

LOST (AND FOUND) IN TRANSLATION

THE *SHENSHU* 神數 ATTRIBUTED TO ZHUGE LIANG 諸葛亮 A REVIEW ARTICLE

Zhuge Liang: *Shen Shu – Das Orakel der Heiligen Zahlen*. Seeshaupt & München: Ryvellus Medienverlag, hardback, 1994, iv + 484pp. Translated from the Chinese by Stefan Kappstein. ISBN 3-89453-016-2. Paperback, 1996, as *Shen Shu – Münzorakel und Weisheitsbuch des alten China*. ISBN 3-89453-105-3.

Zhuge Liang: *Shen Shu – L'oracle des nombres sacrés*. Paris: Éditions Médicis, paperback, 1994, 476pp. Translated from the German by Christian Muguet. ISBN 2-85327-238-9.

Zhuge Liang: *Shen Shu – Het Chinese Orakel der Heilige Getallen*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Schors, paperback, 1997, 512pp. Translated from the German by Hajo Geurink. ISBN 90-6378-354-X.

Yujing He & Justin McNulty: *The Magical Lots of ZhuGe Liang: Divination Using the I Ching*. Lulu (130pp) + CreateSpace (147pp), paperback, 2011. ISBN 978-1468070996.

INTRODUCTION

The *Shenshu* is a minor Chinese divination system (to be distinguished from more complex and generally ‘astrological’ methods containing the same phrase, such as *Taiyi Shenshu* and *Tieban Shenshu*), that has somehow aroused widespread and possibly surprising interest in the western world, with editions in at least six different languages, though in moving from its homeland it’s undergone more than one rather odd transformation; and some may think this Occidental makeover at least as interesting as the original system itself, if only in what it tells us about Western audiences and their desire for divination books from the ‘mysterious east’. And, of course, about the people who exploit that desire.

Like a number of other divinatory and prophetic texts, the *Shenshu* is attributed to the strategist and politician Zhuge Liang (181–234), whose life overlaps the end of the Han dynasty and the start of the Three Kingdoms period. As mentioned in my discussion of the *Maqian ke*,¹ Chen Shou’s biography of Zhuge Liang in the official *History of the Three Kingdoms* makes no mention of his having any interest in the divinatory arts, and like the *Maqian ke*, the *Shenshu* is not contained in his ‘collected works’, the *Zhuge Liang Ji*, nor is it in the more expansive *Zhuge Liang Quanshu*, even though the latter contains a number of apocryphal works. Such divinatory attributions are the result of later tradition, represented most notably by the 14th century novel, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, where Zhuge Liang is represented as a master of *Qimen dunjia*, and in many ways he has developed into a Chinese ‘Merlin’ figure on whom it’s become possible to father all kinds of magical and predictive works. In China, particularly in popular media such as the internet, these attributions are rarely questioned and, as we’ll see, the case is somewhat similar with the western editions reviewed here. I say ‘somewhat’ because actually in the west it’s worse, having every appearance of being blatantly manipulative.

¹ Steve Moore: *Maqian ke – A Prophetic Text Attributed to Zhuge Liang*. Preliminary Translation and Commentary, p.5. http://www.biroco.com/yijing/Maqian_ke.pdf

Nonetheless, before reviewing these European and American translations, we should really take a look at the *Shenshu* in its homeland.

THE ORIGINAL CHINESE *SHENSHU*

Shenshu 神數 may be translated in a number of ways: ‘divine numbers’, ‘spiritual calculations’, and so on, though for reasons that will become apparent below, when dealing with the original Chinese divination system I suspect that a translation along the lines of ‘magic numbers’ might actually be somewhat more appropriate.

I first came across the *Shenshu* in 1979, contained in a Hong Kong-published Chinese New Year Almanac or *Tongshu*. Richard J. Smith provides an excellent historical survey of such works in his *Chinese Almanacs*², while Martin Palmer offers a survey of their contents (typically running to some 400 pages) in his *T’ung Shu*³. Regrettably, Palmer’s scholarship often leaves something to be desired and, for example, we read on page 142 of his book that ‘In fact, the earliest reference to [Zhuge Liang] does not appear until just before the T’ang dynasty (618 CE)’, a frankly alarming error that should counsel caution when dealing with the rest of his work. Nonetheless, the almanac appears to be the *Shenshu*’s natural home, where it appears regularly, year after year. I have another edition for 1990, where the *Shenshu* appears again with slightly different introductory material, and the rather lovely covers for these books are shown in figures 1 & 2.

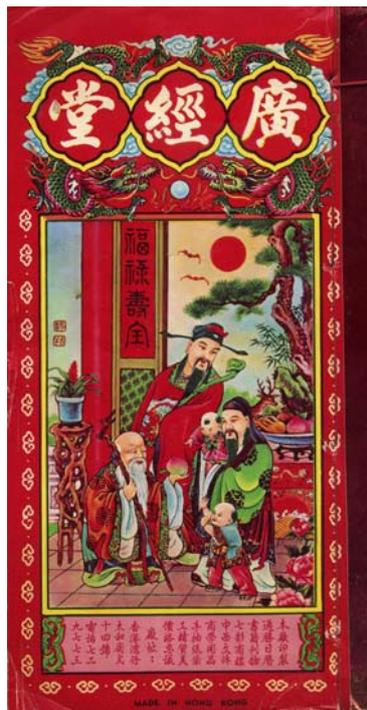


Fig. 1: 1979 Almanac.

