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Divine Words for Mortal Warmth:

Community Engagement through Taoist Kau Cim Divination

Master's Thesis

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Notes on Translations, Transliterations, Poems, Images, and AI Usage

Chinese terms in this thesis, including proper nouns such as names of temples, places, and deities, will be referred to with existing English translations from official records or online encyclopedias whenever available. Existing English translations will be followed by the original Chinese term and/or its romanization. If an English translation is not available, the thesis will provide its own translation and/or romanization for the terms. In this case, the Chinese term will be followed by the English translation. Chinese proper nouns without known English translations will be Romanized with the Pinyin system. English translations of the poems are done by the author.

This thesis is aware that there are records of variations for the oracle poems, their titles, and their annotations mentioned in its content. The thesis will remain loyal to the printed materials obtained in its fieldwork for a better illustration of the fortune-tellers' work, knowing that the materials sometimes differ from other official records by the managing institutions of the temples, such as the Sik Sik Yuen's Stick Enquiry webpage (https://taonet.siksikyuen.org.hk/StickEnquiry) or Chinese Temples Committee's online collection of oracle poems (https://www.ctc.org.hk/chim-search/).

All images in this thesis, unless otherwise stated, are photos from the author's fieldwork taken by the author.

This thesis acknowledges its usage of language assisting AI tools such as Grammarly for spell and grammar checking, as well as generative AI such as ChatGPT to assist with only the translation of the résumé in Estonian language. All usages of AI applications in this thesis strictly follow the guidelines for the use of artificial intelligence in thesis writing provided by University of Tartu (https://ut.ee/en/content/guidelines-using-ai-applications-teaching-and-studies).

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Introduction

Kau Cim (求籤) is a Taoist fortune-telling ritual often found in the Chinese-speaking world. Although available throughout the year, Kau Cim is especially popular in Hong Kong around Chinese New Year as a part of festive routine. It is a yearly practice during the Chinese New Year celebrations in Hong Kong for a member of the government to participate in Kau Cim in Che Kung Temple (車公廟), Sha Tin District to predict the fate of the city in the coming year (Wu). The origin of the practice is believed to have originated in the Han Dynasty (202 BC–9 AD; 25 AD–220 AD), when the Taoist monks would write down prophecies in the form of poetry, and gradually developed it into a fortune-telling system in which a collection of oracle poems are provided for the followers to draw from during Tang Dynasty (618 AD–907 AD) (Li and Lin 46). The process of the ritual is essentially similar to a game of luck: the petitioner seeking divine guidance from the Taoist deities would visit a Taoist temple, kneel before the deity with a cylindrical container that usually contains around a hundred bamboo sticks (Cim, "籤") with a number on each, then pray to the deity with their questions in mind while shaking the container until one of the Cim stick falls out. The petitioner will then collect a paper slip with an oracle poem according to the number on the fallen Cim stick. The poem is written in classical Chinese and often requires a certain level of cultural, historical, and literary competency to be comprehended, is then handed to the fortune-tellers for interpretation.

There are variations of the ritual that include Poe divination (擲筊) for verifying the Cim stick before it is taken to the fortune-tellers. Poe divination is a divinatory method for asking approval from deities which typically utilizes a pair of crescent-shaped wooden blocks, each has one curved side and one flat side. The petitioner cast the blocks with their questions in mind (in the context of Kau Cim, the question would be whether the

fallen Cim stick is meant for them), and if one block falls with the curved side facing up and the other the flat side up, that means the deity confirms the outcome and the petitioner can move on to the interpretation. Any other combination of faces is a negation, and the petitioner must draw another stick until they get one that passes the Poe divination. Some variations ask for three positive Poe divination results in a row for the fallen stick to be approved (Zhang 64).

The oracle poems used in Kau Cim are solely created for divinatory purpose and in general are not treated as literary works independent of the context of Kau Cim. There are many existing sets of oracle poems, each generally associated with a deity and contain mostly around 60 to 100 poems (Xu 38). Each Taoist temple uses a different set of oracle poems, usually adopting the set that is associated with the main deity they worship (Zhang 13). The poems are printed on small paper slips. Besides the poems, the slips often contain extra information such as the title, the luck-rating of the poem, the name of temple, short notes of "卦頭故事 (preface tales)" that make reference to historical, literary or legendary tales, sometimes even annotations that briefly explains the poem (Lee 75). The identities of the authors and editors of the information are often unspecified, though sometimes the annotations are attributed to famous Chinese literary figures such as the Song Dynasty poet Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037–1101) (Liu 96). The number of elements on the oracle poem slips, varies in different temples. During Kau Cim's long history, lapses in manuscripts have sometimes occurred in the transmission of the oracle poems, resulting in different versions of the same poems (Xu 52).

Like other information on the poem slips, the authorship of the oracle poems is neither well-documented nor much discussed, with only a few sets having identifiable authors (Chang 29; Xu 14). Although there is no available explanation or theory to the

obscure origins of the oracle poems, from the perspective of religious studies, the authors might have been marginalized since the deities are the center of worship (Zhang 12–13). The oracle poems, which function as literal manifestations of the deities' will, are thus erased of human intervention. A similar erasure of human involvement also happens in the academic handling of Kau Cim. There are substantial studies carried out that only focus on the oracle poems as a branch of Kau Cim studies (Pettit 512; Chang 29; Shih 164; Shen & Lin 122). However, this primary focus on the poems does not take into consideration the human involvement on the petitioners' or the fortune-tellers' side and thus rips the oracle poems out of their context and deprives Kau Cim of its character as a lived tradition. Most of the existing studies also tend to ignore Kau Cim as an experience, discussing the ritual on theoretical levels without any first-hand ethnography of it (Chang 29; Zheng 1; Zhang 62). Overlooking the practical aspects of Kau Cim also means that there is minimal academic exploration in its regional variations. This thesis aims to fill this research gap, thereby exploring the fortune-tellers' experiences of the process of interpreting the oracle poems and their dynamics with the divination as tradition bearers. Additionally, the thesis seeks to make an academic documentation and ethnography of Kau Cim in Hong Kong as an experience and a lived practice.

1. Background: Taoism, Taoism in Hong Kong, and Its Institutionalization

Hong Kong's history as a colonial entrepôt and has the current status of being one of Asia's leading financial centers have long associated its residents with a fast-paced lifestyle and a practical and materialistic attitude. Although seemingly secular, just like most of the Chinese-speaking world, Hong Kong is deeply influenced by Taoism. Taoism is a religio-philosophical tradition that "permeates Chinese culture" (Seidel et al.), including Hong Kong, and constitutes this thesis' place of focus. It is characterized by an active and positive attitude towards the metaphysical aspects of life, set against the more pragmatic and agnostic philosophy of Confucianism. Writings attributed to Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu from the 3rd to 4th century B.C. set the power of compliance, endurance, and the "paradoxical strength of passivity" as the center themes of Taoism, which later developed into the transcendence of physical and social constraints (Verellen 322). As Taoism was politicized in the following centuries, the seeking of immortality gradually became its another main purpose (322). In the words of sinologist Fabrizio Pregadio, Taoism has always been in a "close, though often controversial" relationship with various forms of divinatory methods (365). Pregadio's examination of *Taiping Jing* (《太平經》, "Book of Great Peace"), one of the canonical Taoist writings, reveals the Taoist view towards divination "as a way of knowledge" and its role in Taoism:

> In the *Taiping jing*, divination is seen not simply as a means of knowing the future or seeking good fortune: predictions are undertaken in the first place to determine the intention (*yi* 意) of Heaven and to integrate it into one's own religious and moral consciousness. Good fortune is the result of this integration: … (377)

If we consider divination as a "quest for certainty in an uncertain world" and a tool to "order experience and mediate the unexplained or unexplainable" (Flad 403), from Pregadio's description, the Taoist handling of divination seems to be extending from its core idea of power through compliance and submission. Divination in Taoism does not

seek to take control over what is predestined by the higher powers but instead allows glimpses of the sacred knowledge for the petitioners to better adapt to their predestined fate.

The discussion of Taoism's history, prevalence, and relevance in Hong Kong cannot be started without first examining the complex local narrative of religion, inside and outside the institutionalized settings. As said in Bosco's 2015 article "Chinese popular religion and Hong Kong identity", "Chinese religion in Hong Kong is quite diverse and amorphous" (8). While the "three teachings", the blend of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, laid the foundation for an indistinct and inclusive view of religion in Chinese culture, it is the exclusive usage of the term "religion (宗教)" in Cantonese leaving various non-organizational religious practice undefined that accommodates and allows for the fluid and non-fixed nature of the Chinese religious practice in Hong Kong. The term "religion" is "reserved for the organized religions" (8) and "religious" is only for those who are devoted to one of these organized religions. As for the non-institutionalized practices and activities that would be seen as "religious" from an anthropologist's view, the local residents have no unified way to describe them. From Bosco's study on surveys on the local people's self-reported attitude towards religion, there are at least three ways that Hongkongers would describe their relationship with what they consider as "religion" or "religious": the first kind (of Hongkongers) do not consider themselves as religious "even though they make offerings in temples" (8), as they do not exclusively devote themselves to the religions; the second kind describes their non-organizational religious practice as "superstitious"; and the third kind sees no distinction between organized religion such as Buddhism and the religious practices outside the organized settings (8, 10). Bosco associates the usage of "superstition" as influenced by Communist China's

attitude towards religion, and the Modernist narrative since the May 4th Movement in 1919 in reaction to the Treaty of Versailles, that emphasizes enlightenment through science and disapproves of religion. Although this thesis agrees with Bosco that those Hong Kong residents who claim to be non-religious are in fact religious in an anthropological sense, it is also worth noting that divination and religious practices are often dissociated from their religious tone or background in the minds of the Hongkongers that participate in them, as they are merely "observing tradition" (11) from their perspective.

