged for delivery at the auspicious moment, but actually chose another time. At most, they followed the auspicious date but not the exact time.

Conversely, other parents did want the birth to occur at a specific date and time to procure good destiny for their child, but were unable to achieve this. The ethnographic details below explain why this occurred.

Jip lik and childbirth

Hong Kong diviners who are asked to identify an auspicious birth moment commonly recommend more than one combination of date and time. This is because diviners are reluctant to assume responsibility for the child's fate. As discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 on *jip lik*, the notion of karma by divination practitioners, diviners avoid interfering with a person's destiny because if they do this then they are likely to suffer from *jip lik* payback. By offering several alternative combinations of date and time, which are the determinants of a person's destiny, the final decision on when to have a Caesarean section is placed in the hands of the parents, so it is they, and not the diviner, who influence the child's destiny. Similar divination practices in Taiwan were reported by Homola (2013:135): 'many fortune-tellers are reluctant to settle birth dates because they believe humans are not and should not be able to settle their own fate'. In Hong Kong, as shown above, there seems generally to be a boundary between what diviners can perform divination for and what they cannot, although there are variations between individual diviners.

As explained above, a person's eight characters horoscope, determined by their time of birth, is the reflection of how their destiny in this world is affected or governed by both their own *jip lik* and that of their ancestors in

previous lives. Therefore, if diviners affect the future of their clients' children by presenting them with only one auspicious moment, they put themselves at high risk of suffering *jip lik* payback. Following divination, if a soul receives a better eight characters horoscope at birth or rebirth than its *jip lik* deserves, then that unmerited increase in the newborn's goodness will be subtracted from the diviner's *jip lik*. It is equally problematic if a diviner causes an eight characters horoscope to be *worse* than that to which a newborn soul is entitled. This will not only cause the baby undeserved suffering, but also shift the measure of the diviner's *jip lik* unfavourably: one day, whether in this life or the next, the diviner will be punished for it.

This is why Hong Kong diviners usually suggest more than one combination of date and time to expectant parents: it makes the parents (rather than the diviner) responsible for the ultimate choice of date and time for their baby's arrival. Since diviners cannot possibly know what kind of eight characters horoscope a baby and its *jip lik* deserve, proposing more than one birth moment is an important protection for diviners from the accountability which they would otherwise bear. Also, suggesting different combinations without revealing which is better allows the possibility that the parents' choice will be the one that best suits their child's *jip lik*. I asked several diviners what they had seen of unexpectedly early births, when babies arrived before the time selected by the parents for a Caesarean section. The diviners seemed generally to welcome such events, saying that this revealed the babies' true destinies, because such births are 'uncalculated' and therefore genuinely reflect the babies' *jip lik* tally.

I met Betty in 2016 when she was in her late thirties, and she became an informant. She had started to learn divination in 2010 and was a regular practitioner. Although she did not work as a diviner, she sometimes performed divination for friends and family (usually free of charge or for a small fee to show gratitude for the divination advice). She complained to me one day that her father-in-law had called for several family meetings in the previous two weeks. Her husband's sister-in-law was pregnant for the second time; her father-in-law (the grandfather-to-be) cared greatly about this grandchild and was eager to choose an auspicious eight characters horoscope for it. Both Betty and her father-in-law had been learning different divination techniques for some years. Betty's brother-in-law had been consulting a trusted diviner for Fengshui divination of his apartment for several years, and asked him to choose an auspicious date and time for the birth of this second child. He came home with a few suggested combinations and asked his father if he could identify the best one.

Betty's father-in-law carefully checked every combination of date and time which the diviner had suggested. He seemed unhappy with the choices and decided to ignore them. He knew that Betty had for some time been learning *Kei Mun Deon Gaap*,⁶⁷ a divination technique in which he was not skilled. He had been calling for family meetings because he wanted Betty to help choose the most auspicious date and time for his grandchild's birth, for which he would use the Eight Characters divination technique and Betty the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* technique. He feared that using only one

⁶⁷ *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* is commonly used to divine about a specific inquiry, and seldomly to foretell a person's destiny. However, the technique can be used to discover whether a person's general destiny is good or bad, and in what aspects.

technique would not be enough to guarantee the best moment. He went so far as to list every possible combination of date and time within the two-week window when his daughter-in-law could have a Caesarean, and divined the auspiciousness of all 168 of them!

Betty's father-in-law chose a few combinations of date and time whose representative eight characters horoscope would bring financial fortune to both the parents and the grandparents. Betty found that, although these combinations seemed favourable from the Eight Characters divination point of view, they were disastrous from the perspective of *Kei Mun Deon Gaap*, entailing for the baby very poor health and a poor relationship with its future partner. She told her father-in-law about these divination findings, but did not suggest any other time which was better from the *Kei Mun Deon Gaap* perspective. Her father-in-law ignored Betty's view and insisted on his preferred combination of date and time.

Betty told me that she had not wanted to be involved in choosing the baby's birth date and time at all, which was why she did not divine for a different auspicious date and time for her husband's sister-in-law to give birth. She commented that it would be best if her father-in-law's preferred date and time were followed. A few months previously she had performed Fengshui divination for a relative who had been diagnosed with cancer and told that she had only six months to live. Following Betty's Fengshui divination advice, the relative recovered from the cancer, but unfortunately Betty had a miscarriage. Betty had always wanted to have a child, and at that time she had been married for more than twelve years. The couple

failed to conceive naturally. They signed up for in-vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment provided by the local government. They waited two years for the first consultation and then another six months for the first treatment. The embryo failed to implant in Betty's uterus. They later waited another eight months for a second course of treatment, which was their last chance, as IVF is only provided by the government to those under age forty. This time she successfully conceived but then suffered a miscarriage.

Betty believed that the miscarriage was a punishment for her Fengshui divination helping her relative to overcome cancer: an action that changed her relative's fate and interfered with the relative's *jip lik*. As a result, the relative's recovery was achieved at the expense of Betty's pregnancy: the payback of *jip lik* is that you need to give one life in order to save another. This experience made Betty more deeply aware of the cosmic recalculation entailed in *jip lik*. She lost her last chance to become pregnant: she and her husband could not afford to pay privately for any more IVF. So she was afraid that, if she interfered with the fate of her husband's sister-in-law's baby, she would be punished again. She felt she could not afford any more losses in her life. In fact, after Betty's miscarriage, she never again performed divination for anyone else.

A few months later, Betty told me that the baby had been born. I asked whether the parents had followed her father-in-law's advice on birth date and time, and she told me no, the birth was timed according to the availability of their chosen obstetrician. This is both an interesting and a common case. The parents had decided on a Caesarean mainly because the

mother-to-be had very low pain tolerance. The parents were both high-earning professionals. Typically for members of Hong Kong's middle class, they made their decisions according to their own preferences. When they found that their doctor was not available at the time preferred by the grandfather-to-be, they chose another time without further reference to him.

Fate-consciousness in Hong Kong's parenting practices

The prospect of a new member in any family is always exciting. In Chinese society the excitement usually extends well beyond the immediate family because the continuity of the blood line is extremely important. As a result, relatives of both expectant parents, and especially their parents, frequently give their various opinions about what the expectant mother should or should not eat, and should or should not do. As in the case of Betty's sister-in-law, this includes advice on when the birth should occur. Sometimes relatives are keen to consult divination to pick an auspicious date and time for childbirth, which might or might not coincide with the intention of the expectant parents.

It is not clear whether Betty's brother-in-law consulted a diviner about the time of birth on his own initiative or whether he was prompted to do so by Betty's father-in-law. I have documented other cases in which expectant parents consulted divination about the birth date and time because their parents had persuaded them to do so: out of respect for their seniors and for the sake of family harmony. Of course, many expectant parents take this initiative themselves. But, whoever initiates the consultation, many

expectant parents do not follow divination advice. So why do expectant parents, grandparents, or other interested parties go to the cost and trouble of consulting divination to find an auspicious birth date and time? I suggest that this is because they are fate-conscious. However, as I show below, they do not let this desire to achieve a good fate dictate their actions: decisions are never based entirely on acquiring good fortune.

Instead of visiting a diviner, a minority of expectant parents and grandparents identify an auspicious date and time themselves by reading 通勝 (*tung sing*): a convenient and low- or no-cost alternative. *Tung sing* is an almanac which is widely available in bookshops, and cheap, costing under HKD\$ 100. It can also be checked online or downloaded as a free mobile application. It is actually a handbook of hemerology, which specifies auspicious and inauspicious dates and times for different types of activity.⁶⁸ Hemerology is a form of divination with a very long tradition in China. Raphals (2013) reported that hemerological texts are commonly found in tombs in China, the oldest dating back to 300 BCE. Following the convention of ancient hemerological texts, *tung sing* identifies auspicious and inauspicious dates for specific activities, such as weddings, travel, medical appointments, house building, and burials. Even trivial everyday activities, such as haircuts and meetings with friends, are covered. However, *tung sing* does not specify auspicious dates and times for giving birth because historically, before the possibility of Caesarean deliveries, no one was able to choose the moment of a baby's birth. My informants who

⁶⁸ Although *tung sing* contains much other information, usually on a basic level, such as on oneiromancy, *cing gwat* (稱骨, literally 'weighing of bones': a form of divination) and samples of Chinese talismans, its main use is for hemerology.

consulted *tung sing* told me that they just picked a day which was generally good, or at least not bad. For example, Bambi told me that there were no good dates during the two-week period when she could have a Caesarean, so she just picked a date which was not very bad.

When I asked Asamu why she wanted to pick an auspicious date and time for her Caesarean, she answered, ‘I don’t think I can give my child anything else, so I want to give her a good destiny’. Other expectant parents said that doing so made them feel more relaxed, or relieved (安心, *ngon sam*). What is it that expectant parents and grandparents worry about? Chumama said that she was worried about labour. She hoped that, by picking a date and time that did not clash with her own eight characters horoscope, both she and her baby would be protected during labour. When Asamu had an ultrasound test for structural foetal anomalies during her second trimester, she was told that her baby had a cyst on the brain (a choroid plexus cyst). This is a fairly common condition, requiring no treatment, which usually resolves itself either during the third trimester or within a few months after the birth. It very rarely causes any abnormality in the baby. Nevertheless, such news is worrying for expectant parents who are concerned and anxious about their unborn child’s well-being. Actively pursuing good destiny for their child eases their concern during pregnancy, acting as a focus of hope that the birth process will be problem-free and that their baby will enjoy good health and fortune.

Although Hong Kong is an affluent city, many people here face stress, anxiety, and depression. High property prices and living costs are a

common problem. Housing in the city has been rated as the least affordable in the world for the last ten years (Arcibal 2020). Many expectant parents worry about the increased expenses associated with a baby, such as the cost of a domestic carer to help look after the baby, or of moving to a bigger apartment. At the same time, they start to worry about their children's schooling and the expense which that involves. Hong Kong is a very meritocratic society and its education system is rigorous and highly competitive. Social pressure is high, including to provide children with the best possible education. Children therefore have to undergo school admission interviews at the age of three (Davis 2019)! Applications to top-ranking kindergartens start even before the child is born. Many parents I met during fieldwork were considering sending their toddlers to pre-nursery at the age of two, and some sent their toddlers to playgroups offering pre-nursery interview training to equip them for the application. In this competitive environment, not only parents but also many young children suffer from stress, and some children even show signs of depression due to the homework, tutorials, and examinations they have to complete. However, most Hong Kong parents have no choice but to subject their children to the city's punishing educational norms.⁶⁹

As well as concerns about their children's mental well-being, expectant parents also worry about providing for their children financially: this is a different but similar concern to that of giving birth to a healthy baby. They

⁶⁹ For example, I was applying for a pre-nursery place for my son when he was aged 18 months. One requirement was a 2-minute video of him singing, even though he could not then even talk, except to say 'baba'. One popular kindergarten in the city received over 1,000 applications for its 60 full-day pre-nursery places. Some popular preschools have even lower acceptance rates. The competition is even greater for primary school places: some popular schools receive over 6,000 applications for 150 places.

hope that their children will have a *better destiny* and therefore not be affected by such problems. Betty's father-in-law favoured an eight characters horoscope for his grandchildren that would bring financial fortune to their parents and grandparents, but he did not want the money for himself or his son or daughter, only for the grandchildren's benefit. Expectant parents or grandparents who use divination in the hope of achieving good fortune for their children are demonstrating their love and care for their descendants.

Cultural differences in mothering practices are well documented in the literature. For example, Stuart-Macadam's and Dettwyler's (1995) edited volume, *Breastfeeding: Biocultural Perspectives*, suggests that breastfeeding practices are shaped largely by cultural factors. In the context of the United States, Dettwyler (1995) argued that the local association of breasts with beauty and sex, rather than with baby care, is the reason behind the decrease in breastfeeding in the USA. In China, Zhu (2010) described the generational shift in ideas about prenatal nutrition. She argued that the ideology of scientific knowledge, a key feature of the post-Mao modernization project in China, persuaded the new generation of mothers to approach health matters scientifically. Zhu reported that expectant mothers nowadays feel pressured to consume a range of nutritional supplements and to monitor their nutritional intake. The focus is on ensuring that they receive enough nutrition to give birth to a healthy baby. While earlier generations of mothers had the same concern, they believed that good nutrition during pregnancy should be obtained from fresh food from farmer's markets.

In Hong Kong, the extremely high prevalence of both divination practice and discourse about fate indicates the high level of residents' fate-consciousness. I suggest that wanting to give a baby a good destiny, including divining for an auspicious birth date, is part of the city's characteristics of parenting, and perhaps also of grandparenting. Han (2013) looked at pregnant middle-class women in the United States, and argued that everyday pregnancy-related activities, such as taking a home pregnancy test, sharing ultrasound images with relatives and friends, shopping, and remodelling the home to accommodate the baby, are practices by which unborn babies are made important in the lives of parents awaiting their birth. Han suggested that these common practices help mothers to build a sense of intimacy with the unborn child. Following Han's argument, I suggest that consulting divination for an auspicious birth date and time serves a similar function for pregnant women in Hong Kong: to establish a link with the unborn child and to make its arrival seem more imminent. I also suggest that, for middle-class Hong Kong families, actively pursuing a good destiny for their unborn child (made possible by private obstetric care) is not just a way of combating anxiety during pregnancy, but also a way of anticipating parenthood.

A different but similar parenting trait

'I believe in (the rulings of) the eight characters horoscope', said Fiona, who believed that fate is at work in everyone's life. She chose not to give birth by Caesarean section, although her doctor suggested this when her

foetus became larger than expected towards the end of her pregnancy. She was worried that having a Caesarean at a deliberately chosen auspicious time might harm her baby if the baby did not deserve such an auspicious eight characters horoscope. She went on to recount stories she had heard about babies born by Caesarean on a divined auspicious date who later suffered various illnesses because they could not manage as good a destiny as that assigned to them through mundane interference. Although Fiona did not explicitly use the term *jip lik*, her reasoning reflected the ideology of how *jip lik* operates in the process of reincarnation. She preferred to have a potentially difficult natural birth in order to secure for her child a natural and true destiny, free from avoidable calamity. This is another example of wanting to procure good fate for one's child.