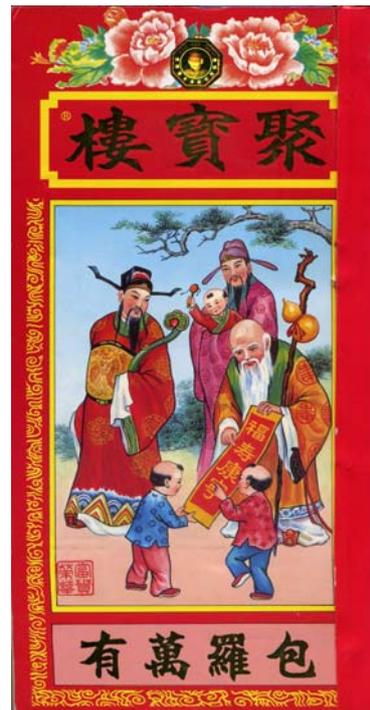


Fig. 2: 1990 Almanac.

Palmer covers the *Shenshu* in section 29 of his book (pp.142–149), under the title ‘The Secret Book of Chu-ko’s Spirit Calculation’⁴ and while, for reasons that

² Richard J. Smith: *Chinese Almanacs*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1992.

³ Martin Palmer (*et al*): *T’ung Shu*. London: Rider & Co., 1986.

⁴ Palmer uses the old Wade-Giles system of transliteration, rather than the more modern Pinyin. Thus his ‘Chu-ko’, rather than the ‘Zhuge’ used elsewhere in this piece.

will become apparent shortly, he's unable to provide a fully-operable translation of the system, he does at least give the key to how it works. Essentially, the *Shenshu* is a method whereby a set of numbers is derived from three written Chinese characters, and these numbers are then used as a key to 384 short texts that provide the divinatory answers. It's thus ideal for deriving texts to match the usual three-character Chinese name, although it can also be used for other purposes, such as discovering whether the name of a restaurant (as in Palmer's example) is auspicious or otherwise. The limiting factor is that the system only works with three words, neither more nor less.

For our example, we'll use a name, and the obvious choice would seem to be that of Zhuge Liang. Our first step is to count the number of brush-strokes used to write each character, thus:

諸	葛	亮
15	12	9
strokes	strokes	strokes

For numbers higher than 10, we simply remove the first digit: thus 15 becomes 5 (similarly for numbers higher than 20). If the number is exactly 10, we treat this as 1. So, looking at our example and removing the 10s gives us the number 529. This is greater than the 384 possible answers, so we then subtract 384 from this, to arrive at a number of 384 or less. For numbers above 768, we subtract 384 twice. For our example, 529 minus 384 gives us 145, and this is the starting number we need. So far this is relatively simple.

Finding our actual answer is a little more complex. Following the instructions in the almanac are 24 pages of apparently completely meaningless text, the first page of which is reproduced as figure 3.



Figure 3.

The circles in the text represent blanks, although from page 2 to 8 the text is solid; thereafter the blanks begin to reappear. This text is divided up into sections of 100 characters, these being titled under the black triangles as ‘First hundred characters’ and so on, each title being followed by ten columns of ten characters, which are numbered from one to ten in circles at the top of each column, reading right to left. This unintelligible text is actually made up of the 384 answers, mixed together, and to find our particular answer, we take our start number, 145, and look up the 145th character. Then we add 384 to find the second character, at position 529, and then continue adding 384 and looking up the characters at numbers 913, 1297, 1681, and so on, the words of the answer appearing ‘as if by magic’ from what would, otherwise, be gibberish. The reason that there are a number of blanks contained in the text, particularly near the end, is that the sentences comprising the answers are of varying length, so the shorter ones simply run out before reaching the end of the text. I remain uncertain about the blanks at the beginning, for one would have thought it easier simply to start all the answers one after the other. But, for example, if our start number should be 5, we find a blank in this position, and the first character of the answer appears at 389. In all there are 12,700 spaces available and, in pre-calculator days, this would undoubtedly have been an excellent way of improving arithmetical skills. The technique also requires a certain amount of attention, for the heading numbers of the blocks and columns are actually ‘in advance’. Thus, to find the 145th character, we look for the fifth character in the *fifth* ten of the *second* hundred. The texts are also, of course, entirely unpunctuated.

So, having worked our way through the 20 characters that comprise the answer to 145 (a fairly average length reading), we end up with the following (reading from left to right):

遇險不須憂風波何足忌若遇草頭人咫尺青雲路

This may be translated as follows:

You need not worry if you run into danger. Storms aren't worth fearing. If you meet a bandit chief, you are very close to a high position.

As divinatory interpretation frequently depends on finding a resonance with particular words or phrases, it may be useful to point out that the language of the *Shenshu* is frequently idiomatic and that there are three items here that, read literally, have a rather more poetical ring. ‘Storms’ is literally ‘wind and waves’; ‘a bandit chief’ is a ‘straw-headed man’; and ‘high position’ is a ‘blue/green cloud’. This sort of phrasing is fairly typical of many of the *Shenshu*'s responses. It does, of course, make translating the text into western languages rather more challenging than might first appear. Nonetheless, the overriding meaning here seems to be that apparently detrimental circumstances (dangers, storms and bandit chieftains) can, unexpectedly, actually give rise to worldly good fortune.