Contrasting Taoism's general complying attitude towards fate, the alterable luck and the active attempt to alter one's luck distinguishes Taoism in Hong Kong from other schools of Taoism. While fate refers to an unknowable, immutable lifelong path predestined by higher forces, one's luck is short-term and changeable with human effort (Bosco 12). Many local religious practices and rituals circle around changing one's luck for a better life at or outside the Taoist temples, and the belief that one can obtain a certain level of control over one's life through changing one's luck endows the participants of the ritual hope and initiative (12).

Yet the fact that Hong Kong residents do not consider themselves religious should not be perceived to be a sign that Taoism, or religion in general, having low relevance in Hong Kong. Family altars worshipping deities or ancestors are very common in Hong Kong, and offerings such as incense sticks and fruits are still being offered on a daily basis (12). Feng Shui, a form of geomancy, still influences the construction process and interior design of contemporary architecture. Including Kau Cim, many parts of the Chinese New Year celebration routine in Hong Kong involve religious activity, such as making wishes at the Lam Tsuen Wishing Tree and spinning the fortune-altering pinwheel

at Che Kung Temple (12, 13). Tightly tangled with the daily lives of the residents, Taoist beliefs and rituals have become a symbol of the Hong Kong identity. Rituals unique to Hong Kong become the face of the city under the promotion of the government, and as a symbol of the city's uniqueness, these Taoist traditions define and uphold Hong Kong's own identity, distinguishing it from other Chinese cities (16).

Institutionalized Taoism was only established in Hong Kong around a century ago, gradually taking shape in the late 19th to the early 20th century (Chan 110; Lai 463). The colonial government passed the Chinese Temples Ordinance in 1928, which led to the establishment of the Chinese Temples Committee in the same year. The committee is in charge of the operation and management of 24 temples in Hong Kong, all of which conform to the ordinance's definition of "Chinese temple", which includes:

a. all Miu (廟, temples), Tsz (寺, Buddhist monasteries), Kun and To Yuen (觀及道院, Taoist monasteries) and Om (庵, nunneries); and

b. every place where-

    a. in accordance with the religious principles governing Miu, Tsz, Kun, To Yuen or Om, worship of gods or communication with spirits or fortune-telling is practised or is intended to be practised; and where

    b. fees, payments or rewards of any kind whatsoever are charged to or are accepted from any member of the public for the purpose of worship or communication with spirits or fortune-telling or any similar purpose, or in return for joss candles or incense sticks, or on any other account whatsoever. (The Chinese Temples Committee)

From the definition, the availability of fortune-telling services is a definitive feature of Chinese temples in Hong Kong. Chan Shun-hing gave an overview of the roles and structure of the Taoist institutions in modern Hong Kong society in his 2007 article "How Taoism Changes in Modern Society: A Case Study of the Se Se Yuan in Hong

Kong". According to Chan, Taoist institutions in Hong Kong are mostly traditional monasteries that house Taoist monks and provide divinatory services. The institutions usually contribute to social affairs by providing poverty relief, disaster relief, and medical services, and some of the more financially capable ones would also establish orphanages, nursing homes, and schools (110). In his article, Chan focused on the case of Sik Sik Yuen (嗇色園), a religious charitable organization established in 1921 and the founding organization of Wong Tai Sin Temple (黃大仙祠), one of the largest and most famous Taoist temples in Hong Kong. Although Wong Tai Sin Temple worships the Taoist deity Wong Tai Sin (黃大仙) and is described as a "modernized Taoist monastery (現代化的道教宮觀)" by Chan (110), the Yuen in fact claims itself to be worshipping a blend of "Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism" (Sik Sik Yuen). Nevertheless, Sik Sik Yuen displays the features Chan discussed as a socially conscious Taoist institution. The Yuen started its social participation in 1924 when it started its free herbal medical service. As of 2024, its medical charity has now developed into 7 medical units including a dental clinic and a physiotherapy center. From medical services, the Yuen expanded its scope of charity services to communal care and recreational activity home care services for the elderly, as well as occupational safety and health programs. The Yuen has also contributed to educational affairs, establishing 13 schools, nurseries and kindergartens, along with a Nature Education cum Astronomical Centre and a mobile biotechnology laboratory (Sik Sik Yuen). Contrary to the residents' self-report, not only are Taoist beliefs and rituals still relevant in modern Hong Kong society, but the Taoist institutional bodies in the city are also actively maintaining their relevance by participating in social affairs.

2. Literature Review

Because of how the oracle poems are seen as an extension of the center of worship (Zhang 12) as discussed and their multi-layered cultural significance as both sacred religious texts and works of literature, existing studies of the Kau Cim tend to focus on the poems instead of the divinatory side of it. Most of them discussed poetry's power as a medium between the believers and the higher powers (Pettit 512; Chang 29), and some explore the translation of the oracle poems to other languages (Shih 164) and even to images (Shen & Lin 122), but the roles and the works of the petitioners and the fortune-tellers remain understudied. Taiwanese semiotician Lee Chin-Yang is one of the few researchers who study the human invention part — the fortune-tellers and their verbal interpretation of the oracle poems — in Kau Cim divination. Her 2016 article "An Interpreter's Reasoning Process of Cim Sticks Using Semiotics" examined the mental process of the fortune-tellers when interpreting the oracle poems in Taiwanese Taoist temples with Saussure and Barthes' theories on the signifier-signified dynamics. Lee's observation is based on her 2004 fieldwork at Daitienkung Hamasen (哈瑪星代天宮), Kaohsiung City, Taiwan, as well as samples of real-life cases of oracle poem interpretation she collected in her interview with the temple's general director 洪文昌 (pinyin: Hong Wen-chang) during 2015 to 2016 (Lee 74). Hong was elected for the position and had a passion for literature, history, and Chinese opera, as well as being well-versed in historical references, divination, and human psychology (74). Daitienkung Hamasen is a Taoist temple that worships Wang Ye (王爺, also romanized as Wangye or Ong Yah, originally an honorific for male royalty members), a group of male deities believed to be guardians of the mortal realm on behalf of heaven and a folk variant of Taoist belief found in Taiwan and the Minnan region in China.

Lee describes the Taiwanese Kau Cim oracle poems as written in an obscure manner with space for creativity to avoid making inaccurate predictions (73). The underlying ambiguity of the poems invites the fortune-tellers to create their own narrative of the poem according to the petitioner's question and the context of their personal history, which means that the oracle poems have to go through two phases of creation during their writing and interpreting to become meaningful for the participants of the divination. This ambiguity and the two-phase creation process of the poems allow the divination of a high level of flexibility, maintaining the constant relevance of both the poems and Kau Cim itself (73). Rephrasing Lee's understanding, the oracle poems can be called a series of "dangling" signifiers without any signified and cannot function as a symbol until the fortune-tellers assign them a corresponding signified according to the petitioner's situation. Lee pointed out how this ambiguity between the signifier and the signified contradicts the Confucianist concept of the rectification of names. The rectification of names sees verbal signifiers as the proof that justifies the social-political power of the signified, and that the power of the signified is a result of a well-defined, static verbal signifier (Ting 46). Although these dangling signifiers are never defined and static in the case of oracle poem interpretation, they are still presented as such, that the symbolisms in the poems are all predestined, in order to maintain their authority as sacred words from gods.

The oracle poems at Daitienkung Hamasen, Lee's fieldwork spot, contain seven components, including a "卦頭故事 (preface title)" of the poem which is a short phrase describing a historical or legendary event or figure. In one of the cases Hong shared with Lee, an petitioner wished to know about the future of their marriage, and the poem drawn had a preface title referencing a historical tale of a man separated from his wife for 18

years before they reunited. Upon reading the title, Hong made a pessimistic prediction for the future of the petitioner's relationship, ignoring the rest of the poem on this one question. Though the petitioner argued that the referenced tale ended with a reunion, Hong believed that a two-decade separation in the tale was an omen of a perpetual separation in real life. Here we can see the first interpretation method identified in Lee's study — the keyword-extracting method: Hong providing a reading solely based on the preface title demonstrates how providing a relevant reading is a higher priority than assigning all potential signifiers in the poem a corresponding signified, resulting in some of them not functioning as a symbol in the interpretation (79).

Non-academic interviews of Taiwanese fortune-tellers and publications about them were also analyzed to gain an emic view from the practitioners. 劉玉龍 (Liu Yu-long), the curator of *Chance from God* (「神示籤詩」), an exhibition on the oracle poem culture in Taiwan for the Kaohsiung Museum of History in 2010, pointed out that the two most significant characteristics of the interpreting process are 1) its emphasis on verbal interaction between the petitioner and the interpreter, and 2) that there is no one fixed interpretation for each poem (99). Actual interpreters have also made similar comments on the nature of the interpreting process. In 2018, an oracle poem interpreter 陳正道 (Chen Zheng-dao), who at the time had served at Checheng Fu'an Temple (車城福安宮), Pintung for almost a decade, was interviewed for a Taiwanese agricultural magazine. Checheng Fu'an Temple is the largest temple worshiping Tudigong (土地公), the Taoist landlord deity. Chen provided more insight into the profession in the interview: in the case of Checheng Fu'an Temple, new interpreters are taken in through apprenticeship. Each apprentice interpreter must learn under two senior interpreters while enriching themselves with cultural and historical knowledge. Like Liu, Chen pointed out that the

same poem will have different interpretations for petitioners with different backgrounds and problems (Li and Lin 48). Moreover, as the poems reflect the divine wills, the interpreters must not commit blasphemy by bringing up anything that is not hinted at in the poems (50). Chen also attested to the interactive side of the interpretation as he believed that the interpreters could only find the right perspective for the interpretation by listening to the petitioner's problem carefully (48). As for the infinite ways to interpret the same poem, Chen explained the phenomenon from another angle: in his opinion, the interpretation needed to be constantly updated to cater to the needs and confusion in contemporary society, therefore the interpreters must not interpret the poems with outdated value for the petitioners from new generations (49). Chen's view on how the interpretation should be customized and updated according to the values of modern society also testifies that it should be the (interpretation of the) sacred texts serving the believers, or the petitioners in this scenario, instead of the other way round in Kau Cim divination.