Penny is a diviner who practises both 紫微斗數 (*Zi Mei Dau Sou*), a fate-calculating divination technique, and Fengshui divination. She planned to give birth by Caesarean section, and had divined an auspicious date for herself. She explained that she chose a Caesarean because she had gestational diabetes. If her physical condition had been better, she would not have chosen to have a surgical cut in her belly. While we occupied adjacent hospital beds (when she was having her regular blood sugar check and I was waiting for my ecobolic to take effect and induce contractions) she said that humans could not and should not try to change the destiny prescribed by their own and their family's *jip lik*. She believed that fate is always at work, both unpredictably and irresistibly. She explained the unpredictability of fate by hypothesizing that, if two children were born at the exact same moment, and so had the same eight characters horoscope,

but one was born to an ordinary family in Ethiopia and the other to one in Hong Kong, the Ethiopian child would still have a less fortunate destiny than the Hong Kong child, given the huge social and economic discrepancies between the two locations. (See Figure 1 and the explanation in Chapter 1 of the emic representation of Fengshui divination practitioners' view of the external forces affecting destiny.)

Penny had very much wanted to give birth by natural delivery but then needed to arrange a Caesarean in a private hospital. She was still struggling with the choice of date. I suggested that she could select a date, not by hemerology, but according to factors independent of the date's auspiciousness, such as when her partner could take paternity leave. In that sense, she would not be interfering with her baby's fate because the eventual date of the Caesarean would be 'random' in terms of auspiciousness. However, Penny admitted, with an embarrassed smile, that she just could not resist divining for herself, because she worried that a random date would be inauspicious. On one hand, she believed that a baby's true destiny could only be fulfilled through a natural delivery, without human intervention in the choice of date. On the other hand, she could not resist intervening to improve her baby's destiny. Penny's attitude to the control of fate might be ambiguous, but her attitude to her baby's fate was not: she wanted to ensure good fortune for the baby. In the event, the baby arrived early, in her thirty-sixth week of pregnancy: she viewed this as the baby finding its own way to achieve its true destiny.

Low adherence to advice about auspicious birth dates and times

In an online post on a popular local parenting website, a mother expressed concern about a big tumour found in the abdomen of her unborn baby. By the time the scan revealed the tumour, she was in her thirty-ninth week of pregnancy. When I talked to her further online, she told me the doctor had said that the foetus was already very well developed, but it was hard to tell from the ultrasound scan whether or not the tumour was malignant. Further examination could only be carried out after the baby was born. The mother was of course extremely upset. Her Caesarean section had been scheduled to take place four days later, but now she might need to deliver the baby straightaway before the tumour grew any larger. On her doctor's advice, she obtained a second opinion from a top obstetrician. She did not find the second opinion very helpful, except that it confirmed the first doctor's view that this was probably a benign 'water tumour' (ascites).

She faced two urgent questions. First, should she have a Caesarean immediately, or four days later as planned? The planned date had been chosen by a diviner, whom she had paid, and she had also paid a deposit to secure a Caesarean delivery in a private hospital at that time. Changing the scheduled date and time would involve extra costs. She was not sure how serious the problem was, and perhaps it was worth waiting just four more days in order to give birth on the auspicious date she had chosen. Secondly, should she give birth in a public hospital instead? She was worried that, if the tumour was malignant and the baby needed an immediate operation to remove it, the private hospital charges would be enormous. She and her

husband, uncertain of the best way forward, sought a third opinion from a paediatrician.

The paediatrician advised that, because her pregnancy had already reached full term, the baby should be delivered by Caesarean as soon as possible in order to avoid the tumour growing any bigger. Secondly, the paediatrician advised giving birth in a public hospital, not because of the high cost of private medical care, but because public hospitals offer better neonatal care. This precise and instructive third opinion helped the parents to act immediately. They abandoned their plan to give birth in the private hospital, and went straight to a public hospital for a Caesarean delivery. Happily, when the baby was born, the tumour was found to be benign, and little more medical intervention was required.

The first priority of parents is always the well-being of their children. While they might want to give their children good destiny by picking an auspicious birth date, this is because they wish their children to have good health and a stress-free life. When a child faces an actual health problem, parents follow medical, rather than divination, advice. The parents in the case cited above gave up any non-refundable deposit which they might have paid to private hospital, and any auspicious date they might have chosen, and chose instead to have the baby immediately in a public hospital. They did not want to wait four more days in order to give their baby a better destiny. They followed the medical advice which recommended the most practical course of action to secure the immediate well-being of their child.

Another new mother, Scarlett, consulted a diviner for an auspicious birth date and time to have her baby by Caesarean section in a private hospital. She paid a deposit to book a delivery room at the recommended time. However, she later decided to give birth by natural delivery instead. She told me that even her obstetrician was shocked by her change of mind. Scarlett explained that, at the prenatal check-up during her thirty-sixth week of pregnancy, her foetus was found to be rather small. Its birth weight was estimated to be slightly above five pounds: only just above the threshold for low birth weight. She had planned for a Caesarean because she was afraid of the extreme pain of labour. Once the baby was found to be small, she thought its delivery would be easier and less painful. That was why she then chose to deliver naturally. Scarlett told me that during her first trimester of pregnancy she had quarrelled with her husband several times about whether she should give birth by natural delivery or Caesarean section. While she favoured the latter, her husband and parents-in-law all preferred the former. Although Scarlett did not enjoy a good relationship with her parents-in-law, she eventually decided to switch to natural delivery, partly because of their preference and for the sake of family harmony. This shows that following divination advice is contingent, not only on the medical circumstances of the mother and baby, but also on personal preferences.

I suggested above that, although parents in Hong Kong are fate-conscious, they do not blindly pursue good fortune without considering other important issues, such as practical factors and personal preference. Now let me clarify this argument. Being fate-conscious refers to people's

attitude towards fate. Fate-consciousness describes people who believe in and accept the concept of fate operating in their life. From this stems the local discourse that people want to acquire good fortune so that they and their offspring will have more prosperous lives. Nevertheless, their *actions* do not necessarily follow divination advice, which might help them to obtain a better destiny. For divination practitioners, adherence to divination advice seems to rank as a very low priority.

Although expectant parents acknowledge that divination provides a way to achieve a better fate for their offspring (by undergoing a C-section at a particular date and time) they often choose not to follow its advice. While they are aware of and influenced by the concept of fate, their decisions or actions are not wholly determined by pursuing a good fate, as shown by the fact that they sometimes choose not to follow divination advice. This suggests that achieving a good fate is desirable rather than mandatory. This is analogous to Jackson's (1988) description of the Kuranko, who speak, but do not behave, fatalistically.

A common practical reason why many expectant parents choose not to follow divination advice to give birth at a particular moment is that extra costs are usually charged for hospital care at weekends, on public holidays, and outside of normal working hours (9am to 5pm). Diviners seeking an auspicious time for childbirth do not take such issues into consideration: their job is simply to discover the best date and time for the baby's destiny. As a result, the propitious birth moment identified often falls outside of doctors' and private hospitals' normal working hours. Many expectant

parents only find out about these extra charges when they book the delivery with their doctor and hospital.

Even parents prepared to pay HKD\$ 50,000 or more to have a Caesarean section in a private hospital might refuse to pay these additional charges, which can amount to HKD\$ 10,000 or more, depending on the date and time. Mr. and Mrs. One had wanted their baby to be delivered on the Saturday of Mrs. One's thirty-eighth week of pregnancy: an auspicious date which they had divined by reading *tung sing*. However, they gave this date up because it would have increased their HKD\$ 70,000 hospital bill by an extra HKD\$ 10,000. To avoid extra charges, they decided to have the Caesarean on a weekday, and eventually picked the Thursday. That choice was determined, not by auspiciousness or divination, but by practicality and their personal preference.

Pregnant women in Hong Kong are entitled to ten weeks' continuous maternity leave. While it is normal to start maternity leave four weeks before the due date, the start date can be postponed, by arrangement with the employer, to any date which is convenient. Mrs. One started her maternity leave on the Wednesday of her thirty-eighth week of pregnancy. She wanted to have a Caesarean section as soon as possible, so that she could make the most of her maternity leave to look after the newborn. She had a choice of three possible days: Wednesday, the first day of her leave, or one of the following two days before the weekend, when extra costs would be payable. She picked the Thursday because Mr. One had work commitments on the Wednesday and Friday. Private hospitals normally

allow husbands to be present during Caesarean sections, both to accompany and support their wives and, more importantly, to witness and share the joy of their child's arrival in the world. Mr. One did not want to miss their baby's birth, and the Thursday was chosen partly to suit his schedule.

Another informant, Mr. Cat, told me that, although the birth date and time divined for his baby would not have incurred extra expense, he still did not follow the diviner's advice, for which he had paid about HKD\$ 1,000. He said that none of those auspicious moments was practicable: 'Either our obstetrician was unavailable, or no delivery room was available'. He explained that all his wife's prenatal check-ups had been conducted by the same obstetrician, who was familiar with her situation, and they had developed a relationship of trust. They did not want to switch to another obstetrician just for the sake of following the divinatory advice. Mr. Cat and his wife did not consider switching to another hospital, which might have a bed available for a Caesarean at the specified time, because they wanted their trusted obstetrician (who only worked in this hospital) to continue caring for Mrs. Cat.

Zeitlyn (2020:185) discussed the difficulties of identifying the role played by divination in participants' lives from their own life-stories: 'retrospective accounts of decision-making may be very different from how a situation was understood at the time'. I suggest that a similar problem arises when trying to explain the actions of expectant parents in Hong Kong. It is widely believed, as I outlined at the beginning of this

chapter, that the high local rate of Caesarean births is caused by parents following diviners' advice on an auspicious time to give birth in order to secure a good destiny for their child. This overlooks the fact that many parents do not follow that advice. It is not generally acknowledged that practical considerations, such as extra hospital charges, medical factors, and personal circumstances, not only dissuade expectant parents from adhering to divination advice, but are actually the key factors in parents' decisions: first about whether to have a Caesarean section, and later about the actual date and time for the baby's delivery.

Hemerology: Eight Characters divination

Expectant mothers who opt for a Caesarean section can choose any time for the procedure from the start of their thirty-eighth week of pregnancy. Any date beyond the fortieth week is likely to be too late: most babies are ready to explore the world before then. Everything in private hospitals is chargeable. If a date is booked for a Caesarean section and the mother goes into labour before that date, a private hospital will charge extra for providing emergency care on a different date. That extra charge is normally at least HKD\$ 10,000. To avoid such unplanned and expensive changes, doctors usually advise picking a date between the thirty-eighth and the fortieth weeks of pregnancy. Also, doctors often persuade expectant mothers to pick an earlier rather than a later date so that the doctor does not have to reschedule appointments with other patients if the birth takes place early.

The Eight Characters divination technique is commonly used in hemerology to determine the auspiciousness of a date and time, and a person's horoscopic life pattern. Experienced divination participants learn that many constraints limit the number of truly auspicious birth moments, and that some of those constraints are uncontrollable. Homola (2013:135) reported that 'because of the rise in the number of Caesareans [in Taiwan], some fortune-tellers assert that fate is not determined by the date of birth but by the date of conception'. That assertion could indeed be understood from the epistemology of the Eight Characters divination.

A person's eight characters horoscope, as deduced by the Eight Characters divination technique, is made up of four pillars. Each pillar contains two characters: the first character from the ten Heavenly Stems and the second character from the twelve Earthly Branches.⁷⁰ The four pillars are deduced respectively from the year, month, day, and time of a person's birth, and collectively they represent the life pattern of that person. For example, in the Chinese calendar, 2019 is the year of 己亥 (*Gei Hoi*), with 己 being the Heavenly Stem and 亥 being the Earthly Branch. All babies born in the year of *Gei Hoi* have *Gei Hoi* as their yearly pillar.⁷¹ 2020 is the year of 庚子 (*Gang Zi*); in turn, *Gang Zi* is the yearly pillar of 2020. To explain the malleable fixity characteristic of *mingyun* (destiny), Homola (2018) used the example of the conjunctions of the fixed *ming* and the annually changing cosmological *yun*, that is *lau nin*. In 2019, *Gei Hoi* is

⁷⁰ See Footnote 26 in Chapter 2 for an introduction to the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches, the pillars, and their relation to the Sexagenary Cycle.

⁷¹ More precisely, the year of *Gei Hoi* in 2019 lasted from 11:14 on 4 February 2019 until 17:03 on 4 February 2020. So a baby born on 4 February 2020 at 18:00 does not have *Ji Hai* as its yearly pillar, but *Gang Zi*, the next yearly pillar.

the corresponding *lau nin*; in 2020 it is *Gang Zi*. Under the Sexagenary Cycle, each yearly pillar repeats every 60 years. This means that the extent of auspiciousness from which a person would benefit in a particular year depends on how the fixed *ming*, that is his or her eight characters horoscope, interacts with that specific yearly pillar, that is *lau nin*. The organizing principle of such interactions is governed by the rules of *Ng hang*, and the individual relationship, such as the working orders of the Combinations and the Clashes, that each Heavenly Stem and each Earthly Branch has with the others.⁷²

Following these principles, when picking an auspicious date and time for a baby's birth, we can consider the yearly pillar as fixed and the monthly pillar as malleable. Take the year of 己亥 as an example. 亥 has the *Ng hang* of water. If the monthly pillar has an Earthly Branch which has the *Ng hang* of wood, this is auspicious, since water gives rise to wood in the construction cycle of *Ng hang*.⁷³ What is more, in the working order of the Combination of the Earthly Branches, each Earthly Branch pairs up and combines with one other Earthly Branch with a different *Ng hang* to make the two Earthly Branches which are mutually compatible. For example, 亥 (water) combines with the Earthly Branch of 寅 (*jan*) (wood).⁷⁴ The combination of these Earthly Branches is considered to be

⁷² Chapter 2 outlines two working orders, the Combinations and the Clashes, that operate within the Heavenly Stems. The same orders apply also to the Earthly Branches. Raphals (2013) pointed out that many but not all hemerology techniques or systems use *Ng hang* and these two working orders of the Heavenly Stems/ Earthly Branches as their organizing principle.

⁷³ See footnote 31 in Chapter 2 for the construction/ destruction cycle of *Ng hang*.

⁷⁴ The relationship between the *Ng hang* of the two different elements is an important determination of auspiciousness. The combinations of the pair of Earthly Branches/ Heavenly Stems are only favourable if they have different *Ng hang* which follow the

highly favourable because 亥 and 寅 form an auspicious combination and their corresponding *Ng hang* also forms a constructive interrelationship.