Those who know anything of the story of Zhuge Liang, who certainly faced considerable danger while leading his troops on the battlefield, and whose career (ultimately leading to a position equivalent to prime minister) only took off after his meeting with Liu Bei, little more than a bandit chief at the time but later the founder of the kingdom of Shu Han, may find this appropriate. One's tempted to wonder if the author of the text, having decided to attribute it to Zhuge Liang, then calculated the number of strokes in his name and wrote this particular text accordingly. However, other famous names, such as that of Confucius, don't yield such apposite responses.

This, of course, brings us back to the question of the oracle's origin. My 1979 almanac has nothing to say on this matter, merely prefacing the instructions on

consulting the oracle with a rather charming, if slightly crude, picture of Zhuge Liang at his desk, shown in figure 4.



Figure 4.

This is headed *Zhuce Pinzi Yishu Miaosuan*, a title which is almost impossible to put into good English, but implies 'Zhuge [Liang]'s character-component wonderful calculation art'. It's perhaps notable that the words *Shenshu* don't appear here, despite that fact that this is plainly the same text as appears in the 1990 almanac, under the title *Miben Zhuge Shenshu*. This is slightly easier to English, as 'Zhuge [Liang]'s Secret Book, the *Shenshu*'.

However, the 1990 almanac replaces 1979's pictorial title with a preface, reproduced here as figure 5, and this gives us a little more to work with.

秘 本 諸 葛 神 數

是書係舊時抄本，紙皆破碎，乃遠代之遺傳，世不多觀，相傳為漢諸葛武侯所作，共有三百八十四籤，按三百八十四爻，其中吉凶，如應斯響，較之金錢馬前等數，實有霄壤之別。余什襲珍藏，視同拱璧，今友人有家庭圖書集成之輯，內有藝術彙編一篇，搜輯豐富，多為真本秘本，該主人再三以此書付梓相商，因想禍福吉凶，人所共有，先賢傳授此書，本以指人迷惑，故未敢自秘，謹錄一通，詳加校對，搜殘補缺，以供同好，惟願占者誠心禱告，無不靈驗，如神，慎勿以兒戲為之，致損此書之價值也。

民國七年七月 吳縣江蔭香謹識

Figure 5.

Palmer reproduces exactly the same text, along with a translation (pp.144–145). However, as his translation fails to even name the author correctly, I decided to translate the text afresh. What follows is, admittedly, a fairly free translation, but hopefully rather less free than Palmer's. Here Zhuge Liang is referred to by his posthumous title, Zhuge Wuhou, 'The Martial Marquis Zhuge'.

This text comes from an old manuscript, which was very fragmentary. It has been handed down from remote times and is largely unknown to the world. According to tradition, it was written by Zhuge Wuhou of the Han [dynasty]. In all, there are 384 predictions, similar to the 384 lines [of the Yijing]. Long and short sentences are mixed together. In my opinion, its judgement of good and bad luck is profound and inexhaustible. Compared with Jin Qian and Maqian divination, the responses are very accurate and correspond to everything in the world. A friend of mine has a large and prized library of books on such arts of which this is the most treasured volume, and I repeatedly requested that he allow it to be printed so that mankind's fortune and misfortune, and good and bad luck, could be made available to the public. The old sage passed down this text to resolve people's confusion, rather than to be mysterious, and it should always be used respectfully, to avoid injury and contribute to well-being. If one divines with sincerity, the answers are always divinely right. Be careful not to play with this book or you will destroy its value.

7th month of the 7th year of the Republic [1918].

Respectfully written by Jiang Yinxiang of Wuxian [an old name for Suzhou].⁵

The first thing to be said about this is that the story of an 'old manuscript found in an unnamed friend's library' is a very typical 'origin story' that commonly occurs when texts are putatively being attributed to ancient authors who almost certainly have nothing to do with them; it's also rather reminiscent of what we in the west would describe as an 'urban legend'. And considering the extreme complexity of the *Shenshu*, with its rigidly mathematical structure of 'hidden' verses, it's very hard to see how it could have been reproduced from a 'very fragmentary' manuscript. Assuming the preface is not entirely fictional, I'd suggest that it's far from out of the question that Jiang Yinxiang (of whom I've been able to discover no further information) may, in fact, be the actual author of the text and, similarly to the *Maqian ke*, which is also attributed to Zhuge Liang⁶, that the date of composition of the entire work may in fact be in the early Republican period.

⁵ For comparison purposes, Palmer's translation (again, using Wade-Giles transliteration) reads as follows: *This book has been copied down through the ages from the old times. In the old times, only a few fragments of it were preserved and very few people knew of it or how to use it. According to legend, during the Han period it was written down by a man called Chu-ko Wu Hou and consists of a total of 384 predictions. Some of these prediction poems are short, some long but they all contain powerful explorations of both good and bad fortune. It is also very accurate and if you compare it with the fortune telling of Chin Ch'ien or Ma Ch'ien you will find this method is more accurate. A friend of mine has a large library of books on many similar subjects but he says that this book is the most valuable and accurate of them all. The book of Chu-ko is able to tell everyone whether they will have good or bad fortune. It can also lead people to avoid evil things and guide them to fortune and safety. Those wishing to use it should be honest in order to ensure the utmost accuracy. Do not play with this book or else you will destroy its value.*

Written on 7th month of the 7th year of the Republic at Wu Hsien by Chang Yin Hsiang (1918).