Chen illustrated the interpretation by mentioning the three interpretations he had done for three poems, and two of them demonstrate the keyword-extracting method mentioned in Lee's essay. In one case, a pregnant woman wished to know the gender of the baby, which was her third child, and told Chen that she preferred a girl. The poem she drew began with the line "子有三般不自由 (the gentleman has three kinds of discomfort)", and the rest of the poem described how, although suffering from poverty for now, the situation will become better for the "gentleman" in spring. As the character "子" can mean both "man" or "son", and the same line with the character mentioned the number "three" and "discomfort", the interpreter predicted the baby to be a boy, contrary to the mother's expectations. According to Chen, the baby indeed turned out to be a boy

(51). In another case, the petitioner wished to know about the medical condition that their daughter had been suffering from. The poem the petitioner drew describes how a person is mentally drained by the schemes and concerns in their mind for all four seasons but eventually encounters a helpful person, ending with a reminder to the reader that they need to be sincere with that helpful person. From the imagery of the mentally drained person, Chen concluded that the daughter of the petitioner was suffering from a mental illness instead of a physical one. The daughter was later proved to be suffering from depression. In the above two cases, Chen only picked up one line from each poem that mirrored the petitioner's situation, echoing Lee's observation on how the interpretation is often conducted with only parts of the poem instead of the entire poem, leaving some of the potential signifiers dangling (79).

In her publication 籤詩密碼：神明誠徵專屬解籤人("The Code of Oracle Poems: the Deities are Looking for their Exclusive Interpreters"), Taiwanese writer, history teacher, and oracle poem interpreter 徐維芷 (pinyin: Xu Wei-zhi) summarizes the result of her fieldwork in over thirty Taoist temples in Taiwan on the systemization and interpretation of the oracle poems. As mentioned before, the oracle poems will sometimes come with annotations for the petitioners, though those annotations are often ignored. Xu discussed a case in her book in which she actually utilized the annotation for the interpretation: a student of Xu's drew an oracle poem for the prediction of their public exam result and asked Xu for interpretation. The poem opens with the line "選出牡丹第一枝 (choose the first branch of peony)", and the rest of the poem advises the petitioner to not hesitate and make good use of the chance that would come in spring. From the inclusion of the word "first", the student decided that the poem was a good omen of them getting satisfying grades. Xu added that the imagery of the peony is also a

positive sign, as the flower is regarded as the king of flowers in traditional Chinese culture. She then moved on to the annotations: under the section for "功名 (honors related to studies)", the annotation said "朱衣點頭 (the red-robed nods)". Xu explained that "the red-robed" referred to a deity that had excellence in distinguishing well-written articles. Agreeing with the positive signs in the first line of the poem, the annotation predicted that authorities would approve the student's performance in the exam. Xu started by interpreting the poem itself through keyword-extracting and then moved on to complement the interpretation with the annotations. From the order in which she handled the elements in this poem, although the annotations could be used in the interpreting process, they will only be an auxiliary tool. It is also possible that the annotations were only put into consideration in this case because they did not contradict Xu's interpretation, and conversation-based interpretation still has a higher priority than the annotations according to Xu's description.

From Lee's analysis of the dangling signifier to the fortune-tellers' emphasis on interpersonal interaction over the supposedly authoritative sacred text, verbal human interaction should be seen as the core of the interpretation of the oracle poems. This further contradicts the existing academic perception that the oracle poems are the essence of Kau Cim divination.

2.1. Kau Cim through the Theoretical Lenses of Tradition — Centered Approach and Vernacular Knowledge

This chapter will introduce the theoretical tools this thesis employes in the critical assessment and interpretation of Kau Cim. Beginning with the premise that Kau Cim implicitly incorporates the analytical categories of "belief" by which is meant, "expressive practices by which people create, articulate, teach, disseminate, discuss, challenge, question, adapt, and debunk beliefs" (Motz 350 as cited in Valk 178). Belief incorporates ways of organizing knowledge and making sense of the tradition under focus (Valk 176). One of the core practices that is involved in Kau Cim divination is the usage of the narrative: fortune-tellers narrate in genres through interpretation, using poems; conversational cues; and provide creative analyses of the sacred poems, as well as including into it their own individual aspects. Narratives utilized as such, are infused with belief as the underlying characteristic that provides the tradition with authority.

The three aspects of the vernacular: knowledge (Valk 1); theorizing (Briggs 98); and religion (Primiano 41) form cornerstones of the theoretical approach. It may be mentioned that the application of these categories is not super-imposed onto the fieldwork material. It is our empirical research material that determines the paths of analysis that this thesis adopts. It is not enough to categorize or theorize on a given religious or folkloristic phenomenon without looking at whether such approaches would further the salient quest for meaning making in our scholarly endeavour. These approaches provide the most organic and appropriate tools because in the absence of scripted conversations and strictly charged rules, Kau Cim has retained its functionality in the present context of hyper-modernity in Hong Kong through creative adaptations that are discussed at length in the later chapters. Fortune-tellers are the pillars that uphold the institution of Kau Cim

and it is only through their creative individual agencies to theorize, interpret, explain, locate, isolate, validate, and position the "will of the deity" through their vernacular practices, that the tradition thrives. Vernacular religion which organically underscores all ritual, practice, and interpretation connected with the divinatory practice (Primiano 51; Valk 16); and tradition theory in folkloristics. Vernacular religion as a method straddles the roles that individuals play in determining how they experience and view religious traditions. The ordinary everyday interpretations that result in the performance of religions and traditions is the focus of how Leonard N. Primiano in 1995 put forward the concept known as vernacular religion. However, this concept is contested and problematized in the wake of it being used and misunderstood as a dialectical other to institutional religions. Further, the terminological baggage that this term "vernacular" is associated with have led to its usage being questioned in the field. Simon Bronner criticized the term for its problematic etymology in English (4) and it being tied to "a cultural binary of unofficial/informal and official/formal" (3). However, the term still holds analytical values as a tool that reveals the "entanglement" (Valk 7) of the seemingly opposing ends.

This thesis utilizes the following three applications of the concept of vernacular:

1. Vernacular religion: This thesis handles Kau Cim as a ritual of vernacular religion — religion as it is lived, experienced and interpreted by the individual (Primiano 39). This dynamic and responsive concept is appropriate for Kau Cim, a divination that requires the spontaneous incorporation of context into interpretation.
2. Vernacular theorizing: this approach of theorization is a reaction to the Western theory/fact opposition that examines "folkloristics, performance,

and vernacular theorizing as practices for producing, circulating, and receiving knowledge" to see "how they differentiate themselves as well as how they intersect and interact" (Briggs 101). With the lack of strictly charged rules and high flexibility of Kau Cim, this thesis wishes to take an emic approach that understands and analyzes Kau Cim by discovering its internal, organic dynamics instead of imposing etic theories.

3. Vernacular knowledge: this thesis handles in the interpretation of Kau Cim as "an expressive strategy and its never-finalized product" (Valk 9) in a verbal form. The expressiveness and fluidity of the interpretation will be demonstrated in later chapters.

Further, there is a common perception among Hong Kong residents that tradition and the traditional exist in a binary opposition against the modern, and many Taoist religious rituals and divinations such as Kau Cim belong to the traditional for its perceived opposition against the rationalist and scientific modern. This thesis acknowledges but will not adopt this binary opposition between the traditional and the modern. Instead, this thesis perceives tradition as the fluid and ever-changing process of knowledge transmission, and the traditional the fruit of this process. Not only is the traditional not an opposition to modernity, but it is also defined by its continuation in a modernized society. Kau Cim fits into this definition as a religious practice and festive routine passed down from older generations to the younger ones, and from religious authorities (such as fortune-tellers) to the participating public. Kau Cim as an adapted tradition and the vernacularity of the interpretation process will be further explored in the following chapters.

3. Fieldwork: Preliminary Observations

Three fieldwork trips were conducted to obtain materials for analysis. Three Hong Kong Taoist temples, Wong Tai Sin Temple, Che Kung Temple (車公廟), and Shing Wong Temple (城隍廟) were chosen for their reputation among the locals as the temples that give the most accurate Kau Cim predictions according to online forums and social media. As introduced before, although also worshipping non-Taoist deities such as Confucius, the main object of worship is still the Taoist deity Wong Tai Sin, an immortal who was born a poor shepherd (Sik Sik Yuen) and is known among the locals for his "guaranteed granting of every wish (有求必應)". Che Kung Temple, located in Sha Tin District, worships General Che, a real-life general in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) who was "not only merited for his successful suppression of uprisings", but also was worshipped for "clearing epidemics wherever he set foot in" (The Chinese Temples Committee). Shing Wong (城隍), or Cheng Huang in Mandarin, is the Taoist protector god of a city who manages ghosts and spirits in a certain area for peace and order (The Chinese Temples Committee). Temple worshipping Shing Wong can be found all over the Chinese-speaking world. This thesis conducted fieldwork at the Shing Wong Temple in Shau Kei Wan, Hong Kong Island.

3.1 First Field Trip: Rationale and Description

I did not have a personal experience with Kau Cim before this thesis. I decided to first experience Kau Cim and observe the fortune-tellers as a petitioner for a few reasons: the first was to fill in my knowledge gap of the Kau Cim experience, and the second one was that, by starting from becoming the patron of their business, I wished to build genuine connections with the fortune-tellers. I considered it might be more difficult to gain their trust as a researcher and one-sidedly obtaining information from them, being conscious

of the fortune-tellers' identity as businesspersons.