Comparably, a month which has an Earthly Branch belonging to the *Ng hang* of earth, an element that conquers the water of 亥, is considered unfavourable. Besides, under the working order of the Clashes, each Earthly Branch also pairs up with another Earthly Branch to form a harmful relationship, and each weakens the force of the other. 亥 and 巳 (*zi*, fire) together form such a clashing relationship.⁷⁵ So, the monthly pillar containing 巳 is also not desirable in the year of 亥, primarily because their *Ng hang* (water and fire) has a destructive/ controlling relationship (in *Ng hang*, while earth conquers water, water also conquers fire, and therefore water is also weakened) and the relationship between the two Earthly Branches themselves also clashes. That is, if a monthly pillar has the Earthly Branch of 午 (*ng*), which also has the *Ng hang* of fire but itself does not pair with 亥 to form a clashing relationship, then 午 would be less inauspicious than 巳 when interacting with 亥. Similar interaction rules also apply to Heavenly Stems when determining the auspiciousness of

constructive relationship of *Ng hang* (see footnote 31 in Chapter 2). The Combination will be unfavourable if the pair of Earthly Branches/ Heavenly Stems have a different *Ng hang* which is under the destructive cycle of *Ng hang* (see footnote 31 in Chapter 2). An example of an unfavourable Combination is when the Earthly Branch of 子 (*zi*, water) combines with the Earthly Branch of 丑 (*cau*, earth).

⁷⁵ Similarly, the two Earthly Branches which together form the clashing relationship do not always have two *Ng hang* which are in a 'destructive' relationship, such as the water of 亥 and the fire of 巳. In another example, the Earthly Branch of 丑 forms a destructive combination with the Earthly Branch of 未 (*mei*) and both Earthly Branches have the *Ng hang* of earth. Inauspiciousness would be greater in the clashing of 亥 (water) and 巳 (fire) than between 丑 (earth) and 未 (earth) because the same *Ng hang* of 丑 and 未 does not form a harmful relationship.

dates and times,⁷⁶ but interactions between Earthly Branches usually carry more weight.

What does this partial epistemology of the Eight Characters divination tell us? Expectant parents can choose any date between their thirty-eighth and fortieth weeks of pregnancy to give birth by Caesarean section. With luck, that two-week period will cover two successive months and the diviner will identify which monthly pillar is more auspicious. However, many parents have no choice about the monthly pillar and can choose only the date and time within the fixed month and year. This might explain why, according to Homola (2013), some diviners in Taiwan see fate as being determined by the date of conception rather than the date of birth. Clearly, the date of conception determines the date of birth. If the estimated due date falls within a month whose monthly pillar is not favourable to the yearly pillar, then a diviner can only pick from within that date range. Some diviners I met believe that the availability of a truly auspicious combination of year, month, date, and time for giving birth during that short two-week period is partly dependant on the parents' *jip lik*. That is, if the parents have an accumulatively good karmic record, their offspring will benefit from this and will deserve the opportunity to be born at an auspicious moment, thus obtaining an auspicious eight characters horoscope, and vice versa. Of course, the ultimate moment of birth, and therefore the destiny of a child, depend largely on the *jip lik* accumulated

⁷⁶ In practice, more rules usually apply when determining the auspiciousness of date and time, and they can be very complicated. However, they all point to the effect of the monthly pillar on the overall auspiciousness of a person's eight characters horoscope.

by the newborn's soul, as determined by its own and its ancestors' deeds in previous lives.

Diviners' newborns

Mikiki and his wife Mimiku planned to have a *Gei Hoi* baby. Back at the beginning of 2018 they were both calculating which month and corresponding monthly pillar, when conjoined with the yearly pillar of *Gei Hoi*, would give a good eight characters horoscope to the baby itself, and match and be favourable for the eight characters horoscopes of both of them as parents. They found that February and March 2019, which respectively had the monthly pillars of 丙寅 (*Bing Jan*) and 丁卯 (*Ding Maau*), were desirable. In order to identify the best month for the baby to be born, they went so far as to calculate the best approximate time for conception. Their plans were thwarted: they did not conceive. They gave up trying when it became too late for a baby to be born in February or March, and then Mimiku became pregnant. Their son was born in May 2019.

Mikiki and Mimiku had long discussions over several months about whether or not they should opt for birth in a private hospital. The only reason they considered this was so that the baby could be delivered at a time that would suit both baby and parents. Mimiku wanted a natural delivery because they planned to have another child, and doctors usually suggest waiting for two years after a Caesarean before trying for another

baby. Also, having a Caesarean section increases the risk of complications in future pregnancies, and she did not want to risk the well-being of a second child. An equally important factor for Mimiku was that natural delivery leads to better medical outcomes for both mother and baby, as explained above.

‘I really can’t pick any date’, Mikiki said. Mimiku’s due date was in the month of 戊辰 (*Mou San*), both of these characters having the *Ng hang* of earth. The Heavenly Stems of the yearly pillar, *Gei*, also belong to the *Ng hang* earth element. Mikiki’s concern was that, whatever date and time they chose, the baby would have unbalanced *Ng hang* elements in his eight characters horoscope, since the earth element was taking up so much weight, even though the other two pillars were not yet known. He explained that earth ‘conquers’ water, and the heavy earth element in the baby’s eight characters horoscope would result in the water element being badly harmed. As a result, the persons and aspects represented by the water element in his eight characters horoscope might be adversely affected. ‘If he learns Eight Characters divination one day, and finds out that his water element is very weak, he might blame me for picking that eight characters horoscope for him’, Mikiki feared.

Among the options in the two weeks before Mimiku’s due date, there were few auspicious combinations of date and time. Although Mikiki knew that having a Caesarean before the thirty-eighth week of pregnancy was likely to be inadvisable, he went to an antenatal check-up with Mimiku and asked the obstetrician whether it would be possible for Mimiku to have a

Caesarean in her thirty-sixth week of pregnancy, which would be the last week of the month of *Ding Maau*. The doctor refused: an unsurprising but still disappointing response. Mikiki was in a dilemma about whether he should pick a date and time for his wife to have a Caesarean. There was no date and time he could pick which would be acceptable to him, but he feared that the baby would have an even worse eight characters horoscope if Mimiku gave birth by natural delivery.

Mikiki then went to *Gun Jam* (觀音, Avalokitesvara) Temple to consult stick divination.⁷⁷ The question he presented for divination in front of the Goddess was: ‘should I pick a date and time for the birth of my son by Caesarean section?’ The divination outcome was this poem:

守舊守舊 事有成就

動則多殃 靜則無咎

Stay with the tradition, thing could be accomplished.

Move will cause calamity, stillness will cause no blame.

Hatfield (2002:870) examined the chronotopic character of Taiwanese *chhiam* divination poems and discussed ambiguity in poetic divination messages: ‘even the most promising or auspicious *chhiam* contain a hidden danger and even the most inauspicious [contain] the hope of a favourable reversal’. However, the poetic message which Mikiki received was very straightforward and directly applicable to his enquiry. The poem’s advice was that, if the couple chose the traditional option, which they understood

⁷⁷ Stick divination is sometimes also referred to as poetic divination. Stick divination procedures are documented in Hatfield (2002).

to mean natural delivery, they would get what they wanted: a good eight characters horoscope (destiny) for their baby. Mikiki interpreted the reference to ‘any move’ as meaning the action of choosing a date and time for a Caesarean; the poem indicated that this would cause calamity and that they should remain ‘still’, i.e. do nothing. So the message seemed to say clearly that the couple should just await a natural birth.

Mikiki eventually agreed to Mimiku’s choice of a natural delivery. But in his heart he hoped for an early birth in the month of *Ding Maau*. He started buying ‘cold’ food for Mimiku in the thirty-fourth week of her pregnancy. In Chinese medicine, women in late pregnancy, from around the thirty-sixth week, are advised to eat ‘cold’ foods, such as watermelon, green bean soup, and grass jelly, once or twice a week. This enables a process called 清胎毒 (*cing toi duk*), which literally means clearing toxins from the foetus. It is believed to help remove ‘hotness’ from the mother’s body, which detoxifies the foetus, so that the baby suffers fewer problems such as allergies and eczema. While ‘cold’ food seems to be good for late pregnancy, consuming too much of it can lead to an early birth. Mikiki bought ‘cold’ foods, not only two weeks earlier than is recommended, but also more often, bringing some home every two days. When he learned that a woman gave birth one evening after eating a tiny piece of watermelon the day before, he went out and bought a big watermelon and asked Mimiku to eat the whole thing. Another day, he heard that dried beancurd sweet soup might cause early birth, and he brought home a big bowl of it. Mikiki did everything he could to bring about the early birth of his son. Mimiku, for her part, also wanted the baby to arrive early since an earlier date seemed

to offer a better destiny for the baby. She therefore consumed all the ‘cold’ food that Mikiki brought home. In the end, it was not only the divination poem that persuaded him to agree to a natural delivery, but also Mimiku’s preference, his dissatisfaction with the limited choice of available auspicious dates, and his worry about being blamed by his son in the future.

Hart had been practising divination for about five years. I took my newborn son with me to meet him and other divination practitioners, all either new parents or parents-to-be, for a coffee and a catch-up on parenthood and divination usage. Hart’s wife was pregnant, and the child was expected in two months’ time. Hart knew that Mikiki, who was also at the gathering, had recently become a father and asked if Mikiki had picked a date for his wife to have a Caesarean. When Mikiki told him that Mimiku had given birth naturally, Hart was curious about the effect this might have had on baby’s destiny and asked: ‘Is his eight characters horoscope okay?’ Mikiki responded that he was very thankful that the boy had a good (natural) destiny. When some of our common divination practitioner friends asked Mikiki on other occasions about his son’s eight characters horoscope, he answered consistently and with pride: ‘This is his fate! It is better to have let him choose it himself’. This simple response not only ignores the long story behind his choice, but also reveals how parenthood lessened, or even overtook, his original focus on divination and fate. I stated at the beginning of this chapter that Mikiki had described people planning to give birth by Caesarean without consulting a diviner on an auspicious birth date and time as ‘irrational’ and ‘nonsensical’. Those comments were made before he had experienced fatherhood. He did not

know then how factors such as personal preference and practicality might come to prevail in parental decision-making.

Hart, on the other hand, picked a date and time for his wife to have a Caesarean section as soon as he found out that she was pregnant. He chose a date in the thirty-eighth week of her pregnancy. However, the baby arrived four weeks earlier. When I asked him later what he thought of his baby's early birth, by which of course he tacitly understood that I meant the baby's eight characters horoscope, he replied: 'Everything has turned out for the best'. His wife eventually gave birth in a public hospital, because private hospitals do not usually admit expectant mothers until their thirty-sixth week of pregnancy. Hart also said that he was very happy to have saved almost HKD\$ 120,000 by avoiding the private hospital bill.

The high cost of private care which he had been spared would have included additional charges for choosing delivery at the weekend and in the middle of the night. Unlike Mr. and Mrs. One and many other expectant parents, who avoided additional charges, Hart had been willing to pay extra. He explained that the moment of birth he had picked, and therefore the corresponding eight characters horoscope, was particularly auspicious for the child's future study, career, and health. He said that, being a diviner himself, he knew the value of a good eight characters horoscope. So he was willing to pay the enormous hospital bill in order to give his child a good fate. In other words, he accepted that some financial cost was necessary to gain the reward of a good destiny for his child. In addition, his baby was born at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, and he had wanted it to

be born in a private hospital, even if he could not choose the date and time, because of his lack of confidence in public hospitals (a view widely shared in Hong Kong). This case again demonstrates that divination is not the sole factor determining parental decisions, even for a practising and committed diviner.

The importance of personal preferences and practicality

As described above, some expectant parents did decide to have their babies delivered by Caesarean section in a private hospital and sought divination advice on auspicious birth dates and times. Of course, many mothers give birth in public hospitals, largely for financial reasons. They might also want to consult divination for an auspicious birth date and time, but since a Caesarean delivery, and hence a choice of birth date, is not an option for them, they are unlikely to consult divination for this reason. Nonetheless, it is consistently found that these parents also list personal preferences and practicality as high priorities in childbirth-related decisions, just like those who give birth in private hospitals.

Daisy told me: ‘high charges in private hospitals are a real problem’. She added that, if she had any spare money, she would rather spend it on a holiday than on private hospital care. However, another key reason for her decision to give birth in a public hospital was that she wanted to give birth by natural delivery and to breastfeed her baby, both of which practices are encouraged by public hospitals. In public hospitals, formula milk is only provided if the mother is unable to breastfeed her baby for medical reasons.

Some mothers consider that giving birth in a public hospital will help them settle more easily into a breastfeeding routine, since they will be expected there to nurse the baby every three hours, which helps to establish and increase milk supply.

Daisy is a full-time mother. When we had this discussion, she had a three-year-old daughter and was pregnant with another baby girl. Although she was living with her parents-in-law, they could provide little help with either childcare or housework. She was determined to breastfeed her younger daughter because this is a healthier option than formula milk, and she wanted to provide the best for her baby. Equally important for her was that, as she had learned with her first child, breastfeeding would save the considerable time and work involved in constantly washing and sterilizing milk bottles and a breast pump. Daisy's choice to give birth in a public hospital was based on a mixture of personal preferences and the practical demands of her domestic and financial situation.

Daisy did not consult any divination about the birth of either of her children. Does this mean that she did not care about or believe in divination? Of course, there are people in Hong Kong who rarely or never consult divination. However, most of them are sympathetic to the idea of divination and to those who consult diviners. Daisy told me that her own Chinese name was recommended by a diviner whom her mother visited and paid. And that her sister visited a diviner to pick an auspicious birth date and time before having a baby by Caesarean section in a private

hospital. Although Daisy herself had not consulted divination, she was by no means unsympathetic towards its use by others.

Isabella also gave birth to her second child in a public hospital. She was a schoolteacher in her early thirties, and her first child was born near the start of the summer holiday. She felt as though she had missed out on her maternity leave, since it overlapped with her summer teaching break. She hoped that her second child would be born in May, so that the summer break would start immediately after her maternity leave ended. In this way, she could maximize her time off work, which would allow her to spend about four months at home with her newborn. Isabella's plan succeeded, and she gave birth to her second child in the following May.

I asked Isabella why she had decided to give birth in a public hospital despite the fact that her husband and mother would have preferred her to have private hospital care. She explained that, as a civil servant, she was entitled to enhanced care in a public hospital at a discounted rate. Paying a rate similar to that paid by non-civil servants for a shared room of six to eight in a public hospital, she could stay in a semi-private or even a private room. She said that a private room would have cost her at least HKD\$ 100,000 in a private hospital, and the large sum of money she saved could be used for her children's future education or medical costs if needed. For all these reasons, Isabella chose to give birth in a public rather than a private hospital. Like Daisy, Isabella weighed both her personal preferences and financial considerations before choosing public hospital care.

I also recorded 20 cases (see Table 1) in which expectant mothers gave birth by Caesarean section in private hospitals without consulting divination for auspicious birth dates and times. A typical example is Kirsty. Although she was a divination participant, she did not plan to consult a diviner for an auspicious date and time to give birth. This was because she had heard from other people that extra charges always apply if a mother wants to give birth at a chosen date and time. Also, she wanted to time the birth so as to allow herself and her husband to arrange easily for maternity and paternity leave. She therefore thought that divination was not needed. Just like those who consulted divination for a birth date, she prioritized personal preference and practicality.