⁶ Steve Moore: *Maqian ke*, p.8.

That there are 384 predictions raises an obvious question (and it's one that will have some relevance when we come to discuss the western translations): is there any connection between the *Shenshu* and the *Yijing*? The answer to this would appear to be both yes and no. From the preface we can see that the choice of a total of 384 predictions appears to have been made deliberately to match the number of lines of the *Yijing*, specifically referred to as *yao* 爻. I suspect that the decision to have the first two predictions start, respectively, with the words 'heaven' and 'earth' may also have a deliberate resonance. On the other hand, it's obvious from the stroke-counting method of consultation and the mathematical system of 'hiding' the responses, that this is as far as the relationship goes. There are no hexagrams or trigrams, no stalks or coins involved and, obviously, no commentary tradition similar to the Ten Wings.

Nor, when Jiang Yinxiang is looking for a comparison for the *Shenshu*'s accuracy, does he mention the *Yi*. Instead he chooses first the *Jin Qian* (Golden Coin) method. This is, admittedly, a system that uses hexagrams, but they are derived with six coins, have either no moving lines or only one depending on the edition consulted, come with different texts and are ordered according to Jing Fang's 'Eight Houses', rather than the 'King Wen' sequence. Da Liu, in the second edition of his *I Ching Coin Prediction*⁷ gives a short translated text for this, while Kermadec gives both a translation and the illustrated Chinese text of a long version in his *Heavenly Pennies*⁸. For each *Jin Qian* hexagram, the full text gives a title, a 'symbol' that is, effectively, a judgement text, a 'poem' which expands on this judgement, a series of short 'auguries' such as 'The lawsuit is won' and lastly a short exemplary tale from history or romance, which also is usually the subject of the accompanying illustration. Unlike Kermadec, who gives only the 64 possible responses, Liu gives a method by which a single moving line and a secondary hexagram can be deduced and, although *Jin Qian* is cruder in its responses than the *Yijing* itself it is, nonetheless, a reasonably sophisticated divination system.

The second method Jiang compares to the *Shenshu*, however, is *Maqian*, which is perhaps a little puzzling. One assumes that Jiang is referring to one of two possibilities. The first is the *Maqian ke*, mentioned above in the introduction; however, this is a 'prophetic' text, rather than a consultable system, and while its alleged 'prophecies' about former dynasties have a suppositious appearance of accuracy, it can hardly be considered a divinatory method. The second possibility, and perhaps more likely given that the word for 'method' used when referring to both the *Jin Qian* and *Maqian* is *shu* 數, is the divination system known as the *Maqian shu* 馬前數, (literally 'ahead of the horse calculation', though the meaning is rather more 'quick calculation/divination')⁹. Considering the rarity of references to this method, the choice is perhaps surprising, even if *Maqian shu* is also a stroke-counting technique. However, the strokes are made at random, then counted, and it is whether the total is odd or even that gives an answer in terms of good or bad fortune, yes or no. There are no texts, and as a comparison for 'accuracy' this seems a very curious choice indeed.

⁷ Da Liu: *I Ching Coin Prediction* (2nd edition). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, pp.171-220. The material on *Jin Qian* is not included in the first (1975) edition.

⁸ Jean-Michel Huon de Kermadec (Trans. N. Derek Poulsen): *Heavenly Pennies*. London: Mandala Books (Unwin Paperbacks), 1985. Kermadec also gives a five-coin method and text that, interestingly, is also attributed to the polymathic Zhuge Liang, and this five-coin system also turns up in New Year Almanacs.

⁹ For discussion of this method, see Steve Moore, *Maqian ke*, p.10.

Ultimately, then, the *Shenshu* is a fairly simple method that keys stroke-counting to a set of numbered texts, with a very complex delivery system that seems designed to ‘mystify’ the user until they start to see the message appearing ‘as if by magic’ from the apparently unintelligible text. There is a hint here of the stage-magician’s showmanship, and, despite the preface’s admonitions not to play with the oracle, I find it very easy to imagine the *Shenshu* as a divinatory game, suitable for including in the New Year Almanac, that would keep the kids quiet for hours working out oracles based on their names (and learning their arithmetic, too). Of course, it could equally be used for more serious divination, though the necessity of having to select a mere three words upon which to base the consultation is perhaps rather limiting; but ultimately I get the impression that originally the *Shenshu* was hardly more than an unpretentious little divination suitable for popular entertainment. The daily newspaper horoscope end of the market, rather than the Delphic Oracle.

In recent years, of course, the *Shenshu* has escaped the Almanac and established a presence on the internet, where there are numerous Chinese-language sites offering instant consultation on entering three characters; or even just three numbers¹⁰. The usual responses then appear, as they appear in the original version, but without all that tiresome calculation the modern world has no time for. But it’s when the *Shenshu* appears in the western world that the transformation process really gets underway.