3.1.1 Wong Tai Sin Temple

I started my fieldwork at Wong Tai Sin Temple and made my visit on the 30th of January, 2024. It was 11 days before the 2024 Chinese New Year. The Kau Cim area was near the Main Alter that worshipped Wong Tai Sin, surrounded by railings. A matrix of kneeler pads was set within the area, facing the Altar with an incense offering area between them. The temple lent containers with Cim sticks to its visitors at a booth. There was a basket with around half a dozen Cim stick containers in it on a table in front of the booth, and next to the containers there were some pencils and paper for the visitors to mark down the number of the Cim sticks they drew. Around the booth there were signs giving instructions on the Kau Cim ritual in Traditional and Simplified Chinese, English, even Japanese, and Korean. Two Chinese signs reminded the visitors to bring their own tools for Poe divination. Next to the booth there was a path led to the Wong Tai Sin Fortune-telling and Oblation Arcade (黃大仙簽品哲理中心), where the fortune-tellers were. However, asking for interpretation from the fortune-tellers is technically optional, and the temple provides a website giving modern Chinese and English translations and annotations of the oracle poems. There was a signage with the QR code of the website next to the booth.

I took a container and went back to the Kau Cim area. Some petitioners offered food such as fruit and cooked chicken even though the instructions at the booth mentioned nothing about offerings. Two to three petitioners used coins for Poe divination, and I did not see any petitioners used the wooden blocks for Poe divination. I prayed according to instructions I read online, telling the deity my name, date and time of birth, and question (which was about my studies). Cim 48 fell out at my prayer.

With my number I proceeded to return the container and visited the Arcade. Despite many temple visitors, not all booths were open on the day of my field trip. Most of the booths set up a desk close to the corridor at the entrance and put a couple of chairs on the corridor at the other side of the desk. Some booths put up stands outside their booths selling only the oracle poem paper slips for a few Hong Kong dollars. The poem slips provided by the fortune-tellers at Wong Tai Sin Temple only include four kinds of information: a headline saying "黃大仙靈簽 (Wong Tai Sin Oracle Cim Stick)", the number of the poem written in Chinese numerals, the title of the poem, and the poem. No annotation or luck-rating is on the slips.

Most of the fortune-tellers were elderly in their sixties to eighties. The procedure was more or less the same at all the booths: I approached the fortune-tellers, they asked me which Cim stick I had drawn and the thing I wanted to ask, and handed me the paper slip with my poem on it. The poem I drew, Cim stick number 48, is titled《卓文君私奔》("Zhuo Wen-jun Elopes"):

繡閣聽琴自起思
改粧寅夜最歡時
可憐沽酒臨邛市
才子佳人兩下廚

Here is a line-by-line literal translation of the poem:

Listening to the zither's sound in her embroidery chamber, her thoughts were stirred
She dressed up at the midnight, the merriest hour
How pitiful, they sold wine at the Lin-qiong city
The talented gentleman and the fair lady both worked in the kitchen

This poem tells the story of the historical figure Zhuo Wen-jun (卓文君), a poet of the Han Dynasty (202 BC–9 AD; 25 AD–220 AD), and her elopement with Sima Xiang-ru (司馬相如), fellow poet and politician. Zhuo was living with her rich merchant father and was renowned for her musical talents. Sima was poor at the time but equally

gifted in music. Sima played zither courting Zhuo at her father's banquet, and Zhuo decided to elope with Sima on the very same night. The two had to sell wine and food for livelihood after eloping.

The first fortune-teller was an old man. A woman worked for him touted me to their booth. Once we settled down, the first thing he did was ask for my Chinese zodiac sign. I told him it was tiger, and he immediately deducted my birth year from my sign, as the Chinese zodiacs alternate in a 12-year cycle with each sign attributed to a year in it. He noted down my zodiac on the poem slip and told me that my poem about Zhuo Wen-jun's elopement was rated "中上 (moderately good)". This poem was a good omen for those who had study-related concerns, according to him. He proceeded to read the poem out loud for me and briefly explained to me the plot of the poem. He was mindful of the inherent rhythm and musicality of the poem when reading, but it was not particularly dramatic or performative. His interpretation centered around the phrase "才子佳人 (talented gentleman and fair lady)" from the last line. He inserted me into the phrase, especially "才子 (talented gentleman)", as he told me the phrase was a sign that I would achieve great improvement in academic performance in the year. He asked me about my field of study and pointed out the phrase was also a sign of me studying a niche specialization and would become "a profession".

The second fortune-teller was also an old man. His Cantonese was rather heavily accented, and the service list told me that he also spoke Mandarin and Hakkanese, the dialect used by the Hakka (客家) people, an ethnic subgroup under the Han Chinese people. Like the first one, he asked for my birth year and zodiac, but this time rated the poem 中平 (average). He told me there was nothing to be worried about because this was a story about a talented lady. He read me the poem and gave me the context of the

elopement. The fortune-teller asked about my relationship status after reading as he thought the poem indicated a helpful romantic partner. This time, instead of Sima who made his appearance in the poem as the “talented gentleman”, I seemed to have been inserted into the role of Zhuo, the protagonist of the poem. He told me that there would be better fortune that year than the last for people whose sign was tiger.

The third fortune-teller was an old lady whom I will refer to as Auntie Yuen. I gave her my number and question, to which she immediately replied that it was a sign of success. I realized the rating of poem 48 swung back to moderately good as she put down the rating and the theme of my question on the poem slip. She told me I was a hard-working person and that she could tell I was a strong-willed person. “Some might call that stubborn,” I replied, and Auntie Yuen insisted she knew the difference between stubbornness and productive determination, as she was also a “stubborn” person when she was young, always sticking to her own decisions and letting no one convince her to change her mind. She persuaded me to stay determined and follow my heart as she did. Then she moved on to tell me the story, but unlike the previous two times, Auntie Yuen provided a few contexts that are not in the poem. In her narrative of the elopement plot, Zhuo was already widowed before the poem’s plot. She convinced her father to let her go as “she had already followed her father’s will in her first marriage and should have the freedom deciding her second”. Her father refused to support the couple financially but still gave her a horse, a carriage, and a couple of servants, all which Zhuo refused to accept. This was when she introduced me to the 49th poem in the temple’s Cim set, which was about Zhuo’s partner Sima after the elopement. According to Auntie Yuen, poem 49 tells the story of Sima inscribing his vow on a bridge linking his home and the capital, that he would not go back home until he succeeded in the imperial exam in the capital.

He eventually fulfilled his vow after a decade of effort. Auntie Yuen sees the success-after-dedication plot in poem 49 as the next stage in life that I would go through. She briefly mentioned that the poem guaranteed my health and career success, both aspects I have not expressed concern about.

Auntie Yuen made small talk with me even after the transaction was done, asking me if I had gotten used to life in Europe and about my family's health. That was when I learned that she had a daughter who at the time had already immigrated to the UK for around half a year. Auntie Yuen was happy that I managed to come back around the Chinese New Year so that my parents could spend the holidays with me, and commented on how her 10-year-old grandson who immigrated with said daughter of hers was already enjoying celebrating Halloween more than Chinese New Year.

I realized there were more male fortune-tellers than female fortune-tellers, so for the last sample I decided to talk to a female fortune-teller. The last female fortune-teller asked me for my date of birth, then looked for my Chinese zodiac and 八字 (Ba-zi)[1] from a book. She jotted down on the poem slip the rating of the poem (average this time), my date of birth, Ba-zi, and my age in the year of dragon according to Chinese age reckoning[2]. She assured me the coming year of dragon should be a smooth year for me without obstacles. The fortune-teller called the poem a "辛苦籤 (stick of toil)". Most of the time in this session she was reading my Ba-zi instead of the poem. She concluded that my luck in my studies was not promising and asked me about my academic performance. I told

[1] Literally "eight characters", also known as the "four pillars of destiny", a way to record one's birth date and hour with eight characters according to the Chinese calendar and time-keeping system, and a divinatory method which predicts one's fate from it.

[2] The Chinese age reckoning considers a newborn to have reached 1 year old at the first Chinese New Year after their birth, and most of the time one's age in the Chinese age reckoning is 1 year older than one's actual age.

her it was not bad; she looked confused but did not change her opinion. She did see the fortune of my study becoming better since 2022, but not before hitting a trough in 2020 and 2021. I told her I graduated in 2020 with first-class honors. She was even confused by the gap between her reading and my report, as well as me seemingly having gotten away from the bad study luck, but assured me that everything would be fine if I had done well in the previous few years. Despite my situation contradicting her reading, she was happy to see me avoiding bad study luck in 2020 and 2021.

After the interpretation, when I paid the fee, she made small talk with me. She asked if I was studying in Hong Kong or overseas, and, upon learning that I was studying in Europe, she told me that her son was also living there. She shared with me things she had heard from his son about life in Europe, such as food and weather, and was happy that I came back just in time to spend Chinese New Year with my family.

3.1.2 Che Kung Temple

On 1st February 2024, 9 days before the Chinese New Year celebration, I visited Che Kung Temple in Sha Tin District with a friend. She had experience participating in various Taoist religious traditions but not Kau Cim. We walked through the temple's main gate and a courtyard area for incense offering and reached the altar of General Che. At the left side of General Che's statue there were some kneeler pads for Kau Cim, though not as many as in Wong Tai Sin Temple. At the left side of the Kau Cim area was an exit led to a "soothsaying counter". The soothsaying counter consisted of six sets of tables and chairs. Five booths were for the fortune-tellers, and three were in business on the day. The remaining booth was for lending out Cim containers and Poe wooden blocks and selling oracle poem slips. A deposit of 20 Hong Kong dollars[3] would be charged for Cim

[3] Around 2.4 euros

containers and Poe wooden blocks, which would be given back upon returning the tools. The temple charged 5 Hong Kong dollars[4] for each poem slip and 20 Hong Kong dollars for interpretation per poem.