Divination as a secondary consideration

As portrayed above, Mrs. One chose to have a C-section for her delivery, nevertheless, she did not make up her mind until the end of her thirty-sixth week of pregnancy. She had originally wanted to give birth by Caesarean but, as she learned more about motherhood, she changed her mind and decided instead for a natural delivery. 'I think a Caesarean section is a quick and convenient method of delivery, but now I want to experience the (labour) pain of being a mother', she said during her second trimester of pregnancy. Mrs. One was tiny, just five feet tall. At a check-up in the thirty-fifth week of her pregnancy, her obstetrician suggested she should have a Caesarean section because her foetus was large relative to her body

size, and natural delivery would be very difficult for both her and the baby. So Mrs. One eventually opted for a Caesarean section.

She told me consistently throughout her pregnancy that, if she decided to have a Caesarean section, she and her husband would consult divination for an auspicious birth date and time. Like other parents, they wanted their child to have a good destiny. Mr. One had admired a very well-reputed diviner in Hong Kong for a long time. Mrs. One told me that she had not believed in and had never consulted divination before she met her husband, but that he had gradually changed her mind. She said that the diviner favoured by Mr. One had previously predicted that shares in logistic companies would increase in value in 2017. Sure enough, in that year, a mainland Chinese firm acquired a major local logistics company, and all local logistics firms benefited from this to some extent. Mrs. One gave me several other examples of the accuracy of that diviner's predictions and opinions. She admitted being influenced by the divination stories with which her husband continually bombards her, and that she was now also a divination participant.

Although the couple had planned, when they first anticipated a Caesarean delivery, to ask that master for an auspicious date and time to give birth, eventually, they did not do so because Mrs. One changed her mind mid-way and decided on a natural delivery. In the end, she had to have a Caesarean section for medical reasons. As described above, they picked an auspicious date and time themselves by reading *tung sing*, but then disregarded that advice because of the doctor's unavailability on the

day in question. I asked why they had not consulted the master whom Mr. One admired, instead of using *tung sing*. They said there had not been enough time to consult him because there were only two weeks left before Mrs. One's thirty-eighth week of pregnancy. That was why Mr. One had resorted to *tung sing*.

By the time Mrs. One was pregnant, both Mr. and Mrs. One believed and were very interested in the prognoses and predictions of divination. Did their behaviour show that they did not care about divination? The answer is both Yes and No. They did care about divination: they were both participants and showed great interest in the subject. Knowing about my research on divination, they often asked me questions about fengshui and Fengshui divination, and we also talked at length about other divination techniques and practices. However, although they had planned to consult a famous diviner for an auspicious birth date and time when they were thinking of having a Caesarean delivery at the beginning of Mrs. One's pregnancy, they did not do so as they later changed their plan for a natural delivery. Mr. and Mrs. One's short ethnographic details show that divination was not the most important factor in their choices about the birth of their child. Although they later felt the need to consult divination for an auspicious birth date and time, they chose an easier way to do so, and then did not follow the advice.

Other factors informing decision-making

Most people in Hong Kong have at least some interest in or curiosity about divination. Since I started my research on divination in 2016, I have come across only a rare few extreme dissenters. Eleanor was one of them: not only did she not believe in divination, she had a hostile attitude towards it. When she had a Caesarean section in a private hospital, she selected the birth date and time solely according to the availability of her obstetrician and an operation room. When I started an online thread asking why people consulted, or wanted to consult, divination to choose an auspicious date and time for a Caesarean, Eleanor commented:

‘If you are a responsible parent, you do not need to pick an auspicious date and time to give birth. Billionaires would not need to divine for an auspicious date to give birth to their offspring. [...] Those babies who were born according to the divined date and time, do they all have a good fate? It is a lie that giving birth on an auspicious date and time will give a child a good destiny. [...] A really good destiny for a child is if its parents have deep pockets! You have studied so much, why do you believe in such non-scientific and illogical things?’

Eleanor was an active participant in a local online forum where parents exchange ideas about and discuss pregnancy and parenthood. She believed that, not divination, but devoted love and financial provision give a child a good destiny. She might not have cared about divination, but she did care about obstetric costs in private hospitals, obstetricians’ experience and qualifications, post-partum recovery, the pros and cons of different brands

of formula milk, babies' weight gains, and so on: all this was revealed in the several threads which she started (and to which I responded) online. She had the same concerns about pregnancy and parenthood as any other parents. Although she did not subscribe to the use of divination about childbirth, nor probably about anything else, she loved her baby in the same way as the parents who used divination in order to give to their children a good life. While some parents consult divination and its advice when making decisions about pregnancy and childbirth, Eleanor consulted online forums and discussions when making hers. Her case demonstrates that divination is just one of many different means used by parents seeking information.

The above ethnographic details about informants are not intended to show that divination is irrelevant to expectant parents, nor to the everyday lives of people in Hong Kong. On the contrary, they reveal how divination is used, valued, and discussed in different situations. Zeitlyn (2020:17) suggested that divination is 'a technology that assists decision-making (or is at least *involved* in decision-making)' (my emphasis), although not everyone favours this particular type of technology or employs it to obtain information. Mikiki did not fully rely on the divination poem he obtained to inform his decision about natural delivery, but he highly valued his wife's, and especially his own, subjective feelings about the entire childbirth process. In contrast to Mikiki's indecisiveness, Betty's sister-in-

law was clear that she was going to have a Caesarean. She did not need to resort to divination to make up her mind about this. Even so, it is obvious that they both wanted to give their child a good destiny. Mikiki and his wife eventually opted for natural delivery rather than a Caesarean section, not because they did not want to give their son a good destiny, but because Mikiki could not pick a truly auspicious eight characters horoscope for the baby, and therefore hoped that the boy would choose a good one for himself.

As I suggested above, wanting to give a child a good destiny or life is a common aspect of parenting in Hong Kong. The use of divination to ensure an auspicious horoscope or good destiny is just one of the actions expectant parents take for their children's well-being. Mikiki and Mimiku calculated their preferred month of conception in order to achieve a favourable monthly pillar for their son's eight characters horoscope. Isabella chose her preferred month of conception in order to gain the longest possible time off work to be with her baby. Mikiki and Mimiku were guided by divination in their family planning in much the same way as Isabella was guided by her school's teaching schedule.

The use of divination is different in each case: it might be consulted to inform the choice of mode of delivery, or the birth date and time. Whatever it is used for, the results of divination are often balanced against, and less compelling than, personal preferences, practicality, and any factors threatening the immediate or foreseeable well-being of the baby. Divination is certainly a technology of decision-making. It is very widely

used in Hong Kong to inform decisions relating to childbirth. The low adherence to advice obtained suggests that users of this technology are more committed to the process than to the outcome: this argument is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Baby naming and adherence to divination advice

Chapter 6 shows that picking an auspicious date and time for a baby's birth (by Caesarean delivery) has important financial consequences for expectant parents. It is not the divination that is expensive, but having a Caesarean at a particular date and time in a private hospital. However, limited financial resources do not stop Hong Kong parents from wanting to give their children a good destiny. In this chapter, I show how Hong Kong parents also use divination after their baby is born to find auspicious an name: an alternative and much less expensive way to serve their fate-consciousness.

Destiny is determined and fixed at the moment of birth; using divination to choose an auspicious date and time for a Caesarean, can bestow a good destiny on a baby. However, many Hong Kong parents opt for the cheaper alternative, divination for nominative analysis, to provide their children with good fortune. From the perspective of an experienced divination practitioner, naming or nominative analysis is not as effective in assuring good destiny as being born at an auspicious moment: the moment of birth is fundamental in forming a person's fate. Although an auspicious name can enhance the level of prosperity enabled by one's horoscope, and

so can change one's fixed destiny to some extent, an auspicious birth moment is always the best option for achieving a good destiny.⁷⁸

Inexperienced divination practitioners and non-practitioners might be unaware of the difference in effectiveness of the two divination usages. Hong Kong has a proverb: '唔怕生壞命，最怕改壞名' (*m paa saang waai ming, zeoi paa goi waai ming*) which translates as 'one should not worry about being born with a bad destiny, but only about having a bad name'. A bad name is one that is unsuitable for a person's horoscopic pattern and therefore inauspicious; for example, if the *Ng hang* (see footnote 6 in Chapter 1) of a name is the *Gei san* to the person's horoscope then it has an unfavourable effect on their everyday encounters. In the past, there was no point in worrying about a bad destiny because, before the possibility of Caesarean sections, the time of birth could not be chosen. The proverb points to the dichotomy between uncontrollableness and controllableness. Rather than trying to act against fixed destiny, it suggests that people should focus on those aspects of their lives that are controllable, for example by behaving well and working hard, and so, by analogy, giving oneself a good name. By calculating the 'quality' of a name and acquiring an auspicious name, one can to some extent control one's life, and therefore one's destiny.

⁷⁸ Chapter 1, Figure 1, shows an emic representation of Hong Kong Fengshui divination participants' view of external forces affecting destiny. The current chapter describes divination practitioners who rely on nominative analysis to bring better destiny. Although they might have different views of forces affecting destiny, and refer to different types of divination techniques to alter a fixed destiny, the two types of divination practitioners do not contradict each other (some divination practitioners use both kinds of divination to change their destiny) and they all act with the aim of controlling and acquiring good fortune for themselves or their children.

I asked some parents who had given birth in public hospitals how they had named their babies. About four-fifths⁷⁹ of them had at least used divination for nominative analysis (see Table 2 in the next section), which again confirms Hong Kong parents' desire to give their children a good destiny. The vignettes in Chapter 6 show that decisions about hospital type, mode of delivery, and birth date and time for C-sections are informed by a mix of factors. Of these, finance is the factor that most commonly prevents parents from choosing a Caesarean birth and its corollary, the ability to choose a pre-calculated auspicious birth moment. However, when it comes to deciding babies' names, the situation is much more straightforward. All parents, whether or not they consulted divination for nominative analysis, relied on *one* simple rule: whether or not they liked the names. In other words, personal preference is overwhelmingly the strongest reason for parents' choice of baby names.

Homola (2013:127) described a diviner in contemporary Taiwan who advised her informant, whose horoscope suggested bad marriage prospects, to change her name in order to find a husband more easily. But the informant flatly refused because she *liked* her name. She explained that her father had chosen her name with great care and that she never wanted to change it. This equally implies that no one would ever pick a name that they disliked even slightly. This is because a person's name is intended to be used for a lifetime: it is part of their identity. Parents therefore believe that a good name is a lifelong gift to their child. To parents, a good name is a name that they like. As shown by the ethnography that follows, such

⁷⁹ In Table 2: (Type 1 Public + Type 2 Public)/ Total Public = (24 + 22)/ 58 = 80%.

personal preferences are more significant than the auspiciousness of a name.

It is worth noting that some people also use divination to find a new name for themselves in adulthood, in the hope of obtaining good fortune or changing their destinies. Homola (2015:48) suggested that, in Taiwan, a change of name is a corrective procedure to remove the bad influence or inauspiciousness of one's original name, and that a name can be changed several times over the course of a lifetime to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. Ideally, as well as epistemologically from the divination perspective, such action is absolutely workable and desirable. However, in real life a change of name requires a great deal of administrative paperwork: once the name has been legally changed, the name-holder must inform multiple parties, such as schools, employers, banks, pension and insurance companies, government and immigration offices, among many others, of the new name.

In the past few years I have met about fifty divination participants who, after divination for nominative analysis (either by themselves or by a diviner) found that their names were inauspicious and wanted to change them. Of these, only one executed a deed poll and changed her given name formally. Although it is always possible to execute a deed poll and change one's surname legally, this is almost unheard of except in extreme cases where someone wants to dissociate themselves from their family. All the other informants who adopted a new name did so informally. For example, they told their friends and relatives about their new (informal) names,

printed the new (informal) names on their business cards, announced it on social media such as Facebook, and renamed their social media accounts: then they used the divined name as their everyday name. Apart from convenience, another benefit of adopting a new name informally, without a deed poll, is that one can also change one's surname, in order to maximize the auspiciousness of the name (see below on name structure, destiny, and nominative analysis).⁸⁰ However, if a name is not changed officially then the new divined name, although commonly used, will be less effective in terms of bringing good fortune.

Asamu told me that the reason why she wanted to conduct a nominative analysis for her baby is that she wanted to give it a good destiny: the same reason why she chose to have a Caesarean section at a divined auspicious date and time (although her baby in fact arrived early, as described in Chapter 6). Asamu elaborated: 'If we named our daughter ourselves, what if the name was not suitable for her (fate)? There would be a lot of hassles if we need to change her name later. It is better for her to have an auspicious name right from the beginning, isn't it?' The amount of paperwork required and inconvenience caused by a name change in later life, along with the important factor of being fate-conscious, together contribute to the popularity in Hong Kong of nominative analysis for newborns to ensure that their names are propitiously chosen right from the outset.

⁸⁰ In Hong Kong, singers and movie stars commonly adopt auspicious (sur)names (via divination) at the beginning of their careers in order to achieve success in the entertainment industry.

Statistical analysis of parents' naming practices and the pursuit of good destiny

The naming practices among the group of parents I met during fieldwork can be categorized into three types: Type 1, consulting a diviner for name suggestions; Type 2, choice of a name by parents or grandparents with the aid of divination handbooks or online applications to check its auspiciousness; and Type 3, choice of a name by parents or grandparents without using any means of divination. Table 2 presents the naming practices of some parents whom I followed up with. This shows that, regardless of the type of hospital, only 27% of them used no divination at all for nominative analysis when naming their babies (Type 3).

Some parents did not use one type of naming practice only, but two types sequentially. For statistical purposes, I have classified them here according to the practice which they first adopted. For example, the parents of A used the Type 1 means of name choice first; not liking the suggested names, they then used Type 3 to finalize the baby's name: I categorized their means of name choice as Type 1. In another example, the parents of B used Type 1 first, then Type 2, and then returned to another diviner and made a Type 1 choice: I also categorized this as a Type 1 choice. My categorization is intended to map the proportion of parents who used divination at least once during their baby naming process. In fact, none of my informants who first used Type 3 later switched to Type 1 or 2. It is also remarkable that some parents first used Type 2, and then Type 1, but not Type 3. None of these parents adopted all three types of practice.

Although the statistics in Table 2 cannot accurately reflect the naming practices of parents, the ethnography below provides details of how parents used divination strategically to combine personal preference and auspiciousness.