THE GERMAN AND CONTINENTAL EUROPEAN TRANSLATIONS

As far as I know, the *Shenshu* first appeared in a western language in 1994, when Stefan Kappstein (whose other works seem to be in the areas of acupuncture and Chinese medicine) translated the Chinese text into German for his *Shen Shu – Das Orakel der Heiligen Zahlen* [‘The Oracle of the Holy Numbers’].¹¹ This was followed by French and Dutch editions in 1994 and 1997 respectively, both translated from Kappstein’s German edition, and, although I haven’t seen them, I believe there are also Italian and Portuguese language editions, again derived from Kappstein, and there may well be more.

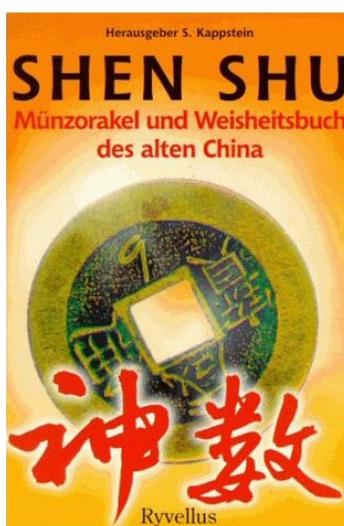


Figure 6: German paperback translation of the *Shenshu*.

¹⁰ A typical site may be found at: <http://www.hkheadline.com/fortune/zhuge.asp>

¹¹ The 1996 paperback edition is titled *Shen Shu – Münzorakel und Weisheitsbuch des alten China*, [‘*Shen Shu* – Coin-oracle and wisdom-book of ancient China’].

I've generally worked with the French edition here (figure 7), as being in the language most familiar to me, and the quoted passages in this section (in my own translation), and their accompanying page numbers, come from this edition, rather than the German one.

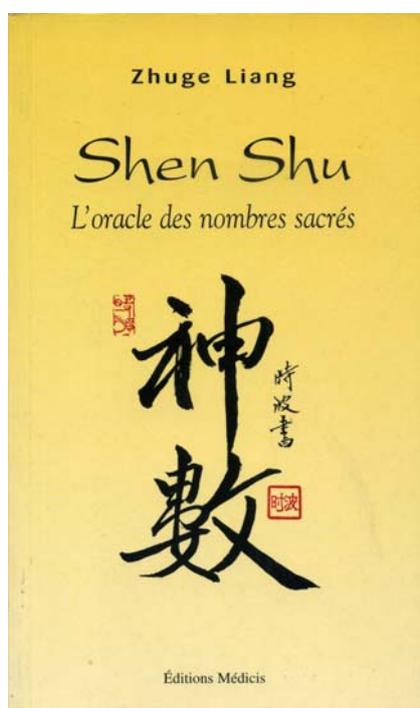


Figure 7: French translation of the *Shenshu* (front cover calligraphy: Shen Bo).

It might be thought that the *Shenshu* was a little too parochial to transplant to the west, particularly if its target culture neither uses ideographic characters nor counts the brush strokes employed in writing them. It'll come as no surprise, then, to learn that Kappstein has done rather more than simply 'edit and translate' the *Shenshu*; in fact it's been given a complete makeover, and obviously been designed to appeal to the same market as the *Yijing* itself.

For a start, the whole notion of the answers 'appearing by magic' from a block of unintelligible text has been abandoned, with all 384 answers now being ready-extracted and appearing in order, generally one to a page; each answer has also been provided with an explanatory commentary. Predictably, the original consultation method has had to be discarded as well, and Kappstein's translation, and the various editions derived from it, have turned the *Shenshu* into a lot-drawing oracle, with ten coins. I've only seen the coins that come with the Dutch edition¹², but I assume them to be standard across the range of books. These are reproductions of ten Chinese cash of the Qing Emperor Guangxu (1875–1908), but on the reverse, as well as the mint-marks in Manchu script, each coin bears an Arabic numeral from 1 to 9, plus 0. The Dutch edition being a paperback, the coins are packaged in a segmented, clear plastic envelope; however, the first German edition was in hardback, and here we find that the oracle pages numbered 1–384 have had a circular hole punched through them at the top, where the circle becomes a design-feature of the heading, these punched holes forming a circular tube which appears to have originally contained the coins.

¹² My copies of the French and German editions, being second-hand, arrived without the coins.

The *Shenshu* has now been turned into an oracle that, like the *Yijing*, answers specific questions. While thinking of the query concerned, the ten coins are shaken in both hands, and then allowed to fall into the right hand, whence, with the eyes shut and using the left hand, one draws out a coin to get the first of the three numbers required. One then places the drawn coin back with the remaining nine, shakes them and draws again, and repeats the process a third time to get the full set of numbers, which can range from 0-0-0 to 9-9-9. Thereafter we proceed as normal, subtracting 384 from any figure above that and looking up the text for the resultant number in the book. This consultation method is, of course, entirely manufactured for the translated edition, and has no basis in the Chinese original. There is even less basis for the claim that drawing three zeroes (an obvious possibility, given the lot-drawing method used) is a refusal by the oracle to answer, and that if one gets it ‘one should then refrain from asking any questions of the *Shenshu* throughout the duration of one week of the Chinese lunar calendar (ten days)’. Says Mr. Kappstein. Well, believe that if you like.

There is no Chinese text, and the characters appearing at the head of each page are only numbers, not written with the usual figures but using the more complex ‘accountancy numerals’. So, using the same example as previously, numbered 145, what do we have? An English translation, drawing on both the German and French texts, gives us this:

When you meet danger, you need not necessarily suffer. If you have to face wind-whipped waves, how could being frightened be of any help? When you meet a simple man, you’re close to retiring to a hermitage (p.164).