When we borrowed the containers, we were told that there was a time limit on the matters we could ask General Che: since it was still the year of rabbit on the day, we could only ask about the near future in the remaining year of rabbit, meaning the next 9 days, but not the future in the year of dragon. This was not an issue in Wong Tai Sin Temple. We asked a fortune-teller in a nearby booth about the time limit, and he told us to apologize sincerely and explain to Che Kung why we had to ask about the year of dragon so soon, and we could still ask about our future in the year of dragon.

Unlike Wong Tai Sin Temple, the oracle poems in Che Kung Temple came with annotations and ratings but used no historical or legendary references. I drew two poems, for the first one I tried to stick with the time limit and asked if my flight a few days later would be smooth. I got the 26th poem that was rated as 中 (average):

須信人間鬼最靈
人為善惡自報應
好香不須神前薦
臨事何須叩神靈

解曰：凡事作福　自身平安　家宅小吉　求財半遂

(One must believe in the utmost efficacy of the spirits in the mortal realm
Good or evil deeds, karma will repay accordingly
Fine incense does not have to be offered to gods
Why bow to the god now when push has come to shove?

[4] Around 0.6 euros

Explaination: Pray for good karma for everything. Safety and peace will be upon you. Moderate fortune upon family. Pursuit of wealth is somewhat successful.)

The second poem was for my studies in the year of dragon. It was the 83rd poem rated 下 (poor):

掛帆順水上揚州
半途頗耐浪打頭
實力撐持難寸進
落橈下俚水難流

解曰：凡事不吉

(You raise the sail and set off for Yangzhou with the current
Halfway, you endure quite some head-on hits from the waves
Despite the effort, you can hardly advance for an inch
Lower the oars and sails, the flow is difficult

Explanation: Misfortune upon every matter.)

We went to the fortune-teller who told us we could still ask for our future in the next year if we asked politely, who was a white-haired old man. When he saw poem 26 and heard about my concerns about a flight a few days later, he immediately told me that General Che was mad at me for not being able to make that decision for myself. He quoted the last line of the poem saying there was “no need to even interpret” it, and did not charge me for this poem. Moving on to poem 83, he asked me if I was studying overseas as he saw the depiction of ship voyage in the first line as a sign of me travelling. He warned me about obstacles in the coming year, and I would have to make extra efforts to overcome them. However, he still assured me that the coming year would not be a rough year for tiger-signed people.

My friend drew 2 poems. Her first question was about her coming life in Japan,

as she would soon set off for the country for an exchange program. He confirmed carefully with her if she only wanted to ask about her life but not study or anything else, which she affirmed. According to him, the poem said she was not living in an ideal location, so he advised her to move. He also reminded her to be aware of her diet. He then asked for her zodiac, which was cow, and told her to beware of her health, as the Tai-sui (太歲)[5] star was sitting at her zodiac that year of dragon. He asked if she had worshipped Tai-sui, and she told him her mother had done that for her. He asked if her mother had brought her any talisman, to which she said no since her mother was in Taiwan. He expressed his disapproval of her mother for not getting her a talisman and told her not to take his criticism of her mother personally, as he was positive that he was older than her mother, indicating his right to call out her mother's inappropriate action as a senior. He asked why her mother was in Taiwan, and my friend told him that her parents were divorced. Her second question was about her relationship with her boyfriend after moving to Japan. He affirmed that they would keep their contact, but it would be easy for her to encounter new romantic interests in Japan. My friend asked if that was a warning telling her to resist temptation. The fortune-teller only shrugged and said "It is hard to say". He told us he had divorced twice, just like her parents, and that "not even a wedding contract could guarantee anything". They continued a rather personal conversation about relationships for a short while.

Both of us wanted to experience more but the temple's closing time was approaching, so we visited another fortune-teller right outside the temple. We walked past

[5] Tai-sui is a fictional star in Chinese astrology that is believed to revolve in the same orbit with Jupiter but in the opposite direction. It is believed that when Tai-sui sits in the position of a zodiac, people of that zodiac will have bad fortune that year. Tai-sui affects four zodiacs every year, and the affected zodiacs need to worship Tai-sui to avoid said bad fortune.

his place when getting to the temple, which was a three-story house that opened its ground floor for selling incense, paper offerings, and fortune-telling services. His family seemed to be living in the house and running the business. The set up of his fortune-telling corner was like the booths in Wong Tai Sin Temple. We handed him our poems except for my invalid one. He started with me and poem 83: he asked for birth date and time and pulled out a notepad to mark down my age and detailed Ba-zi horoscope. He spent much time silently making notes on my Ba-zi throughout the session. He commented on how my horoscope was dominated by fire elements, and advised me to first learn how to control my fiery, impetuous temper. He explained to me my yearly fortune in the coming year of dragon and suggested me to leave Hong Kong as early as possible. From my horoscope, he also concluded that I would have problems in marriage. I did not ask him anything about migrating or marriage. He then moved on to the poem, suggesting me to burn the poem slip as the poem was a poor one and to not go out after dark too frequently. He concluded the session from my horoscope and yearly fortune instead of the poem: it was a wise decision for me to move away from Hong Kong and study abroad. The next two decades would be a good time for me to study and build my career, and I should take my chance and work hard.

My friend handed him the poem about her life in Japan first and told him about her situation. Just like with me, he asked for her birth date and time. He then checked her yearly fortune and told her she had to be careful about everything, as the year of dragon would not be a smooth year for her. She better pay extra attention to her health, according to him, especially on her diet. After that he moved on to her second poem, the one about her relationship. He assured her that things would go well for their relationship, then again read the poem and gave her the literal explanation. According to the fortune-teller,

General Che told her that there would be profit for her and all she needed to do was to stay calm and wait for that to happen. Her poem was a sign of fame and wealth, so everything would be fine for her.

3.1.3 Shing Wong Temple

On 3rd February 2024, one week before the Chinese New Year celebration, I visited Shing Wong Temple in Shau Kei Wan, Eastern District. Compared to Wong Tai Sin Temple and Che Kung Temple, Shing Wong Temple is much smaller in both size and scale. There was not any zone reserved for Kau Cim, so I approached the staff and asked if they provided the fortune-telling. The staff looked puzzled and told me no one would perform the fortune-telling at that time when there was only a week left of the year, as one could only predict their fortune within that Lunar calendar year. I told her I was doing it then because I was studying abroad, and my semester would start before the year of dragon. I asked if there was any way for me to perform Kau Cim for the year of dragon when it was still the year of rabbit, and the staff insisted there was no way.

3.2 Second Field Trip: Framing of the Research Questions

I conducted my second field trip from the 24th to 25th June 2024. From my last field trip I realized that the nuances of the interpretation come from individual fortune-tellers instead of temples, so I decided to focus on one temple — Wong Tai Sin Temple — only, as the design of the Arcade allows more space for the fortune-tellers' self-expression. I have also realized how the fortune-tellers rely on their client’s input of personal information for the interpretation, so I continued observing them as a client. The objective was to collect more samples of interpretations as well as variations of the interpretation of the same poem, both from fortune-tellers I had visited last time and new fortune-tellers I had not spoken to. I have also observed last time that many fortune-tellers promoted

themselves to be able to speak different Chinese dialects besides larger languages often spoken by tourists, such as English and Mandarin. I was curious about the niche service and decided to see its role in the fortune-teller's job. I focused on the Hakkanese-speaking fortune-tellers since my mother is Hakkanese and I can understand the dialect to a certain extent.

Both days were weekdays, and there were not as many visitors as the first trip. There were a pair of female visitors at the Kau Cim area asking a staff if Poe divination was required to verify the result. The staff told them it was not required. Fewer booths were open this time. Besides poem 48, I drew another poem asking about whether I could find a part-time job or internship that summer. I got poem 61 for that question:

十二金牌速召回
奸雄設計幾時灰
可憐一旦功勞散
老少扶車不斷哀

(Swiftly summoned back with twelve golden plaques
When would the villain be sick of his scheme?
What a pity, now all the merit has gone
His family, the old and the young, mourn endlessly with hands on his cart)

The poem was about the national hero Yue Fei (岳飛), a military figure and national hero in the Song Dynasty (960–1279). He was summoned back to the capital with twelve golden plaques halfway during a war, convicted, and executed all because of the scheme of his political enemy Qin Hui (秦檜).

First I went back to the second fortune-teller I spoke to in the first field trip, the one with Hakkanese on his service list. He rated poem 61 下 (poor) and told me the first half of the year was a poor timing for me to find a job, but things will be better in the coming later half. He assured me that there was nothing to worry about. "Even when it's

a poor poem?" I asked, and he said it depends on the situation. There would be people jealous of me if I already had a job, but that would not be an issue when I had not. Towards the end of the session he asked for my place of ancestry, and I told him my mother was a Hakka. He switched to Hakkanese and asked, "You're Hakka from where?", which I misheard as "Do you speak Hakkanese?" and replied with "I can understand but not speak". He asked again in Cantonese, and I told him about my mother's home village in Guangdong province. He told me he was an original Hakka from Meizhou (梅州, a city at the Eastern end of Guangdong province)[6] asked again if I could use the dialect. We made some more small talk, and he told me to come again some time. I could not ask much about his Hakkanese business, as he seemed to be busy looking for the next client.