Table 2: Statistics of parents' naming practices following births in public and private hospitals

Total population of mothers/ fathers = 96 (100%)				
	Naming practice types			
	Type 1: Visited diviner(s)	Type 2: Performed divination themselves	Type 3: Did not use any divination	Total for hospital type:
Public hospital	24 (25%)	22 (23%)	12 (12.5%)	58 (60%)
Private hospital	19 (20%)	5 (5%)	14 (14.5%)	38 (40%)
Total for practice type	43 (45%)	27 (28%)	26 (27%)	

I was eager to find out whether parents who performed divination for an auspicious birth moment were more likely also to conduct nominative analysis, given their initial action to actively pursue good fortune for their babies. Mothers who gave birth in public hospitals might not be able to choose the mode of delivery or the birth moment even if they had a Caesarean. It is therefore difficult to discover whether there is any pattern of divination usage among this group of mothers. I created Table 3 to show the use of divination about childbirth and baby naming by mothers who gave birth in private hospitals. Table 3 shows that, altogether, three-

quarters⁸¹ of parents who conducted divination for the timing of a Caesarean section also conducted nominative analysis for their newborns: this shows their consistent desire to actively pursue good fate for their offspring. However, among those who did not perform divination for childbirth, subsequent naming practices were rather random. While those who gave birth by natural delivery were equally likely to practise all three types of naming practice, nearly half of the parents who did not consult divination before give birth by Caesarean section later conducted nominative analysis when naming their babies.⁸² Although there are hardly any obvious divination usage patterns for these two types of parents, the use of nominative analysis by a significant proportion of them further confirms the particular trait among Hong Kong parents of wanting to ensure a good destiny for their children.

Table 3: Breakdown of the mode of delivery, divination consultation, and naming practices of mothers who gave birth in a private hospital

Total population of mothers = 38				
Delivery method and use of consultation	Naming practice types			
	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Row total
Caesarean section with divination	12	3	5	20
Caesarean section without divination	6	1	8	15
Natural delivery	1	1	1	3
Column total	19	5	14	

⁸¹ (Number of Caesarean sections with divination Type 1 + Number of Caesarean sections with divination Type 2)/ Total number of Caesarean sections with divination = (12+3)/20= 75%.

⁸² (Number of Caesarean sections without divination Type 1 + Number of Caesarean sections without divination Type 2)/ Total number of Caesarean sections without divination = (6+1)/ 15= 46.7%.

Name structure, destiny, and nominative analysis

In Han⁸³ Chinese names, the surname precedes the given name. Most contemporary surnames have only one Chinese character, although a rare few of them have two characters, which are called 複姓 (*fuk sing*, literally ‘double surname’) and are also in use in Hong Kong. Han Chinese given names usually have one or two characters, the latter being more common in the city. That is, Han Chinese names follow the structure: ‘Surname (given name 1)’ or ‘Surname (given name 1) (given name 2)’, with each set of brackets representing a choice of one character.

One of the most commonly used divination techniques for nominative analysis in Hong Kong is 八十一靈動數 (*baat sap jat ling dung sou*), also known simply as 靈動數 (*ling dung sou*). The word *sou* means number. As that suggests, this technique divines the auspiciousness of a name according to the number of pen strokes in an individual character and in the various combinations of characters in a person’s surname and given name(s). The phrase *baat sap jat* means eighty-one. The technique ascribes varying degrees of (in)auspiciousness to the numbers one to eighty-one. The numbers of pen strokes fall into five categories, called 五格 (*ng gaak*, literally ‘five style’). The categories are: 天格 (*tin gaak*), 人格 (*jan gaak*), 地格 (*dei gaak*), 外格 (*ngoi gaak*), and 總格 (*zung gaak*).

For example, in the name 陳大文 (*Can Daai Man*), 陳 is the surname and 大文 is the two-character given name. The respective numbers of pen

⁸³ China has 56 ethnic groups. Han is the dominant ethnic group in greater China and Hong Kong.

strokes in these characters are 16, 3, and 4.⁸⁴ *Tin gaak*, in this case, is the number of pen strokes of the one-character surname, 陳, plus one,⁸⁵ i.e. 17. *Jan gaak* refers to the sum of the pen strokes in the surname and the first character of the given name (陳 and 大) which is 19. *Dei gaak* refers to the sum of the pen strokes in both characters of the given name (大 and 文) i.e. 7. *Ngoi gaak* is the number of pen strokes in the second character of the given name, 文, plus 1, which is 5. Lastly, *zung gaak* is the sum of all the pen strokes in the whole name, which is 23. Few Chinese characters have more than thirty pen strokes. Also, Han Chinese names rarely have more than three characters, or four characters if a person has a *fuk sing*. Hence, it is unlikely that the total number of pen strokes in all the characters in a name, that is *zung gaak*, will be more than eighty-one. In all the nominative analysis cases I witnessed during fieldwork, the number of pen strokes of Han Chinese names was always less than eighty-one.

The word *tin* means heaven. *Tin gaak* is heaven-related: it derives from one's surname which is passed down through the paternal line. It represents a blessing from one's ancestors. The nature of the surname and its corresponding auspiciousness, which arises from the number of pen strokes, are given and fixed. The (in)auspiciousness of the number of pen strokes in one's surname (and to lesser extent of one's family or lineage) is therefore sometimes interpreted and understood from the perspective of the family's

⁸⁴ The number of pen strokes is calculated according to the traditional form of Chinese characters, not the simplified form.

⁸⁵ For a surname which is a *fuk sing*, *tin gaak* examines the sum of the pen strokes in the two-character surname instead. For a name with a total number of characters (including surname and given name) of two or four, such as a one-character surname with a one-character given name, or a two-character *fuk sing* surname with a two-character given name, different rules apply for determining the numbers of pen strokes in *ng gaak*.

or ancestors' *jip lik* debt level: a view described at great length by Brokaw (1991) who discussed the traditional moral order in Chinese societies. Whereas one's surname, the 'innate' fortune (i.e. *tin gaak*) is inherited and fixed, a given name can be freely chosen, with characters which might offer auspicious combinations of numbers of pen stroke.

All nominative analysis techniques examine the auspiciousness of every single character in a person's prospective name. That is, even for techniques other than *Ling Dung Sou*, the auspiciousness of the character(s) of one's original surname is always unalterable. So even my informant who changed her name by formal deed poll kept her surname, even though it was not very auspicious, and changed only her given name. Changing one's surname officially is not usually an option because it would be upsetting for one's family. As noted above, as the next best option, divination participants can change their surname 'unofficially', and informally adopt a new one. Nevertheless, their original surname never loses its (in)auspiciousness effect. This is another example of the perception of the 'malleable fixity' of one's destiny, as proposed by Elliot & Menin (2018), in that nominative analysis and auspicious naming are used by divination practitioners to control, enhance, and alter their destinies.

Some diviners, using *Ling Dung Sou* to conduct nominative analysis, give a list of suggestions for the first character of the given name and a separate list for the second character of the given name. All the characters in each list have the same number of pen strokes. Divination participants

can then pick any one character from each of the two lists to form their names. This ‘mix and match’ style means that diviners offer clients only one possible combination of auspicious pen stroke numbers.

It might seem that diviners are interfering with the name holder’s destiny because the lists of characters all have the same level of auspiciousness according to the numbers of pen strokes. However, the lists offer choices in that the different characters belong to different *Ng hang*, which might increase or reduce the overall level of auspiciousness determined by the number of pen strokes, depending on whether the character’s *Ng hang* would have a favourable or unfavourable effect on the horoscope, and therefore the destiny, of the name holder. Hence, by giving a list of suggestions obtained from divination, and leaving the final name choice to the parents/ clients, diviners protect themselves from the responsibility of interfering with the name holder’s destiny.

To protect themselves further from responsibility for changing someone’s destiny via an auspicious name, some diviners increase the ‘randomness’ of the name/ character choices by providing more than one set of lists of given names to their clients, with more possible characters and pen stroke number combinations to choose from. The number of characters given in each list varies. Diviners commonly give more choices for characters with pen stroke numbers of between 10 and 20 than for characters with pen stroke numbers of less than 10 or more than 20 because these are less common. I have also witnessed diviners performing nominative analysis who gave six to ten precise given name choices (each

containing two characters and different pen stroke combinations, representing different extents of auspiciousness).

As noted above, the *Ng hang* of the characters is also believed to affect the extent of auspiciousness for the name holder. Diviners conducting nominative analysis might also perform other divination alongside *Ling Dung Sou* to assess the *Ng hang* of the characters. For example, 五音, *Ng Jam*, is a divination technique that categorizes the *Ng hang* of Chinese characters according to their pronunciation. A diviner using both *Ling Dung Sou* and *Ng Jam* would first identify what elements are lacking from the *Ng hang* of the name owner's horoscopic pattern, and then choose characters with an auspicious number of pen strokes and the required *Ng hang*. It is generally considered that using more techniques at the same time will more effectively ensure the name's subsequent auspiciousness. However, using more than one technique is not only more time-consuming but also makes it more difficult to coordinate the results. This is because each technique may produce different and even contradictory outcomes concerning the auspiciousness of particular characters or pen stroke numbers.

During my years of fieldwork, I found few diviners who used two or more divination techniques at the same time when performing nominative analysis for clients concerning the auspiciousness of names. This is because, first, coordinating two or more techniques is a complicated task. One diviner explained that if both the number of pen strokes and *Ng hang* are considered at the same time, this leaves him with a limited range of

suitable characters to offer the client. Secondly, using two or more divination techniques produces more auspicious names and therefore increases the diviner's risk of assuming responsibility for altering the name holder's destiny.

I asked two diviners, who had used two divination techniques simultaneously for nominative analysis, why they had done so when that exposed them to a higher risk of *jip lik* payback. One had done so for his niece: family obligation meant that he had to provide 'the best' for a family member. The other diviner had been prepared to do so because he had a long-established and trusting relationship with the client, and the diviner wanted to divine an auspicious name for the client's child, despite the risk of *jip lik* payback/ recalculation.

Mikiki demonstrated an extreme case of divining for nominative analysis. In Chapter 6 I described how his and his wife's choice of natural childbirth was guided by practical factors and personal preference. When it came to naming, he decided to use divination to find the 'ultimate' auspicious name for the baby. Mikiki took more than a month to perform the nominative analysis because he was using four different techniques and trying to coordinate their respective results. He even wanted to add a fifth technique, but could not manage the increased complication of the 'matrix' of results. Besides, the local Birth Registry called and asked why the couple had not yet registered their son's birth certificate: the time limit for doing this was about to expire, and late registration would incur a fine of a few thousand Hong Kong dollars. Mikiki therefore settled for using only

four techniques. Many of the practising diviners I met during my fieldwork use only one technique when conducting divination for nominative analysis, and this is reflected in the nominative analysis cases I recorded.

I don't like the names

Some of my parent informants did not consult any divination when choosing their children's names. When I asked why they had not done so, their answers all pointed to 'problems' which they anticipated with the names that diviners might have suggested. Examples of those responses were: 'the choices are too limited', 'they are not very appealing', 'they are very old-fashioned', 'they could sound very odd', and so on: all reflected their *dislike* of the sort of names that they believed diviners would recommend. Those parents preferred to choose names whose pronunciation and meaning they liked. Some of them had already had names in mind throughout or even before the mother's pregnancy.

Practising diviners also acknowledge that some parents want to adopt particular characters in their children's names, and respect the fact that parents have personal preferences. When parents request nominative analysis, some diviners ask whether they have preferred characters in mind. Even if they were not specifically asked about this, parents would tell the diviner if they had a preference for particular name characters, and the diviner would then check the auspiciousness of these.

Metonymic fortune?

Tessa was in her mid-thirties and a white-collar worker. She gave birth in a public hospital. Two weeks later she spent eighty minutes on public transport to visit a diviner recommended by a friend for nominative analysis for her baby. The traditional Chinese practice, with which many new mothers comply, is to stay at home and rest for a month after having a baby. Tessa was motivated enough to contravene this traditional rule and to make a long journey to consult divination for an auspicious name for her newborn. And yet she and her partner did not take up any of the names suggested by the diviner.

‘The suggested characters do not make any sense; they do not have any meaning!’ said Tessa. The couple thought that the lists of suggested first and second characters for the given name, in whatever combination, failed to convey any contextual, concrete, or positive sense, despite the fact that each character carried an implicit meaning. They therefore ignored the diviner’s recommendations and chose characters for their baby’s given name by themselves, according to the combined meaning of the two characters. They did not consult divination to examine the auspiciousness of that choice. They explained that the names suggested by the diviner were only suggestions, and in no way binding. Tessa commented that, while there are many different schools of divination and techniques, the names had only been suggested by one diviner, probably only using one divination technique. Therefore, the couple did not feel obliged to follow the advice. More importantly, they did not *like* any of the suggested

combinations of characters, unlike the ones that they personally chose with care, love, and dedication.

Like many other parents, Tessa and her partner *cared* about the choice of characters for their baby's name. Although they did not adhere to the divination advice, they chose a name with a positive message which they thought would brighten the life of their child, and whose meaning they hoped would also be auspicious. Instead of following divination advice to enhance the baby's fate, they followed their personal preferences, using metonymic meaning in working out their own innovative way of bringing good fortune to their child.

Strategic use of divination results

Tessa's case shows that some divination participants reject divination results entirely. By contrast, other parents follow divination advice in part: they may reject only the suggested characters, while calculating the number of their pen strokes and selecting other characters with the same number of pen strokes. Parents deploy different strategies to ensure that the name finally chosen meets their personal preferences. Compared with choosing an auspicious moment for the birth, which necessitates birth by Caesarean section and all the consequent practical problems (costs, availability of doctor and operation room, and so on) nominative analysis is a simpler and more flexible means for parents to seek better fortune for their child.

Chapter 6 described how Mr. One had long admired a famous local diviner. Although he had planned to consult him about an auspicious date and time for Mrs. One to give birth by Caesarean section, eventually he did not do this and resorted to reading *tung sing* himself. After their son was born, Mr. One did consult that master and paid him to perform a nominative analysis for the baby based on his date and time of birth. The couple also asked the master to check the suitability of several names that they liked. The master responded by email that their preferred characters were not suitable for the baby's horoscopic pattern. The master had conducted nominative analysis based on *Ng Jam*. He examined the boy's eight characters horoscope, assessed the *Ng hang* required for a favourable destiny for him, and discovered that the boy had a 'hot' destiny (having been born in the summer) and that the *Ng hang* of metal and water would therefore be beneficial for him. The master suggested six different precise given names, based on *Ng Jam* and according to the *Ng hang* of the pronunciation of the characters. Each of the suggested names contained characters belonging to the *Ng hang* of either metal or water.

Mr. and Mrs. One did not adopt any of these names because they did not like them. 'The suggested names all sound very old-fashioned', Mrs. One explained. One of the six suggestions had exactly the same characters as the name of a well known local comedian, who was widely disliked. 'How can such a name be suggested and used?' asked Mrs. One. The couple therefore rejected all the names suggested by the master, even though they had paid about HKD\$ 3,000 for the nominative analysis. They started looking for alternative characters for their son's name, but they kept

in mind the divination advice that the *Ng hang* of metal and water were favourable for his destiny.