This is plainly the same passage as we looked at, above, when translating directly from the Chinese text, though there are some divergences, and these originate precisely in the three idioms pointed out previously. ‘Wind and waves’ is now translated literally, rather than as an idiom for ‘storms’ in general, which is fair enough, if perhaps a little specific. Rather more baffling is the way the ‘straw-headed man/bandit chief’ has become a ‘simple man’; one can only conjecture that Kappstein has assumed a ‘straw-headed man’ to be wearing a commonplace straw hat, and thus to be a ‘simple’ peasant. Presumably following on from this notional simplicity, the ‘blue/green cloud’ then becomes a ‘hermitage’ rather than a ‘high position’. One can only say that the third sentence of Kappstein’s translation has undergone something of a transformation of meaning compared to the Chinese original.

In case the meaning of the oracle itself isn’t immediately apparent, we are also given a commentary, which reads as follows:

This refers to the courage of the consultant, and he is advised not to torture himself over his inner fears, as that would hinder rather than help him.

Thus he shouldn’t ‘put his nose too high’¹³. ‘What the officer won’t tell you, you can learn from the soldiers’, as an old Chinese proverb has it. Rather than worrying about possibly lowering himself socially, he should mix with ‘ordinary people’. Only thus can he find inner peace and, possibly, also his Master (p,164).

In that this comments on the translation, as it’s been prepared, it does its job, though the extrapolation that one might ‘find his Master’ is perhaps unwarranted and speaks very much of the spiritual/self-development market being aimed for. But the

¹³ One assumes this is equivalent to the English phrase, ‘to look down one’s nose’ at something presumed inferior, or perhaps ‘to be snooty’.

whole message of unexpected good fortune arising from apparently unfavourable circumstances, contained in the Chinese original, appears to have gone missing somewhere along the line. Perhaps this is due to the unnamed *Shenshu* ‘initiate’ from Macao, mentioned by Kappstein in his introduction, who apparently provided ‘profuse explanations’ helping him prepare his commentary. This would possibly have been more convincing if the ‘initiate’ was actually named, assuming that he/she is not the Anna Paula Alves de Jesus in Macao who’s credited with giving Kappstein a copy of the original book. But perhaps the ‘initiate’ is enjoying a nice cup of tea somewhere with Jiang Yinxiang’s equally mysterious library-owning friend.

If I sound somewhat cynical here, it’s perhaps because so much of Kappstein’s book has obviously been contrived with the same western audience in mind that buys copies of the *Yijing*. Admittedly, it’s not a scholarly work, but there’s no mention of the *Shenshu*’s relatively humble (and probably recent) origins, nor of its original Chinese form. There is, though, quite a lot of supplementary material that makes it *look* as if it has scholarly credentials, including a lengthy glossary covering terms such as Qigong, Buddhism and animals mentioned in the text. There’s also much on Zhuge Liang, as putative author of the text, his life and times, and even excerpts from the novel, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the relevance of which, dealing as they do with the first meeting between Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei, frankly escape me.

Of equally doubtful relevance is a three-page section on the history of the *Yijing*, which Kappstein claims to have studied, both in Chinese and in translation, for 25 years¹⁴. However, as Kappstein makes no claims of a direct connection between the *Yi* and the *Shenshu*, the purpose of this section would appear to be simply to imply one by association. It is immediately followed by a brief biography of Zhuge Liang and a sketch of his times, and then we come to the following section:

The Sacred Number Oracle, in Chinese Zhuge Wuhou Shenshu, comes from the brush of Zhuge Liang who, as we’ve already seen, was one of the most celebrated figures of epic novels and Chinese opera librettos. His life story is attested by a great number of sources and his name is well known in Chinese literature. The text was probably written around 220 AD. However, it is possible that significant changes have been made subsequently – as is also the case in most classical Chinese texts, including the Yijing.

The text is original insofar as this is the one true literary and spiritual counterpoint to the Yijing. The latter is characterized by a strict internal structure, shaped intellectually.

The author of Sacred Numbers has just taken over the number of stanzas, in this case 384 – or 64 x 6 lines of the hexagrams of the Yijing. But the textual content goes in another direction: it has powerfully poetic images borrowed from various natural processes and the normal flow of events related to human relationships. It relies less on the elements of cosmology, philosophy and social organization underlying the Book of Changes than on superstition, mythology and the timeless wisdom of life known as common sense.

So is it not surprising that the oracle of the sacred numbers drawn from life and popular belief is even today the most popular book

¹⁴ Curiously, the edition he recommends is that of Sung, from 1934, apparently not realising that Sung has simply taken over the translation of James Legge.

of divination used in southern China and southeast Asia, and that the public prefers it to the drier Yijing (p.454).