The second fortune-teller was an old man in his 80s. In his booth there was also a woman working for him. He rated poem 61 "下下 (extremely poor)". The woman laughed hearing that but told me there was nothing to be afraid of, and getting poor poems was not necessarily a bad outcome. In his interpretation, the elopement in poem 48 was a sign for me to leave my hometown and study abroad. He proceeded to check which direction is the most auspicious for me, marking down my date of birth at the back of the poem slip. According to the fortune-teller, since I was a tiger-sign born in winter and the element of my fate is fire, I should be heading to the direction of Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia, all countries to the south of Hong Kong. He added that since that year of dragon was a year of wood, and wood generates fire according to the Chinese philosophy of Wuxing (五行, "five elements"), that year will be a prosperous year for me.

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[6] My mother, native user of the dialect, later confirmed from my description that he was speaking the Meizhou variant of Hakkanese. She also added that the Meizhou Hakka was believed to be the main clan of Hakka people in Guangdong province, which later branched out into different smaller communities, hence the fortune-teller calling himself "original Hakka".

He then moved on to poem 61 and saw that as a sign of me having to insist on my own way, as the hero's downfall began with him obeying the order and going back to the capital. He told me to look for jobs in fields of wood, fire, and metal elements (since wood generates fire and fire overcomes metal). He asked about the subject of my studies. I told him it was heritage studies, and he congratulated me for choosing a subject of wood element. He suggested that I keep on developing in the same field as it was suitable for me. He provided more extra information, such as that the 5th of June to the 5th of July was the most prosperous month for me in the year. The zodiac of the prosperous month was horse, and the combination of wood element and horse zodiac would bring me good fortune. He told me to go find a husband whose sign was horse, even though I did not ask for advice on marriage.

I talked to a female fortune-teller at the end of the first day, who told me to burn poem 61, the poor one, and took away the slip. I asked if it was a taboo to bring back the bad poems, to which she replied “Why would you need it? I’ll burn it for you!” She was the only one who offered to do so.

On the second day I started with a male fortune-teller who had Hakkanese on his list of services. I saw his business card and realized he shared my mother’s surname, which is Yip (葉). According to what I have learnt from my mother, in the case of most Guangdong Hakka villages, all villagers in one village share the same surname. I asked if he was Hakka and told him my mom was also a Hakka and a Yip, and it turned out he and my mother were born in the same village. The fortune-teller seemed happy knowing that and told me to come with my mother someday. In his own words, he did not know much about his home village and rarely went back now he was in his 80s. His family moved away when he was 4 to Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province, and then

Hong Kong, both Cantonese-speaking cities. His mother was a Cantonese speaker, so the family used Cantonese for communication, and he only learnt Hakkanese after moving to Hong Kong. There is a Hakka community in Sai Kung District, Hong Kong, where the fortune-teller grew up, and he learnt Hakkanese as a child playing with kids from the Hakka community there. I asked him how many Hakkanese-speaking clients he would usually meet per year, and the number was around 8 to 10. He repeatedly told me to visit again someday with my mother when our transaction was done.

I visited the first booth I visited in the first field trip. This time the woman who touted me last time was in charge of my interpretation. When she was explaining the plot of poem 48, she mixed up Sima Xiang-ru with Li Qing (李靖), fictional hero from historical legend 《虯髯客傳》 ("Qiu-ran Ke Zhuan", "The Legend of the Curly-bearded"). I found out in my research later that the 90th poem in Wong Tai Sin Temple's oracle poem set was also about the elopement of Li and his romantic interest.

I went back to Auntie Yuen at the end of the second day, who did not recognize me. Halfway through the interpretation, she suddenly asked if I wanted to draw an extra poem on my romantic life since she was curious. I thought I had to head back to the Kau Cim area to draw the extra poem, but she pulled out a Cim container from a drawer and told me to stay seated. She instructed me to pray to the small Wong Tai Sin altar at her booth and simply pull out one bamboo stick from the container without shaking it. I got poem 17, which she rated 中吉 (moderately good):

秋水兼葭白露盈
盈庭月色浸階清
清風吹動馬鈴響
響接晨鐘不斷聲

(Reeds by the autumn brook drips of white dew

Moonlight flooded the garden, stone steps glow clear bathed in it
Breeze flows and rings the horse bells
That echo with the morning bell's lingering chimes)

Though I could not tell the historical reference from the poem's literal expressions, according to Auntie Yuen, this poem was about the "漢初三傑 (Three Heroes of Early Han)", founding-father-like figures of the Han Dynasty including the general Han Xin (韓信), the politician Xiao He (蕭何), and the strategist Zhang Liang (張良). Zhang Liang recommended Han Xin to Liu Bang (劉邦), who later became the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty, but Liu refused to give Han a worthy position. Han left in anger at midnight, but Xiao went after Han and persuaded him to stay and work for Liu. Despite none of these names appeared in the poem, the reference is hinted in its title 《月下追賢》 ("Chasing after the Capable under Moonlight"). When telling this story, Auntie Yuen mistaken Liu Bang for Emperor Wu of Han (漢武帝), the seventh emperor of the dynasty.

At the end of the session, she suggested me pay with electronic payments and showed me several pieces of paper with QR codes for it, but then revealed to me that she had no idea which code was for which digital wallet and asked me for guidance. Remembering her talk from last time, I thought she was talking about the immigrated daughter. However, without any prompt, she told me that it was her eldest daughter, who was a head nurse at one of the most prestigious hospitals in Hong Kong, that helped her with setting up the QR codes. The immigrated daughter was her second daughter, and she also had an accountant son. All her children had their own family. Auntie Yuen started showing me photos of her grandchildren from her smartphone after I showed her through the QR codes, scrolling through her messages with the immigrated daughter while telling me about the daughter's journey of buying a house in the UK. We spent 20 minutes chatting about her family after the transaction.

3.3 Third Field Trip: Further Observations

I traveled back to Hong Kong at the end of 2024, planning to do my third field trip during the 2025 Chinese New Year celebration, the peak period of Kau Cim, which starts at the end of January 2025. Before the field trip I met with another long-time friend. Upon knowing my thesis topic, she shared with me her friend's experience with Kau Cim: the friend was an architecture student going for fortune-telling before an important exam at Man Mo Temple (文武廟), a temple in Hong Kong that worships multiple deities including King-Emperor Man Cheong (文昌帝君), a Taoist patron god of students, scholars, and exams. Our conversation happened after the student finished the exam and before the result was released, but the architecture student had already told my friend how precise the reading had been, as the fortune-teller accurately pointed out that it was not the first time the student attempted the same exam and even predicted the exam questions. Intrigued by the architecture student's experience, my friend first decided to join my third field trip at Wong Tai Sin Temple, but our plan failed as she fell ill on the day of fieldwork, which was also the only day when both of us were available.

However, I made a visit to Man Mo Temple in Sheung Wan District with my mother on 31st January 2025, the 3rd day of Chinese New Year celebration. My mother has been taking me to the temple since I started my master's studies. Although the visit was not intended as a part of fieldwork, I decided to participate in Kau Cim in the temple, intrigued by the experience of the architecture student. Along with King-Emperor Man Cheong, Kwan Tai (關帝, historical military figure-turned guardian god of martial excellence, business, and loyalty) is the other main deity worshipped in the temple.

It was extremely crowded on the day at the temple. At the right side of the temple's hall there was a sale counter selling all sorts of incense and tools for prayers, a long queue

was in front of it. I borrowed a Cim container from the staff at the counter, which they did not seem to provide many as I had to wait until the previous user returned it. I did not see many visitors participating in Kau Cim. Cim 64 fell out at my prayer. The oracle poem slip at Man Mo Temple was the most annotated one in my field work. The rating of the poem was 上上 (best) according to the slip:

> 吉人相遇本和同
> 況有持謀天水翁
> 人力不勞公論協
> 事成功倍笑談中
>
> 聖意：貴遇趙　訟即了　名能成　病可療　財有餘　婚亦好　問信音　即刻到
> 碧仙註：作事須知兩不同　主謀全仗貴人功　但凡事事皆如意　只恐人生談笑中
> 解曰：此籤謀望和合遇貴人是[7] 挈凡事稱意出入皆宜訟即了名得成財有望婚亦合病可醫信決至無不遂也
>
> (The gathering of the blessed is inherently peaceful
> Not to mention that there is a strategic patron
> No need for human efforts, let's talk about teamwork
> Things will be achieved with twice the outcome in joyful talks
>
> Holy will: There will be an encounter with a patron named Zhao. Lawsuits/disputes[8] will end soon. Fame will be achieved. Illness can be cured. Wealth is abundant. Marriage is good. If asking for message, it will arrive soon.
> Annotation of Bixia Yuanjun[9]: Know when you act that there are two disagreeing opinions. It is only because of the patron that the plan succeeds. If anything could go as one wishes, then life

[7] This thesis found several unofficial online records of the same explanation of this oracle poem, which belongs to the 關聖帝君一百籤 (Hundred Cim Sticks of Kwan Tai) set, using the character "提 (uplift)" instead of "是 (yes)" here. The following character "挈" also means uplift and is often used together with "提". The thesis uses "是" according to the oracle poem slip provided by Man Mo Temple, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong.

[8] The character "訟" carries both meanings

[9] 碧霞元君/碧仙, Taoist guardian goddess of Mountain Tai and childbirth

would be nothing but a joke.

Explanation: With this Cim wishes will come in agreement. Patron will come and uplift. Everything will be agreeable. Travel, inbound or outbound, is proper. Lawsuits/disputes will end soon. Fame will be achieved. Wealth is hopeful. Marriage will be harmonious. Illness can be cured. Message will surely arrive. Nothing goes unsuccessful.)

Guided by the staff, I went to the side hall of the temple to see the fortune-teller. There was only one fortune-teller in the temple, who was an old man. I told him the question I drew that poem for, which was whether I should stay in the same city or go to a new place for my doctoral studies. He took over the slip, read it and refused to interpret it for me. According to him, this poem did not provide answers for questions with two choices. If I really wanted an answer, I should draw two poems, one asking if I should stay, and the other asking if I should go. He refused to charge me for the poem.