Mr. and Mrs. One selected several new characters. As well as checking their *Ng hang* online, using the *Ng Jam* technique, they also examined the number of pen strokes of the characters online. They then: mixed and matched the possible combinations of their chosen characters; calculated the total number of pen strokes in each combination; used a website that teaches and explains *Ling Dung Sou* to check the auspiciousness of each combination; and selected some more new characters which had a suitable *Ng hang* and an auspicious number of pen stroke numbers. They finally chose a first character, the name of a bird species, and a second character, a species of tree. ‘This bird is the *fastest* bird in the world, and this tree is the *oldest* tree in the world (emphases in original)’, Mrs. One explained with pride and excitement. Like Tessa and her partner, the couple’s choice was based on the metonymic relation between the name and features of the two species, and they hoped that this name would bring their son the best fortune in all aspects of his life.

Mr. and Mrs. One acknowledged that the six names suggested by the master were more auspicious than the one they picked, because all the characters of the suggested names had *Ng hang* that was auspicious for their baby. While the first character they chose had the *Ng hang* of metal, the second had the *Ng hang* of earth: not an element favourable to the boy’s horoscope, according to their view. Mr. and Mrs. One *did* take into consideration the *Ng hang* that was favourable for their son, as suggested

by the master, but in the end they preferred characters which conveyed extraordinary (metonymic) meanings. At a result, instead of choosing two characters with the *Ng hang* of either metal or water, the couple selected only one such character. They were happy with their decision: ‘Our prime consideration is, not whether the name is the best or the most fortunate for our son’s destiny, but that it expresses our love and devotion for him (through selecting his name ourselves)’, Mrs. One explained.

Kacey, facing a similar situation, practised a similar naming strategy. She found the names suggested by the diviner for her second child ‘unacceptable’, and the characters ‘hilarious’. ‘One proposed character is composed of three (Chinese) gold characters. I do not even know how to pronounce it! Even though he found that my son’s destiny lacks the *Ng hang* of metal that it needs for auspiciousness, no one would use this character nowadays’, Kacey explained. That character is 鑫 (*jam*): a character made up of three iterations of 金 (*gam*), the Chinese word for gold. Gold is of course a metal and its Chinese name character has the *Ng hang* of metal. The word 鑫 therefore contains a strong metal *Ng hang* element.⁸⁶ The diviner had explained that the horoscope of Kacey’s son was significantly lacking in the metal element, and that he would enjoy better fortune if his name made up for the shortfall.

⁸⁶ Another way of assessing the *Ng hang* of a Chinese character is through the graphical component of the character. For example, the character 鑫 (*jam*) is made up of three metal (gold) elements: its *Ng hang* of metal is undeniable. Characters that contain obvious *Ng hang* graphical component, such as those containing the Chinese words for fire (火) and water (水), might be seen as having the *Ng hang* of fire and water respectively. Sometimes the graphical component and the pronunciation of a character suggest that it has a different *Ng hang*. However, a diviner would not usually use two different ways to check the *Ng hang* of a character, but only the method with which they felt comfortable and confident.

The character 鑫 is very rarely heard or seen in everyday life in Hong Kong, and Kacey did not like it, so it was not surprising that she disregarded this suggestion. However, she and her husband also rejected all the other suggestions by the diviner because they did not like them either. The couple explained that, when they had consulted the diviner about their first child's name, they had adopted his suggestion straight away because they liked one of the proposed names. They were disappointed with the nominative analysis for their second child.

Kacey and her husband then read some manuals about nominative analysis and found that the number of pen strokes in the characters proposed by the diviner were also auspicious, but the diviner had not explained this when making his suggestions. However, they still resisted following his recommendations. Instead, they noted the auspicious numbers of pen strokes suggested in the manuals and looked for new characters that met that criterion as well as having the *Ng hang* of metal. They presented their own name choices to their parents, and discussed the final selection with them. They did not check their final name choice with the diviner but adopted it right away. This case again demonstrates that, when choosing names, personal preference is a more important factor than auspiciousness.

Personal preference really matters

Mr. and Mrs. Kpop consulted another well known diviner for nominative analysis. They paid the diviner about HKD\$ 3,000 and, after performing divination, he proposed four names. They did not like any of them. One had a character whose pronunciation was the same as one of the characters of Mr. Kpop's given name, although they are two different Chinese words. In English naming, although it is not common, some fathers and sons have the same forename and surname; in the USA the suffix 'Jr' is then often used to distinguish the son from the father. By contrast, Chinese parents usually avoid giving children characters that are in their own names, because a shared given name implies that the two name-holders are from the same generation, and thus obscures their generational relationship. Mr. and Mrs. Kpop also thought it would cause confusion if the characters of the father and son's given names sounded similar to each other. Two of the other suggested names had a similar problem, sounding too much like the names of other family members. Mrs. Kpop added 'these two names are also very old-fashioned'. She was concerned that a child with an old-fashioned name might be laughed at or even bullied by his peers at school.

Mr. and Mrs. Kpop said that, of the four names proposed, there was only one that might be acceptable, and even that one sounded like the name of a district of Hong Kong, which annoyed them. Eventually they rejected all four names and sought another diviner for nominative analysis. While some parents choose their baby's names according to the (metonymic) meaning of characters (as in the two cases described above) Mr. and Mrs.

Kpop's selection focused on the pronunciation of the characters. Although this shows the differences in parents' personal preferences, the general rule remains that they choose for their children *only* names that they *like*.

Stella was another of my parent informants. She ran a retail business with her husband and consulted a diviner whenever she experienced hardship in her everyday life. She gave birth to her baby in a public hospital and consulted a diviner for nominative analysis for her baby. The diviner gave her a few lists of characters: each list contained about ten characters with the same number of pen strokes. Stella and her husband picked several characters they liked from the lists and mixed and matched them to form some possible name combinations. Then they performed *Ling Dung Sou* themselves via a mobile phone app to check the auspiciousness of the numbers of pen strokes for each of these name combinations. Eventually they chose, not the one with the highest score, but the one they most liked. This again suggests that parents, although fate-conscious, do not unconditionally accept names suggested by diviners and, more importantly, that personal preference is their highest priority when considering names for their children.

Divination experience and adherence

Many existing anthropological studies on divination suggest that divination messages or outcomes are the result of collaboration and negotiation between diviner and client: see for example Akinnaso (1995), Zeitlyn (1990; 2001), and Peek (1991). Collaboration is necessary to achieve a

divinatory outcome which satisfies the client's concerns (see Graw (2009)). The above ethnography of nominative analysis reveals that parents who are unsatisfied with names suggested by a diviner might choose other names themselves. Many parents follow only part of the divination advice, such as which *Ng hang* element is favourable for the baby's horoscope: they then add this criterion to their naming strategy. Rather than collaborating and negotiating with a diviner for a name with which both parties are happy, parents tend to adopt their own strategy to find a name which satisfies them, without further reference to the diviner. In most of the cases described above, parents were not satisfied by the divinatory responses that they received: diviners seemed not to be attentive, and 'customer service' was often lacking.

Nowadays, many diviners use digital means of communication. They promote themselves and their services on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, and conduct divination with clients via WhatsApp or other instant messaging applications. This trend dominated in Hong Kong between 2020 and 2021, when social distancing measures were introduced in response to COVID-19. Such 'electronic divination'⁸⁷ often involves less interaction between diviners and clients, in terms of diviners explaining outcomes and communicating their thoughts to clients, than is usual in face-to-face consultations. I am not suggesting that face-to-face

⁸⁷ 'Electronic' divination must be distinguished from 'virtual' divination. The former refers to divination carried out by diviners using internet technology instead of meeting clients in person. The latter refers to divination carried out by computer programmes without involving a diviner (although diviners may have been involved initially in setting up the programme). An example of virtual divination is when parents conduct *Ling Dung Sou* themselves online (via a website or mobile app) to check the auspiciousness of names that they have come up with.

consultations are always conducted in great depth or that every detail of the divination is interpreted for the client. Nevertheless, the restricted interaction between diviner and client in electronic divination, and the probably less extensive explanation of the results, tend to lessen clients' satisfaction with the overall divination experience. While previous anthropological studies about interaction, collaboration, and negotiation between diviners and clients concern situations in which diviners understand the clients' situations better, respond to them instantly, and interpret the divination outcomes for them, my fieldwork shows that such cooperation by diviners should not be taken for granted, especially in nominative analysis. I argue that the less the diviner engages with the client during a divination consultation, the less satisfied the client will be, and that this is likely to lead to lower adherence to divination advice.

Methodological difference

The willingness of diviners to talk to and engage with clients varies between individuals. Diviners may also be more willing to talk to some clients than others, depending on their mood and (perceived) relationship with the client. However, the difference between Hong Kong diviners' relative (lack of) engagement with clients and the engagement described in other anthropological studies probably results from researchers' different focuses: while most existing divination studies focus on the diviners' perspective, my research also explores that of the clients. The presence of an anthropologist may affect informants' behaviour or attitudes: the typical

problem of the observer effect in ethnographic fieldwork. The observer, the observed, and any apparatus used will always influence each other at the moment of observation (Trnka & Lorencová 2016). Monahan & Fisher (2010) described the observer effect as producing ‘staged performances’ by informants, depending on how they perceive themselves and want to be perceived by observers.

During my years of fieldwork I have met and talked to many diviners. Most of them told me only positive aspects of themselves, for example, about successful divination they had performed, how they were loved and needed by their clients, and how they had used divination to help others. This is absolutely normal and understandable, and they would have said the same to anyone interested in their careers as diviners. However, given my identity as a researcher, and in their eyes an intellectual, they were even more likely to tell me only about their ‘virtues’. They knew that this information would be recorded and written down, and probably hoped that their names or reputations would be promoted through my research.

When I talked to my divination participants’ interlocutors, many of whom are, or were once, the clients or students of some diviners to whom I spoke, they gave very different stories of their experiences (sometimes with these same diviners). Many reported to me that their divination consultations had been unsatisfying, that diviners were too driven by money-making, and even that diviners had lied about their training and experience. This difference between the accounts given by diviners and those given by clients highlights the possibility that focusing on diviners

alone is likely to produce an ‘information gap’, not fully capturing how divination itself is understood by the clients. A methodological focus on diviners alone provides insight only into cases in which clients were satisfied with the outcome of their divination consultations, and overlooks the experiences of those who were not.

Ambiguity, trust, and expectation

Trust is essential for successful divination. When divination is performed, clients must trust, to some degree, both the diagnostic/predictive function of divination itself and the diviner’s ability to perform divination accurately; if not, why would they consult it? In the event of an unsuccessful divination outcome clients might lose faith in a diviner’s ability but retain trust in the divination per se: a phenomenon reported by Heald (1991). While faith in divination technique or practice is largely unquestioned by divination participants, what about trust in the diviner? I describe below a case of nominative analysis that triggered my interest in the importance of a client’s trust in a diviner. Is established trust in the diviner an important element to consider when looking out for divination consultation? If not, what can we tell from the trust that clients place in randomly chosen diviners?

Kitty told me that she was not happy with the diviner whom she visited for nominative analysis for her second child. The diviner gave her a choice of ten words for the first character of her child’s given name, and another ten words for the second character. ‘Together, there are one hundred

possible combinations with which I could name my baby. The diviner told me they were all the same and that they all scored one hundred for auspiciousness.’ Kitty had no idea how she should pick the right name for her child from these suggestions. However, it was not her inability to decide that upset her, but her decision to visit this particular diviner.

Kitty had visited a different diviner for nominative analysis for her first child a few years earlier. She said that this diviner had not only charged less but also given her lots of details when calculating her child’s fate and had suggested fitting and auspicious names for the child’s destiny. ‘He is a very good diviner’, Kitty commented. However, she did not return to him for nominative analysis for her second child because his workplace was too far from her home. She felt it would have been wrong to take her baby on a long journey by public transport when tradition prescribed that she should be at home receiving postpartum care. So she chose another diviner, closer to her home, to perform nominative analysis for her younger child: an experience that she came to regret.

Both hemerology to choose a birth date and nominative analysis for a newborn involve divination to enhance the destiny of someone without experience of life in this world, and whose ability to adapt to everyday life is not yet known. Unlike divination for a single aspect of life, such as a relationship or a job, divination for a newborn is for its whole life’s destiny: the issue is therefore much larger and more important. In Kitty’s case, it was not the lack of loyalty to her first diviner that I found significant. As I argued in Chapter 6, practicality is an important factor in clients’ choice of

adherence to divination advice. It is clear that practicality was the reason why Kitty did not go back to the first diviner, whom she trusted and was satisfied with. What caught my attention was why Kitty should initially trust the new diviner, whom she had found randomly online, with no personal recommendations, to perform divination for life-affecting nominative analysis for her second child.

Geschiere (2013a; 2013b), discussing the entanglement of witchcraft, intimacy, and trust, argued that, for the Maka people of south-eastern Cameroon, witchcraft comes from the inner circle of one's family or household, not from the outside. He stressed the ambiguity of intimacy: while standing for harmony and security within Maka households, it is 'at the same time the source of mortal threats' (Geschiere 2013a:72). He argued against linking intimacy with trust: a rather uncontested relation and positive view which prevails in existing studies. He drew an analogy between the Maka and Bocage witchcraft in western France as portrayed by Favret-Saada (1977; 2009) and instead suggested that trust is *not* self-evident, even among people with the closest relationships. Geschiere (2013a; 2013b) saw trust as a constantly emerging 'event' that is contingent on specific historical circumstances, and is a necessary element for collaboration with one's intimates, who can betray, threaten, and use witchcraft against one.

Meinert (2015), following fieldwork in northern Uganda, argued that distrust is the starting point of social interaction. Like Geschiere, Meinert suggested that trust only develops over time, and added that it is an open-

ended endeavour. She proposed that a necessary condition for building trust is truth. In places like Uganda, which have suffered decades of civil war and social unrest and where people get used to lies and distrust, ‘truth does not have objective qualities, but has to be practiced as a temporal and willed phenomenon’ (Meinert 2015:131). Liisberg (2015) suggested that trust is a benign form of self-deception that is practised as a way to cope with ambiguity in everyday social life. At the individual level, interpersonal trust is a mode of understanding that is based on a positive view of the other. Pedersen (2015) categorized different kinds of trust, such as *prima facie* and reflective trust or distrust. Despite such differences, trust always depends on one individual’s past experience with another in similar social situations, or on their constitutive expectation concerning a new social situation. To trust is to expect a ‘high predictability of successful social interaction’ (Pedersen 2015:107).

The above accounts suggest that, first, trust is not given unconditionally, but unfolds only when certain conditions are met. Secondly, trust is a necessary tool to cope with ambiguity. Thirdly, the ambiguous situation, which can be resolved by trust, suggests that people at least have a positive expectation and expect a positive outcome, despite any underlying ambiguity.