There's a great deal that's contentious here. Even if we were to entertain the notion that Zhuge Liang was the actual author, the date of writing in 220 can be nothing more than a guess (and at this *particular* date, Zhuge Liang probably had his hands rather full with the final fragmentation of the Han empire into three separate kingdoms). Similarly, the notion that the *Shenshu* is 'the one true literary and spiritual counterpoint to the *Yijing*' might suffer if placed in competition with Yang Xiong's *Taixuanjing*. Besides, taking the simple, Chinese version of the *Shenshu*, rather than Kappstein's hyper-inflated edition, with its commentaries and apparatus, there's simply no comparison. There's also the claim, repeated on the back cover blurb, that the *Shenshu* is 'today the most popular book of divination used in southern China and southeast Asia, and that the public prefers it to the drier *Yijing*.' I suspect that the *Tongshu* almanac as a whole may be a more popular (in many senses of the word) divination book than the *Yijing*, but this passage is attempting to represent the *Shenshu* as a book in itself and the comparison appears once again to be nothing more than a fallacious attempt to connect the two works by association, in the same way that there's a heavy emphasis on the correspondence between the 384 responses and the lines of the *Yi*.

As for the possibility of 'significant changes' having been made to the wording, Kappstein returns to this notion a few pages later in a section on 'the authorship of the text'. Here, after referring to other (unnamed) Chinese texts where the authorship is disputed because subsequent hands have made alterations and additions to the original, we read:

It was not otherwise with the Oracle of Sacred Numbers. Although it says in large literary collections that Zhuge Liang is the sole author, a number of things tend to show the opposite when looking at the text closely. While most of the stanzas were written in the style that was common at the time of the Three Kingdoms, certain passages of a more modern feel suggest that modifications and additions were performed a millennium later, simply because some of the archaic style had become incomprehensible to the later eras of the Song and Yuan. To perform divination with this text, insertions were made, and we do not know if they aid the understanding of the text, or if they misrepresent the basic idea concerned and make them unrecognisable (p.457).

Apart from the fact that one would like to know the titles of those 'large literary collections' mentioning Zhuge Liang's authorship, I'd suggest that if certain passages have a more modern feel than one would expect from a 3rd century writer, a more economical solution might be, not that the text has been modified by later hands, but that it is simply not a 3rd century text in the first place. But this sort of logic obviously wouldn't play well with the book's target audience.

Ultimately, then, all that really survives of the original *Shenshu* in the Kappstein editions is the translated text of the predictions. Everything else has been 'reconstructed'. This particularly applies to the consultation method, but it also applies to the surrounding apparatus, from the book's suppositious popularity to its position as a match for the *Yijing*. If nothing else, as a marketing exercise, it's really rather remarkable.

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

There are a number of puzzles about the English translation, and some may be confused by the fact that it appears under two different imprints, Lulu and CreateSpace, with different covers, formats and page counts, though the text in the two editions is the same; it is common, however, for self-publishers to use both outlets for better distribution. Rather perplexing though is that the cover of the Lulu edition credits Yujing He and Justin McNulty as the authors, while McNulty's name has disappeared from the cover of the CreateSpace edition, though it does appear in the copyright notice. Their other work together appears to be *Chinese Wedding Traditions*, but beyond this there appears to be no more information available.

Whether He and McNulty had seen the Kappstein editions when preparing their edition, I have no idea, though it's interesting to note that the title *Shenshu* is nowhere to be found in their translation. Instead, the book is titled *The Magical Lots of ZhuGe Liang* and the CreateSpace edition (figure 8) bears the Chinese title *Zhuge Shenqian* 諸葛神籤 (though the last character is given in simplified form), 'Zhuge's Magical Lots'. This is rather confusing for, while the Kappstein editions are indeed lot-drawing oracles, the He and McNulty version is not. Instead, it's reverted to a method of deriving the usual three numbers that's rather closer to the Chinese original, by selecting three English words that have some relevance to the question one has in mind and then counting the number of letters in them. Thus the name 'Zhu Ge Liang', written in English, would give us 325. Again, if the number derived should be more than 384, we deduct this from the total before looking up the text. There is nothing at all to do with lots here, either in the method or the text describing it. Unlike the Kappstein translations, though, the English editions also include the Chinese text, punctuated and in simplified characters, which is at least useful in checking the translation without having to resort to the complex arithmetic of the original *Tongshu* version. There is, of course, absolutely no mention of the text's origin, or of the *Shenshu*'s original format in the *Tongshu* edition.

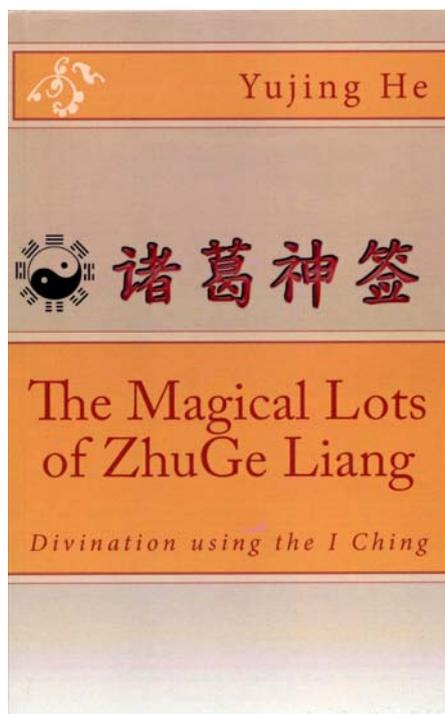


Figure 8. The English translation from CreateSpace.

For the sake of consistency, we'll continue to use the 145th prediction as our example, which He and McNulty translate thus¹⁵:

Don't worry when facing danger. Don't be afraid of the troubles you face; if you meet someone who is generous and straightforward, you will become successful very soon (p.61).