Discouraged by the crowd, I did not follow his instruction. However, on my way leaving the temple, I saw an old man selling calligraphy on the street who also provided fortune-telling service. An old woman working with him seated me and my mother next to his desk as he was interpreting a poem from Man Mo Temple for a client. The client before me was a young woman in her late 20s to early 30s. The two seemed to be talking about the woman's career, and the fortune-teller reminded her to not give up halfway on a task. The woman disagreed with him, saying she would never do so, to which he shrugged and replied, "That's what the stick says".

I told him about my question and situation. He asked about my field of study, I told him it was about cultural heritage, and he said he could tell that I had "a face for cultural fields" and my fate would be tangled with cultural studies. He said the poem was a sign that I would succeed in my application for a doctoral program. I repeated my question that I was not sure whether I should stay in the same city or not, and he as well repeated the message that I would succeed. I started to get the sense that he was not

answering the question, and the in-temple fortune-teller might be right in that this poem provided no guidance on two-choice questions, so I asked again whether I should stay or go. He simply suggested that I go to more developed cities and said I had a face of “a persistent problem solver”. I confirmed with him again that the poem did not suggest one choice was better than the other, to which he affirmed. The fortune-teller did not talk about the annotations.

4. Analysis: "Adapted Tradition" and Vernacularity in the Interpretation of the Oracle Poems

Kau Cim is observed to have displayed many variations in its performance by the legitimate persons (in the temples and by the fortune-tellers) even within institutionalized settings. Larger temples that are more used to tourists tend to have fewer restrictions around the ritual, like how the staff at Wong Tai Sin Temple told the visitors that Poe divination is not necessary, and how both Wong Tai Sin Temple and Che Kung Temple allow petitioners to ask for their future in the next year. The fortune-tellers also contribute to the variations in the ritual: other fortune-telling methods, such as face-reading and Ba-zi horoscope, are often employed in the interpretation that is supposed to be centered around the oracle poems; simplified rituals for poem-drawing are encouraged depending on the fortune-tellers and according to the petitioner's needs; as well as the varying handling of the "bad" poems.

The variation Kau Cim displays contradicts the common perception of fixed, monolithic tradition that is opposed to the ever-changing modern society, which is a dichotomy often discussed in the examination of tradition as a concept. Handler and Linnekin connected the dichotomy with the "Western common sense" (273) in their 1984 article "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious". Likely as a result of colonialism, this "Western" recognition of tradition and modernity being two opposing ends of the one dichotomy also exists in Hong Kong common sense. In the book *Tradition through Modernity*, Anttonen dissected the dynamics between the two ends and their false opposition: modernity is marked by its difference with the previous times of tradition and thus a product of the previous times (28). Anttonen, as well as Shils in his article "Tradition", both used the expression "model" to describe tradition's role in the formation of modernity (Anttonen 35; Shils 126). The opposition is also false in the sense that tradition

is marked by its continuity in modernity, and its status as beliefs and rituals existed in the past and then is passed on to the present (Shils 127). These theories can be used to review the status of Kau Cim in contemporary Hong Kong. Despite the fortune-tellers updating the interpretation to match the mentality of modern society, the divination is labeled as "the traditional other" in relation to, or even highlighting, the capitalist, rationalist, and globalized modern Hong Kong. Kau Cim now has become part of the set patterns within Chinese New Year celebrations, and the mere fact of it being practiced in the past is enough to justify the divination to be continued in the present and in the future. Yet as how evolution organically occurs in the interpretation process of Kau Cim, Handler and Linnekin see the elucidation of tradition as an "inseparable" part of tradition as a model (276). In their words, tradition is a process of itself being interpreted and of creating meaning for the present by referencing the past (287) — similar to how the interpretation of the oracle poems works for the petitioners. Anttonen, however, brings back the duality with modernity to this understanding of tradition, as the act of interpreting tradition emphasize the modern agency over tradition "as past authority" (35).

Speaking of elucidation and interpretation, Primiano's discussion of vernacular religion also emphasizes the significance of the act of interpreting. In his article "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife", Primiano defines vernacular religion as "religion as it is lived: as human beings, encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it" (Primiano 44). His approach to vernacular religion focuses on the individuals' personal journey interacting with, making sense out of, and internalizing religion. Kau Cim recreates this journey with the dialogical interpretation process of the oracle poems, displaying its characteristics as a vernacular religion while illustrating interpretation as the key mechanics of vernacular religion. Kau Cim's vernacularity roots

in its personal nature and the fortune-tellers' emphasis on creating personalized readings for the petitioners. Although the oracle poems, the object of interpretation, are unified in each institutionalized temple and seemingly on the opposing end of "vernacular", the interpretation demonstrates how individuals synthesize narratives and meaning from the texts with their personal history in the practice of vernacular religion. Moreover, how the fortune-tellers' interpretation sometimes overturns the literal meanings of the poems further demonstrates how Kau Cim handles the sacred texts "as it is lived" (Primiano 44) instead of as indisputable canons. The result of the interpretation is highly personal and intimate, and this intimacy allowed by Kau Cim's vernacularity not only maintains its relevance in the modernized Hong Kong society but also brings the community closer together with the shared experience of internalizing a local tradition.

The method of extracting keywords and focusing only on them instead of the whole poem, which is observed in the existing studies and discussed earlier, is frequently encountered in the fieldwork. As in Lee's semiotic analysis, the fortune-tellers create narratives that connect the petitioner's personal history and the poems. This narrative is the core of the interpretation, sometimes even overturning the luck-ratings the poems or their literal meanings. These narratives are created on the spot and cannot be completed without input from the petitioners. In fact, I realized during my fieldwork that the fortune-tellers were "reacting" instead of "acting" during the interpretation process. Their interpretation was a reaction to the poems I told them I had drawn, the personal background I shared with them, and the very fact that I was there asking them for interpretation and listening to them. Poem 61 from Wong Tai Sin Temple would have been interpreted as a bad omen if I had told the fortune-tellers I was employed at the time, so as my friend's poem from Che Kung Temple if she had asked about her studies instead

of life in Japan. The petitioners' inevitable involvement turns the oracle poem interpretation into a spontaneous co-creation of meaning and narrative, despite the interpretation is presented to be pre-destined by higher powers. Liu Yu-long, the curator of the Taiwanese Kau Cim exhibition mentioned before, once criticized the self-teaching guidebooks to oracle poem interpretation on how they sold the illusion that there is one fixed interpretation to each oracle poem (99). He points out that the interpretation should be based on conversations that lead to a unique, customized reading of the poems for the petitioners (99). Rather than a one-sided service, Kau Cim should be considered a process of dialogic narration that intertwines its personal and social nature with the religious texts. This dialogic narration, as Bruner and Gorfain describe, is a polyphonic creation that allows space for "the tellers' commentary, evaluative remarks, interpretive statements, and audience acknowledgments" (57), once again illustrating the intimacy of Kau Cim and challenging the common perception of Kau Cim and tradition being monolithic.

The invalid poems I drew in my fieldwork, those revealed by the fortune-tellers that were not answering my questions, also illustrates the crucial role that fortune-tellers play in the divination process. As a petitioner, I naturally assumed that the poems guaranteed answers to my questions, and did not expect them to serve as rejection to the questions or mismatch for them. Due the inherent ambiguity of the poems, had there not been the fortune-tellers interpreting them for me, I would probably read hard into the poems for answers believing that they must provide one. In the case of poem 64 from Man Mo Temple, although the poem itself does contain a message, it was because of the in-temple fortune-teller, and the fact that he was there to listen to me, that I notice the gap between my question and the poem's literal message. Interactions with fortune-tellers guide the petitioners on not only what to read from the poems, but also what, or when,

not to read from the poems, an insight that could not be attained without religious and literary knowledge and made available by the fortune-tellers.

While the keyword-extracting method and the different ways the fortune-tellers handle the keywords contribute to the variations, the attribution of authority to the poems or deities ensures the credibility of the fortune-tellers and the validity of their interpretations. I observed how the fortune-tellers frequently emphasize that their interpretation is not their own perspective but the poems' or the gods', and their (the fortune-teller's) job is merely to translate and report what the gods are trying to tell us. Not only do they pose their interpretation as predestined, when in fact it was adapted to the petitioner's situation on the spot, but they also tend to present themselves as having no power over the content in their interpretation. The most straightforward verbal manifestation of this attribution of authority is the use of reported speech: the fortune-tellers tend to use opening phrases such as "the deity says" or "the poem is telling you", which distances themselves from their own interpretations. It was not the fortune-teller at Che Kung Temple who was mad at me for asking last-minute questions about my flight, but General Che Himself; and He was also the one who told my friend to wait for wealth to come upon her, instead of the fortune-teller outside the temple. This mindset of the fortune-tellers being but mere messengers, justifies and makes up for their bringing of negative news or unfavorable predictions, and at the same time takes away their liability when the reading is contradicted. The last female fortune-teller from my first field trip did not change her reading of me not supposed to do well in studies despite it contradicts with my situation, as she was merely repeating what my horoscope had told her. Similarly, the fortune-teller outside Man Mo Temple did not take back his words when the female client contrasted his reading but simply insisted that was the message of the poem. Their

"messenger" position also entitles them to be involved in their clients' personal matters, like how some of the fortune-tellers at Wong Tai Sin Temple talked or asked about my romantic status based on the plot of poem 48, despite that not being my concern.