Now let us return to divination. Just like intimacy, divination also involves ambiguity, which takes three different forms. First, divination can lead to the transfer of *jip lik*, or karmic credit, between two unrelated souls. As shown in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, while someone’s karmic credit can be

adversely affected if they seriously interfere with another's destiny by using divination, it is equally possible for the diviner to increase the merit of their karmic account if they use divination to help others (see Chapter 5). The ambiguity of divination lies in its ability either to improve or to diminish one's karmic account, but people cannot precisely control such *jip lik* transfers because they are driven solely by cosmic calculations. Divination practitioners, even experienced diviners, can never know whether they will receive *jip lik* payback, and to what extent they will suffer as a result of transferring their (unknown) *jip lik* credit to their clients if their divination changes their clients' destinies. At best, they can only refer to their past *jip lik* payback experiences and constantly review the boundaries of acceptability in performing divination. In addition, since any karmic credit earned by one's virtue might not be added to one's karmic tally in this life, but only in the next or a subsequent life, divination practitioners cannot know when their goodness will be (partially or fully) rewarded.

On a similar level, there are different discourses, such as what constitutes a true destiny. While some believe that a person's destiny can be affected by giving birth on a selected auspicious date and at an auspicious time (via Caesarean section), others think that only destiny which is free from mundane interference is genuine. Divination (in this case, hemerology for a Caesarean date) therefore has the ambiguous quality of both improving someone's destiny and interfering with their fate.

The second ambiguity relating to divination lies in the attitude of its users. Geschiere (2013b) described the Maka as being afraid of the modern *nganga* (healers) who came from outside of the village, whom they considered to be charlatans. Nevertheless, they needed their novel service, which applied ‘science’ to overcome doubts raised about the traditional local *nganga*. The Maka held ambiguous attitudes towards both the traditional and the modern *nganga*, simultaneously trusting and doubting them. Eberhard (1937) collected a folk tale from Kuangtung (Guangdong) province, which described a comparably ambiguous attitude of a client towards the geomancer, a diviner providing Fengshui divination. In Hong Kong, although there is no distinction between traditional and modern diviners resembling that of the Maka, there is a great proliferation of diviners, who might or might not rely on performing divination to earn their living. Parents and other clients might hold similarly ambiguous attitudes towards their expertise or towards divination outcomes because so many diviners and divination techniques are available.

For example, in Tessa and her partner’s case, outlined above, they were reluctant to accept the names suggested by their diviner, seeing them as being intended only for reference. This was because they knew that numerous diviners were available, offering a wide range of techniques, and they were not sure which were genuine. Betty’s ethnography in Chapter 6 shows how using two different hemerology techniques can produce different results about the auspiciousness of the same date and time. Her case also reveals her father-in-law’s ambiguous attitude to reliance on just one technique to give an ‘accurate’ divination outcome. If not, he would

not have asked Betty, who practised a different divination technique, to perform this second type of hemerology for the same list of possible combinations of date and time.

Last but not least, the third ambiguity in divination underlies the central argument in Chapter 6 that, although parents are fate-conscious, they do not unconditionally follow divination advice. On one hand, parents want to pursue a good destiny for their children but, on the other hand, their decisions are guided less by the divination outcome than by their personal preferences and practical factors. Divination is thus endowed with the ambiguous status of being simultaneously followed and rejected, considered and disregarded. These ambiguities are the vital elements that make trusting collaboration necessary to achieve successful divination.

Trust is necessary to cope with the ambiguity of divination, but it cannot be taken for granted. It is likely to develop from successful divination experiences, whether one's own or others'. So, what expectations do clients have of divination and diviners? Kitty's case shows that her trust in the randomly chosen second diviner was probably shaped by her previous favourable experience of nominative analysis for her first child by another diviner. However, trust in the first diviner was for her less significant than practical factors, such as physical distance and transport, when choosing whom to consult. Kitty's account hints at the positive expectation underlying her trust in the randomly chosen diviner. She emphasized her confusion about which characters she should choose for her second child's name. She described the previous diviner as being better

because he had given *details* when suggesting her first child's name. In other words, if the later diviner had provided her with some explanation for his suggestions, she might have evaluated her divination experience with him completely differently.

Divinatory usage has two forms: diagnosis and prediction (Zeitlyn 2012). While the former is concerned with the present and the past, the latter looks to the future. Hemerology to choose a birth date and nominative analysis are both predictive uses of divination, which aim to identify which actions would best enhance the (future) destiny of newborns. On the face of it, parents merely expect divination, through the diviner, to show how good destiny can be provided to their children. While this is true, it captures only part of their expectation: it overlooks the subjective feelings of parents during the divination consultation. It is the parents, not their babies, who spend time with a diviner at the moment of divination, regardless of whether the consultation is face-to-face, as is traditional, or online. Their subjective experiences and perceptions are important, and satisfaction with the consultation experience is part of what they expect to receive from the divination service.

To be more specific, the satisfaction I refer to here relates to the service provided by and the attitude of the diviner. It rarely depends on the accuracy of the divination outcome or the auspiciousness of names because most parents and other clients do not understand the mechanism of divination, how the outcomes are produced, or what the result means. In addition, both hemerology for a birth moment and nominative analysis are

predictive uses of divination for the life-long destiny of a future adult. This means that no one can know whether the date or name divined is truly auspicious until some time later. For example, I met a mother who is a regular divination practitioner, with daughters aged seven and nine. She told me that they had been well cared for by their teachers all the way through playgroup, kindergarten, and primary school. She believed that this resulted from the auspiciousness of their names, which brought them 貴人 (*gwai jan*): people willing to help devotedly in their lives. Both of her daughters' names were chosen on the advice of nominative analysis performed by a diviner with whom she had a long and trusting relationship. The auspiciousness of the girls' names had only revealed itself over time, as their lives unfolded.

By contrast, Luna's son had for ten years of suffered skin problems which required the constant use of steroid cream, and she believed that the 'unsuitability' of his name had resulted in this undeserved condition. When their son was born she and her husband had visited a diviner who counted the number of pen strokes for nominative analysis. They picked a name they liked from his list of suggestions, and did not question its suitability for years. One day, the boy's grandmother went to her local temple to pray, as she usually did at the beginning of the new year. She met a diviner there and they fell into conversation. When she told him about her grandson's skin problem, he asked if she wanted him to carry out divination for the boy in order to discover the root of the problem and a possible solution. The grandmother agreed, told him the boy's name and when he was born, and paid for the service.

The diviner discovered that the boy's horoscope was mainly occupied by the *Ng hang* of earth and fire. Although, in the construction cycle of *Ng hang*, fire nurtures earth, too much fire will burn the earth, making it dry and gritty. His horoscope or fate lacked sufficient water or metal to remedy the imbalance. The diviner explained that the *Ng hang* of water and metal would help to bring better fortune for the boy, but that lack of them would not cause any big issues in his life, perhaps manifesting, for example, in him being ill tempered. That is, the imbalance of *Ng hang* in his horoscope would not have caused such a serious skin problem. Rather, the diviner pointed to the inauspiciousness or unsuitability of the boy's name. He said that all the characters of both his surname and given name had the *Ng hang* of fire, which had exacerbated the dry earth issue fixed by his horoscope, and that this was the reason for his long-term skin problem. This is because the skin has the *Ng hang* of earth; if the earth (skin) becomes very dry, it causes irritation. As soon as her mother told Luna that her son's skin problem might be due to his name, she asked the diviner in the temple to carry out nominative analysis for a new name for the boy. The diviner came up with several suggestions for given name, all of which have the *Ng hang* of water (which destroys fire) and/ or metal (which weakens fire because fire has to expend energy on destroying the metal, rather than just burning the earth). Luna picked name she liked the most from the list. She said that her son's skin problem had improved greatly soon after he unofficially adopted the new name, and she was considering changing his name officially, by deed poll, at a later date.

Among the new parents to whom I talked during fieldwork, although complaints about unfashionable characters were common,⁸⁸ I never heard a single claim that a suggested name was inauspicious. This was doubtless because insufficient time had passed to decide whether the adopted names were auspicious. Luna only discovered the inauspiciousness of her son's original name after he had suffered the skin complaint for ten years. Rather, parents often complained about the services provided by and the attitudes of diviners. They assumed that divination would show them how to enhance their children's destiny, as evidenced by their consulting and paying for divination. On the other hand, their expectation of a satisfactory experience was only met if the diviner's actions meet their needs.

Hannah visited two diviners for nominative analysis for her baby. She commented that the first had given her no explanation of why the names were chosen, nor about how much or what kind of auspiciousness each potential name would bring to her child. Instead, the diviner just provided a list of names on WhatsApp. She asked him about the differences between the names, but the diviner just said that each of them was similarly auspicious; he gave no further explanation even when Hannah asked again. Although she quite liked two of the suggested names, she decided to reject

⁸⁸ Some of my informants had consulted divination which found their original names inauspicious and then adopted (officially or unofficially) a new name which they hoped would be more auspicious. I did not ask them how their parents had chosen their names, neither did they talk about it. I met three informants who had changed their names (unofficially) a second time. They had adopted a new name, chosen from suggestions by diviners after nominative analysis, because they were told that their original names were inauspicious. But when, after some time, not much positive change had occurred, they visited other diviners who again suggested that these adopted names were not favourable. They then abandoned the earlier adopted name, and chose another new name, again following the suggestions of the second diviners. However, none of them complained about the ineffectiveness of the first adopted name, nor about the 'failed' divination by the first diviner: they just followed the advice of the second diviner.

all the suggestions because of the diviner's lack of explanations, and found a second diviner to perform nomination analysis.

This second diviner also communicated entirely via WhatsApp, but he provided a completely different consultation service. He offered her ten names in total. Hannah commented that, while some of these characters were quite ordinary, some were special, and some very poetic. She was impressed, not only by the wide variety of types of name suggested (particularly helpful because she and her husband had very different tastes) but also by the detailed explanation the diviner provided for every single name: its meaning, and how it would suit and benefit her child based on the child's eight characters horoscope, such as which *Ng hang* element the child lacked.

Hannah told me that I should recommend this second diviner to anyone needing nominative analysis for their baby. During my fieldwork, several new parents strongly recommended diviners they had consulted for nominative analysis who had provided attentive service, such as telling them which will be the in/auspicious years which their children would experience, performing hemerology for a date on which they should register the child's birth certificate, and giving additional names if the first suggestions were not acceptable.

In general, my new parent informants usually rated diviners as good or bad according to the service they had provided, their attitude, and even their personality, but *not* according to their divination skills. A few divination practitioners also told me that diviners had used foul language

during consultations or in their private lives, which the informants found unacceptable. Overall, the new parents who were happy with their divination consultations were those whose diviners had patiently explained the possible fates and names for their babies and provided extra information. As in the northern Ugandan case, where trust is built on non-objective truth (Meinert 2015), so too in Hong Kong parents' trust in diviners depends partly on whether the diviner satisfies their subjective expectations of divination services.

Satisfaction and adherence

As noted above, Kacey rejected the diviner's suggestions for her second child's name because she did not like any of the proposed characters. Kacey had known him for more than a decade, and she and her family had consulted him whenever they needed divination. She had visited him many times, including for auspicious dates for her wedding and for moving into a new property, for career matters, such as whether she (and her husband) should switch to another job, for an auspicious moment for a Caesarean birth and for nominative analysis for her first child, and again for nominative analysis for her second child. She had followed the diviner's advice on the wedding date, the date of the house move, her career change, and the name of her first child. She had also intended to follow the advice on the Caesarean date, but her first child arrived early. 'The names (characters) suggested for my daughter (her first child) were absolutely fine', Kacey explained. She had selected the suggestions which she thought

made the nicest combination for her elder children. Kacey trusts this diviner's advice, as evidenced by her continuing to consult him so often over many years. It is clear that the reason why she rejected his name suggestions for her second child was not lack of trust in the diviner: rather, she had taken that divination advice with a pinch of salt and chosen according to her personal preference.

Kacey or her husband consulted the diviner in person whenever they needed divination. They usually went together, except for the two requests for nominative analysis when she was still in hospital. Her husband had not asked for additional name suggestions, because he did not know that Kacey would be unhappy with the names. Kacey did not have the chance to ask the diviner how good or auspicious the suggested names were because she was not present during the divination process. Eventually, she came up with a new name herself, based on the *Ng hang* suggested by the diviner and the number of pen strokes recommended by a divination manual. The remainder of this chapter shows how a satisfactory engagement with an attentive diviner - that is, a fuller divination experience - might lead parents to adopt a suggested name which they would otherwise not have selected, or might result in parents and diviner together constructing a new name which satisfied all of them.

Becky and her husband chose eight names during her pregnancy, based on their character preferences, and presented these to a diviner for nominative analysis for her newborn. The diviner told her that none of those names was auspicious for her newborn's horoscope, and he

recommended a few different names. Becky initially resisted the diviner's suggestions because she thought it was unlikely that none of her eight names would be suitable. She tried to negotiate with the diviner about the favourableness of her preferred names. The diviner patiently explained to her, name by name, why all her suggestions would be inauspicious for her child, and then how each of his suggested names could bring good fortune to her newborn, as well as describing the differences between each of them. During the sixty-minute consultation, she was gradually persuaded that the names suggested by the diviner were better than those she had come up with, and she started to *like* these names because of their proclaimed auspiciousness.

Becky recounted in detail how considerate the diviner was: he voluntarily also divined for her, free of charge, auspicious dates for registering the baby's birth certificate and for holding 百日宴 (*baak jat jin*, the Hundred Days Banquet, held when the newborn reaches that age and receives good wishes from family and friends). Another example of the diviner's attentiveness, which also impressed Becky, was that he also divined a few auspicious English names for the newborn. Becky's experience of consulting this diviner was strongly positive. She adopted one of the names he suggested, explaining that she did this because he had proved himself to be a good diviner, and she believed that his suggested name would benefit her newborn. Although she did not explicitly state that she had come round to liking the name because of the association between her perception of the diviner's personality and his suggested names, she implicitly admitted that she had done so.

This brief account of Becky again demonstrates how a client's subjective experience of divination is an important factor in forming their evaluation of the diviner. It is such a significant factor that it can change a client's mind about whether a name is desirable, and therefore whether the client likes it. Although the diviner had explained in great depth why each suggested name was auspicious, his unexpected and free provision of divination for English names and dates for the birth registration and Hundred Days Banquet also positively influenced Becky's assessment, both of him and of his name suggestions. While she initially hoped to use the names that she and her husband had carefully chosen, she then changed her mind and chose a name because she had been persuaded that it would be auspicious for her child. So attentive engagement by a diviner can affect a client's personal preferences, leading them to adopt a name they otherwise would not have chosen, and thus resulting in the client's adherence to divination advice.

Bambi's case (see Chapter 6) showed how personal preference (for Caesarean delivery, perceived as a less painful childbirth option) was a stronger motivation for her than divination advice to give the child an auspicious destiny. When it came to naming her baby, Bambi again demonstrated how much personal preference mattered when choosing the name for her second child.

Bambi happened to have a maternal uncle who is a diviner. When she was pregnant for the second time, her elder daughter kept calling the unborn baby Justin. Bambi therefore planned to give the child this English

name. After Justin was born, Bambi started looking for a Chinese given name for him which sounded similar to the English pronunciation of Justin, wanting the boy's Chinese and English names to sound at least to some degree alike. She came up with two Chinese given names and presented them to her uncle, but he said they were not suitable for Justin's horoscope. Bambi came up with three more names, but they were also rejected by her uncle. He then suggested four other names.