Apart from the rather eccentric punctuation, the first half of this is fairly standard, though the 'storms' or 'wind-whipped waves' have been simplified down to 'troubles'. But our 'straw-headed man/bandit chief' has now become 'someone who is generous and straightforward', a translation almost as baffling as Kappstein's 'simple man'. Nonetheless, the 'blue/green cloud' cum 'high position' has now become 'successful', which is at least closer to the original than 'retiring to a hermitage'.

Again, we have commentary to the translation:

This lot is auspicious. With courage, you will head off danger; if you meet nice people to help you, you will have success (p.61).

The punctuation is, again, a little unconventional, but readers will perhaps be relieved to hear that 'bandit chiefs' are, in fact, 'nice people' who'll help you out. The overriding concern here seems basically to be 'don't say anything difficult' that might actually need to be explained.

From references to 'fall' rather than 'autumn', and spellings such as 'color', one may fairly deduce that the English translation has been made by Americans, or at least, prepared for the American market. Without wishing to slight our transatlantic cousins (the fault is more one of marketing strategies than intelligence), I've a feeling this may explain a couple of other eccentricities about the translation. For example, while the name of the ancient Chinese capital, Chang'an 長安, is plainly visible in the Chinese text of prediction No. 3, the English translation renders this as 'Beijing', thus referring to 'the capital' without having to resort to any unnecessary explanation. Again, while the Chinese of prediction No. 91 plainly refers to 'swords and halberds', 劍戟, the translation gives this as 'guns and knives'. Leaving aside the absurdity of Zhuge Liang referring to guns in the 3rd century, the whole idea here seems to be that one should always be 'user friendly' and simply get the *meaning* ('weapons') across. Just don't make the reader have to look up any difficult words like 'halberd'.

What I find truly objectionable about this translation, however, is the sub-title: 'Divination using the *I Ching*', which this plainly is *not*, despite the authors' best efforts to make it look as if it is. Compared to the Kappstein editions, there is vastly less introductory and explanatory material, a mere nine pages, but with regard to the putative connection between the *Shenshu* and the *Yijing* it's immeasurably more misleading. We begin with four pages under the heading 'Fortune Telling and *I Ching*', which attempts to provide a concise account of the use, history and cosmology of the *Yi* (pp.1–4). It may seem a large task to boil down this material into such a small space, but four pages allows generous room for errors, not the least stupid of which is the statement that the *Yi* was anciently consulted by heating a tortoise shell until the resulting cracks could be interpreted. No, I'm afraid it wasn't.

At the end of this section we learn that:

One of the ancient scholars who sought to develop a method of interpreting the I Ching and used it in his daily life was Zhuge Liang (p.4)

While this may *possibly* be true, I know of no historically verifiable evidence to back up this statement.

¹⁵ Page numbers throughout this section are from the CreateSpace edition.

This section is followed by two pages headed ‘Zhuge’s Method of Using Magical Lots’. After a brief (but not entirely error-free) summary of Zhuge Liang’s life and career, we are told that:

Like most Chinese scholars of his time, Zhuge Liang studied the I Ching, and the various forms of divination that were practiced using the book. Even though he was a man of learning and science, Zhuge shared the belief of fortune tellers that the changes to come on earth could be found in the pages and rituals of the I Ching if one looked close enough. He developed a system of divination that went beyond the sixty four hexagrams that standard fortune tellers used. Zhuge paid attention to each line of every hexagram, and developed three hundred and eighty four messages of divination that could address any problem or question that someone might face. He used this divination method in all matters, whether it was matters of politics, military tactics or even his personal life (pp.5–6).

Readers who have stuck with this review so far will hardly be surprised if I say that I think this statement to be one of the most flagrant pieces of fictioneering I’ve ever come across in a work of divination. It is, simply, made up of whole cloth from start to finish. This is then followed by a three-page section on ‘Drawing the Lots’ (pp.7–9), which contains the consultation method described above, and which is again laced with references to the *Yi*, such as ‘Each lot describes a situation or scene that Zhuge had interpreted from the *I Ching*’. Kappstein’s attempt to sell the *Shenshu* to the *Yijing* audience pales into insignificance compared to this, and if Zhuge Liang were around today he’d probably be suing He and McNulty for gross misrepresentation. As would the unknown authors of the *Yijing*.

Ultimately, the *Shenshu*’s journey to the west has been a rather peculiar one. It began as a rather small-scale divination system, quite obviously designed for a Chinese readership, with an interestingly complex system for delivering the answers, ideally suited to the popular New Year almanacs it first appeared in. It was then picked up and entirely transformed for a western audience hungry for divination methods with an oriental mystique and sold with varying degrees of bare-faced cheek to the *Yijing* market, while the origin story connecting it to Zhuge Liang was not only uncritically accepted, but embellished to ludicrous extremes. In the end, the only part of the *Shenshu* that has really carried over to the west is the 384 responses, entirely divorced from their original context and, frankly, rather sloppily translated.

Possibly because I’ve given so much attention to it over the last few weeks, I actually feel a little sorry for what’s happened to a rather cute little Chinese divination system, now that it’s fallen into the hands of rapacious western barbarians. Perhaps this piece will go some way to restoring its original, modestly unassuming reputation.

Steve Moore
A rainy autumn day
2012