Bambi's uncle explained why all five of Bambi's suggested names were inauspicious for Justin. Bambi could not recall the details of why they did not fit Justin's eight characters horoscope because she was so annoyed that all her suggestions had been turned down. She told her uncle frankly that, although his suggested names had good character choices and sounded quite good, she could not adopt any of them because none of them 'matched' the English pronunciation of Justin. Respecting Bambi's decision, her uncle suggested that she should look for a name for Justin herself. He told her the 'rules' of how she should select auspicious characters: for example the graphical components needed in the Chinese characters. Following all those rules, Bambi came up with another new name, and this time her uncle approved.

To Bambi, the most important criterion was that Justin's Chinese name should sound similar to his English name. During the month-long back-and-forth with her uncle, she abandoned the names she had initially liked, turned down her uncle's suggestions of auspicious names, and then followed the naming rules that he advised to come up with a new Chinese

name. Unlike Becky, whose personal preference and view of what constitutes a good name changed entirely because of the attentive engagement of her diviner, Bambi insisted on her original criterion and only accepted names that fitted it. She was very pleased that her uncle respected her wish and enabled her to find a Chinese name for Justin that both met her criterion and was auspicious for her son.

Bambi's decision took about a month: an unusually long period for a diviner to allow for just one case of nominative analysis. She said that no other diviner would have made as much effort as her uncle to help her come up with the right name, and that if she were not his niece he would not have spent so much time helping her. That is, their mutual engagement would have been much briefer, and would probably have ended after he had rejected Bambi's suggested names and suggested new ones: in which case Bambi would certainly not have followed his advice.

Some parents do not consult divination for name suggestions because they have their own clear ideas of how to name their children. Other parents consult a diviner for nominative analysis and accept a suggested name. However, none of them follow divination advice unconditionally: no parents adopt a name that they dislike. This is the reason why some parents refused to adopt names suggested by a diviner. Some parents in that position used part of the divination advice they received, and found names that both adhered to that element of the advice *and* pleased them. Those

who read divination handbooks to check the auspiciousness of names only considered names that they liked and then adopted an auspicious one. My fieldwork with a large group of parents who adopted different practices when naming their babies again shows that divination for nominative analysis is used only as a tool to assist in decision-making, and that divination advice was definitely not followed unless the parents liked the suggested name.

The ethnography in this chapter reveals that the factors which affect adherence to divination outcomes from hemerology for an auspicious birth moment, on one hand, and from nominative analysis for an auspicious name, on the other hand, are a bit different. While parents take into consideration both personal preference and practicality in the former, in the latter their personal preference prevails. This difference arises because, in reality, various practical issues surround Caesarean childbirth, such as private hospital fees, availability of doctors and operation rooms, and any changes in the medical condition of mother or baby. These are, to some extent, unavoidable constraints on adherence to divination outcomes. By contrast, nominative analysis involves no such practical constraints, and parents are free to follow their personal preferences when choosing a name.

I suggested in Chapter 6 that the generally low rate of adherence of divination advice suggests that practitioners of divination might be more committed to and influenced by its process than its outcomes. This Chapter has shown how divination participants evaluate their diviners. Satisfaction with names, or in other words with divination advice, is an experience and

outcome *conditional* on clients' satisfaction with the service provided by diviners during consultations. This finding is supported by Jackson (2013), who stressed the importance of clients' immediate positive psychological changes after divination consultations. The cases of nominative analysis presented here show that adherence to divination advice is closely related to clients' satisfaction with diviners' actions during divination consultations. Those actions can change clients' preferences, allowing the construction of a new name with which both diviner and clients are happy.

Research findings and implications

In this thesis, drawing on my fieldwork in Hong Kong on local divination practice, I explore the topics of destiny, the ethical discourse about *jip lik*, and adherence to divination advice. Chapters 1 and 2 show how the performative aspect of Fengshui divination affords a pragmatic approach to understanding fate. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 show how diviners constantly review how far they should go in divining for and in advising clients, and the importance of anticipating possible future consequences when performing divination, and therefore how the notion of anticipatory responsibility is a crucial everyday ethical consideration for diviners. Last but not least, Chapters 6 and 7 show that divination practitioners do not follow divination advice unconditionally, but weigh it against preference and practicality. I also highlight the connection between clients' satisfactory experiences of divination consultations and their adherence to divination advice. Apart from these research findings, the ethnography in this thesis invites us to rethink some existing theories and methodologies, and offers insights into possible future research directions.

Destiny and time

Destiny has the characteristic of 'malleable fixity' (Elliot & Menin 2018) which demonstrates the tension between determinism and free will. Most existing studies on destiny focus on people's agency in acting to alter their

destiny: that is, how people act to change, and their attitudes towards their known destiny (for example Hatfield 2002; Sangren 2012; Elliot 2016; Schielke 2018; Menin 2020; Lawal 1985; Swancutt 2012a). Most anthropologists writing on this the topic have concentrated on the notion of fate's predetermination, and have sought to explain how people deal with or make sense of that determinism. Going a step further, Elliot and Menin (2018) identified destiny's intimate relationship with time to show the diverse temporal ordering of human action.

Chapters 1 and 2 show how Fengshui divination participants identified their preordained life trajectories via fate-calculating divination and then used Fengshui divination to alter a specific aspect of their predetermined destinies. This finding suggests that Hong Kong Fengshui divination participants see destiny as consisting of several 'fungible' aspects, varying at different times over a life course, and that although these are provisionally fixed, one or a few undesirable aspects can be altered. Chapters 6 and 7 show how prospective parents in Hong Kong use divination, both to choose an auspicious birth date and time for their children (necessarily, by Caesarean delivery) and for nominative analysis to provide their children with good fortune. Hong Kong parents' notion of destiny for their children is similar to that documented in Harrell's (1987) account of a rural labouring community in North Taiwan: 'fate is something covering an *entire life* [my emphasis]. It is not just a small piece of destiny - how the business will do this year or whether one will get sick in the next two. [...] Fate is the entire picture, and this means that we

cannot really tell what someone's fate is until that person dies' (Harrell 1987:100).

While the prevalent view of destiny as having malleable fixity is evident throughout my thesis, Fengshui divination participants and parents in Hong Kong view the temporal elements of destiny differently from each other. Most divination participants see destiny as made up of small fungible components, while those who are also parents consider destiny as being indivisible and covering one's whole lifespan. Homola (2018) analysed how destiny reveals itself in and through time. She suggested that the Chinese notion of destiny, *mingyun*, has two temporal composites. On one hand, it is seen as linear, predetermined, and chronological; this is similar to how Hong Kong parents conceptualize the notion of destiny for their newborns, and the reason why they want to achieve good fortune for them. This temporal ordering feature of destiny only reveals itself over time. On the other hand, Homola suggested that the temporality of destiny is also 'punctuated': that how a destiny (eventually) shows itself (whether it is fortunate or not) over time depends on how different elements in life, such as *lau nin*, interact with the linear fate at any particular moment in life. This temporal working of fate is similar to how Hong Kong Fengshui divination participants view destiny, as revealed in their actions to change particular (provisionally) fixed fungible aspects of life.

Understanding destiny in the context of its relationship with time provides a deeper insight into how people conceptualize destiny (Homola 2018) and then how they act in response. The different views of destiny's temporal aspects held by Hong Kong parents (linear) and by Hong Kong

Fengshui divination participants (punctuated) offer the fascinating insight that people with different aims might be attracted to different views of the temporal working of destiny. This issue deserves consideration in future research about destiny.

Diversity in divination practices: a new methodological direction for the study of divination

Chapters 6 and 7 outline and compare how expectant parents considered issues surrounding pregnancy differently, and how they exercised their own preferences when naming their babies. My ethnography includes cases in which people: (a) divined and followed the divination advice, (b) divined and did not follow the advice, (c) did not divine and were happy not to have done so, and (d) did not divine and perhaps later wished that they had. As noted above, there is no great gulf between those who divined and those who did not in terms of wanting to provide the best fortune for their children. Divination is just one form of technology or tool (Zeitlyn 2020) among many others employed during decision-making. Those expectant parents who did not consult divination about the birth of their child pursued the same aims as those who did seek advice: they all weighed up their personal preferences, practical considerations, and any particular issues affecting their unborn children when making their decisions. Likewise, when choosing baby names, divination participants were just as strongly influenced by their personal preferences as those who did not consult divination.

My ethnography shows the *diversity* of my informants' practices. It is surprising how rarely the attitudes towards divination of different people within the same society have been considered in depth by anthropologists. Divination is one of the leitmotifs of the rationality debate in anthropology. The debate usually focuses on differences between people from different cultures or societies. In other words, the unit of analysis underlying the rationality debate is culture or society. This debate seeks to explain why divination, witchcraft, magic, and other 'non-scientific' practices exist in some places but not others. However, this overlooks the differences between people within the same society. How should different attitudes towards divination of people within the same society be explained? Tylor (1873) argued that survival of the older, 'non-scientific' cultural practices that are still carried out in modern society is empirical evidence of the evolutionary process of culture. Leaving aside the heavy criticism that Tylor's idea of the survival of older cultural practice has received, his theory does not explain the contemporary variation in people's attitudes to and implementation of such older practices within a society.

We often mistakenly expect homogeneity to prevail within any large polity. Obeyesekere (2003) criticized Malinowski for ignoring the different, and even contradictory, views of the natives of the Trobriand Islands about the procreation of different species in order to draw his conclusion that the locals lack knowledge of physiological paternity. Anthropologists should not assume sameness across people of the same society: in reality, people are likely to have different attitudes towards any practice. According to Evans-Pritchard (1937), every Azande attributed misfortunes such as

illness to witchcraft and sought oracular confirmation. In a more recent study of HIV/AIDS among the Azande, Allen (2007) revealed that these days the Azande have different opinions and beliefs about how the disease is passed on, and whom they should consult if they contract it. Only a very small number of them said that they would consult an oracle or diviner if they had HIV/AIDS. My interest in this study is not about how belief in witchcraft and oracles has been overtaken by Christianity and biomedicine in the past decades, but about how the Azande today have various attitudes towards the use of oracles. This issue was not addressed by Allen.

Steinmüller (2013) reported that in Bashan, China, younger generations pay less attention to the fengshui of their houses than older generations. Similarly, Zeitlyn (2020:183), conducting life history interviews with the Mambila, found that they had ‘contrasting attitudes to divination’, with some being more enthusiastic and others more reticent about consulting divination. Favret-Saada (2012) criticized anthropologists for clinging to the idea of ‘belief’ as a fixed attitude of their informants. Instead, she suggested that we should be looking at ‘the thousands of *fluctuating* native attitudes concerning witchcraft’ (my emphasis) since, for example, her study of Bocage witchcraft in western France suggested that local belief in bewitching spells is not stable (47). If one person can have a shifting belief in or attitude towards witchcraft, how mistaken it would be to assume that all the people within a culture adopt the same attitude towards any practice, including divination.

Although social anthropologists might have neglected differences in practices within a society, medical anthropology has considered this issue

in depth for a long time. The concept of ‘medical pluralism’, familiar to medical anthropologists, holds that ‘in any one community, patients and their carers may resort to different kinds of therapies, even where these have mutually incompatible explanations for the disorder’ (Hsu 2008:316). Medical anthropologists focus on the pluralism or diversity of medical practices within the same society. Zeitlyn (2020) proposed that clients’ perspectives should be foregrounded when studying divination. Since most existing anthropological studies on divination have focused on either the diviner or the technique, it seems that the diversity of users’ practices has been overlooked.

Parkin (2013:125) distinguished between medical diversity and medical pluralism, arguing that the latter describes the co-existence of different medical traditions which are insulated from each other, while the former involves the ‘mutual borrowing of ideas, practices and styles between’ different medical practices. As my above ethnography on nominative analysis shows, diviners acknowledge the importance of personal preference and might consider characters preferred by parents when suggesting names for their newborns, and parents adopt their own strategies by altering names proposed by diviners to suit their personal preferences: so diviners and parents mutually borrow their naming ideas and practices from each other. The diversity of divination practices in Hong Kong is thus analogous to the concept of medical diversity.

Rajtar (2016) described the medical experiences of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Berlin. Jehovah’s Witnesses are known to refuse blood transfusions because the practice is held to be unscriptural. Rajtar showed

how the Berlin medical system seeks to accommodate Jehovah's Witnesses, providing 'bloodless' and other non-mainstream treatments. Singelenberg (1990) suggested that the taboo against blood transfusions among Jehovah's Witnesses, if understood in the light of Mary Douglas's theory about pollution and purity, reflects the Watch Tower Society's idea of anti-worldliness. Whatever choices they make about medical treatment, and whatever their view of worldliness, when suffering from illness, Jehovah's Witnesses have exactly the same wishes as anyone else: to be treated for and to recover from their illness.

As shown in Chapters 6 and 7, the widespread belief in Hong Kong in the knowability of fate and the possibility of changing it has contributed to the aim among local parents of providing good fortune to their children. While some parents use divination, others resort to alternative means, such as family planning and financial provision, to achieve this end. Although different strategies are used by different parents, they all act to achieve good health and overall well-being: that is, for a good destiny for their offspring. Jehovah's Witnesses and some Hong Kong parents are similar in the sense that they all have their own preferences and their own aims: while the former choose bloodless treatment for recovery from illness, the latter use divination to procure a better destiny for their children.

Evans-Pritchard (1978) saw 'non-scientific' practices such as divination as being based on invalid premises and inferences; for him this marked the difference between the mentalities of 'primitive' and modern people. His assertion assumes that 'primitive' people unreservedly follow the advice resulting from these practices. However, as my ethnography

shows, divination participants in Hong Kong do not follow divination advice unconditionally, but give significant consideration to other factors, such as personal preference and practicality. Zeitlyn (2020) suggested that the Mambila also do not follow divination results unquestioningly, even though they usually consult only for serious events such as illness. To truly understand divination, we must consider the perspective of clients and how they eventually use the advice.

For a proper study of divination, the traditional approach of comparing cultures that practise divination with those that do not is insufficient. Future research should first explore the different attitudes to divination of people within the same society, and then compare those who consult divination with those who do not. When facing a similar problem, why do some people use divination and others not? What is their common or ultimate purpose, if any? Only after considering these questions can we properly explore divination's general role and value in a particular society, and thence to broader cross-cultural comparisons of divination.

In short, my methodological approach is to look at the differences within a single society, rather than differences between cultures. We can thus benefit from gaining a new and more inclusive perspective on the general role of divination in a particular society, while at the same time avoiding the ethnocentricity inherent in interpreting divination practice from a Western perspective. My study has revealed a complex variety of attitudes among Hong Kong divination practitioners, which simplistic generalizations would have overlooked. The study of divination in practice

is a powerful tool for revealing heterogeneity, even in ostensibly homogenous societies.

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