Given how the fortune-tellers employ fortune-telling tools besides the poem, and how the petitioners' personal information sometimes overrules the poem's literal messages, the oracle poems might seem marginal in the interpretation process. However, they still serve as a pillar in Kau Cim as a "token of credibility" for the fortune-tellers. I have observed several factual mistakes the fortune-tellers made in their interpretation, such as quoting the wrong literary reference or mixing up the names of emperors. Although these might be innocent slips of the tongue, one can also theorize that oracle poem interpretation utilizes a vernacular understanding of Chinese culture and history, instead of accurate knowledge of these fields. When mentioning Sima's fate after his elopement with Zhuo described in Wong Tai Sin's 49th oracle poem, two fortune-tellers told me he achieved fame by acing in the imperial exam, while in fact the imperial exam system was not yet invented in the Han Dynasty. One of them was Auntie Yuen, who told me this same story twice. My encounters with this anachronistic tale do not seem to be exceptions, as a similar testimony is found from a local newspaper column published in 2005:

> 說及「司馬相如題橋」，此籤認真考起。所有之解籤佬均言相如十年苦讀，上京赴考不得志，途經大橋，題下「他日若不乘高車駟馬不過此橋」字句。查實，漢朝未有科舉制度，何來司馬長卿（相如）上京赴考？
>
> (Let us take a serious look at the Cim of "Sima Xiang-ru Inscribing the Bride". All the fortune-tellers say it was about Xiang-ru failed the imperial exam in the capital even after 10 years of hard work, walked pass a bridge, and inscribed on it the words "I shall not cross this bridge again unless on fine carriage and horses". In fact, the Han Dynasty had not yet had the imperial exam system, how was Sima Xiang-ru supposed to take the exam in the capital?) (Wei)

Two decades had passed since this testimony and Sima's tale of success remained anachronistic in the interpretations, which means that the fortune-tellers' historical knowledge has not been challenged in the past two decades. Cultural or historical accuracy was not their major concern, neither their knowledge their clients', as they are expected to provide answers and solutions instead of historical facts. This illustrates the vernacularity of the oracle poem interpretation process, as it utilizes and transmits vernacular knowledge that is not confined to historical facts but fluctuating from them, sometimes even contradicting with them (Valk 9), in order to create meaning for the participating individuals.

By ascribing received authority, from the higher powers, the fortune-tellers add to the interpretation process the aspect of the transmission of the folklore of Kau Cim. The interpretation process is no longer a conversation between two persons, but a passing down of prescribed sacred knowledge from the deity, through the poem, to the fortune-teller, and eventually to the petitioner. This act of "passing down" is the essence and etymological origin of the word "tradition". Its Latin root "traditio" means "handing-over" or "delivery", both concepts related to oral teaching (Noyes 234). As argued in Henry Glassie's article "Tradition", the performance of tradition interweaves the vertical transmission from source to performer and the horizontal transmission from performer to audience (402). The interpretation of oracle poems fits into this structure: the fortune-tellers, or the performers of the situation, quote their interpretation from the source, which is the deities; and then pass the knowledge down to their audience, the petitioners. In other words, whenever the fortune-tellers share their petitioners their interpretation in reported speech, the spontaneously created, adapted, and adjusted reading of the poem becomes a part of, and a reinterpretation of a tradition that is (perceived as) much older

than itself on the spot. Thus, the tradition, which is perceived as old, ancient, unchanging, and official, endows the interpretation with authority thereby legitimizing Kau Cim; while the interpretation maintains the relevance and stability of the tradition by reinventing it. If we adapt Handler and Linnekin's theory and handle the very process of interpreting and handing-down as tradition itself, then the fortune-tellers' job would be a verbal manifestation of tradition by weaving the interpretation into a conversation with the petitioners with the modern narrative agency over the sacred texts.

5. Social Impact of Kau Cim and the Facilitation of Inter–generational Communication

The fortune-tellers' contribution extends beyond verbally manifesting the pragmatics of Kau Cim as a tradition. With their work centered around conversation, Kau Cim becomes a platform that allows, invites, and stimulates communications between individuals from diverse backgrounds as long as they share a language with the fortune-tellers. Consciously or not, the fortune-tellers are able to utilize the intimacy of their craft and create emotional bonds with their clients: during my fieldwork, there were often moments when the fortune-tellers put away their professional, business personas and talked to me about their personal lives. As mentioned in chapter 3, I approached the fortune-tellers as a client who wanted to ask about my studies. In order to know better about my problems, many of them asked me about what and where I was studying. When I told them I was studying abroad in Europe, two of them related to my situation, or precisely, my parents' situation, as they also had immigrated children settled in Europe. They asked me about my life in Europe not as a part of the interpretation, but simply as casual small talk. They shared with me what they had heard from their children about Europe, and told me to come back to Hong Kong more often, as they knew my parents must miss me a lot. Auntie Yuen showing me her chatroom record with her daughter for twenty minutes was one example of the emotional capacity of Kau Cim's dialogical narrative process. During our conversation, she revealed to me that she was not staying in the business despite having long reached retirement age because of financial needs. Her fortune-telling booth is not open every day, and she has the choice of renting her booth to others. Across all the temples I visited in the fieldwork, the fortune-tellers were elderly. Many of them are in their 60s or above, and even the younger ones are in their 40s. During these intimate conversations with the fortune-tellers, I realized how, outside of their profession in their

temple, they rarely have the opportunity to reach out to younger generations, including their children's. Like some other East Asian cities with high population density, Hong Kong also suffers from aging population, and the handling of its elderly residents has always been a concern. As members of the older generations, the fortune-tellers might be deemed as part of a social issue outside the temples, but in their booths, they are connected to people of all ages, backgrounds, even nationalities, while being the respected professionals in the situation. Their profession, while maintaining Kau Cim's status as a relevant tradition, also keeps them as individuals relevant to society as religious authorities, illustrating how tradition sanctions hierarchies and order, and thus shaping social realities (Valk 1).

It is also worth noting how the two fortune-tellers who projected their situations with their immigrated children onto mine both happened to be female, and the gender implications of it. My identity as a female client might have made it easier for them to open up to me, and although gender might not seem to have much influence over the interpretation, patriarchal gender roles and heteronormativity can still be found in those dialogues. The several instances in which I (again, a female petitioner) was given unsolicited readings on romance or marriage are possibly a result of it. There were two times when the fortune-tellers asked me if I wanted to ask about my children's study upon knowing that I was asking study-related questions, assuming an adult woman would not be studying and her concerns would be about her children (though this is also likely a result of them having encountered many female clients with child-related questions). Two oracle poems from Wong Tai Sim Temple that contain romantic plots I discussed in the previous chapters, poem 48 and 90, are both about heterosexual relationships; and the fortune-tellers that have given me romantic readings all naturally assumed that I was

heterosexual, asking me if I had a “boyfriend” or telling me to get a horse-signed “husband”. This thesis has not encountered any discussion regarding the gender politics in Kau Cim or its impact, but the dynamics between the conservative values embedded in traditions, and the evolving social-political climate in which the traditions are transmitted, is worthy of continuing observation.

The inter-generational conversations is not the only kind of connection Kau Cim brings to the fortune-tellers. Many of the Taoist temples are tourist spots and Kau Cim attracts tourists in these temples as a cultural experience. In order to appeal to tourists from overseas, polyglot fortune-tellers often tend to provide different language options on their service lists. Other than languages the tourists often speak such as Mandarin, English, and Japanese, fortune-tellers who speak other Chinese dialects as their mother tongue will also put their mother tongue on the menu. As seen in Master Yip’s case, when providing service in their mother tongue, the fortune-tellers’ booths become a “meeting point” where the non-Cantonese diaspora can gather and talk in their own dialects. For the diasporas in the temples, both the fortune-tellers and the visitors, the interpretation sections create a space for them to reconnect to their ancestral origins and affirming each other’s identity through the conversations in the dialects that are minorities in Hong Kong. This dialogical process raises a “double awareness of selfsameness and continuity in time and space and the recognition of that identity by others” (Dundes 149) that shapes identities, demonstrating Kau Cim’s capacity to identity-building as a tradition.

As a side note, the influence between Kau Cim divination and Hong Kong society is mutual. While Kau Cim provides a platform for inter-generational communication, the local lifestyle has also conformed the divinatory ritual to its needs. Some parts of the Kau Cim rituals are simplified for efficiency, such as how the staff in Wong Tai Sin Temple

suggested the visitor to skip Poe divination and how the larger temples loosen the time restrictions around Chinese New Year. Although this seems to have no visible impact on the interpretation process, the version of Kau Cim that is observed in this thesis is a version that has been adapted to Hong Kong's fast-paced, efficiency-focused, and consumer-oriented capitalist culture.

Conclusion

This journey of revisiting this tradition that we as natives of Chinese culture always tend to take for granted has confirmed my theory that it is incomprehensive to examine the oracle poems or the ritual without paying attention to the human context. Kau Cim has its unique form, but instead of a black-and-white one, it is an ever-fluid form that, through making the oracle poems ambiguous in the interpretations, allows the petitioners to project themselves onto and internalize the oracle poems. Unlike the printed poems, which are essential in Kau Cim but not all to the divination, the dialogical interpretation process is spontaneous and malleable for the people involved, and it is this spontaneous and malleable interpretation that connects the divinatory ritual with the people's lives in Chinese-peaking cultures for centuries, allowing the communities to bond through Kau Cim and giving them reasons transmit and value the ritual as a tradition. It is the fluid human involvement that solidifies Kau Cim's statues as a tradition, and because of it we care about Kau Cim enough to examine it in academic environments. The explorations of Kau Cim also bring up the question of how much of these observations on its dialogical, co-creative character apply to other similar divinations, such as tarot reading, and whether all divination methods can be seen as intimate communal healing practices. Nevertheless, with in this thesis' observation, Kau Cim has demonstrated how the mortal humans and their verbal interactions function as the core of the divination, instead of the higher powers. The fact that these interactions, as well as the many variations of the ritual, are found in institutionalized temples under the management of a statutory body serves another reminder on how religious traditions can center around humans instead of deities or doctrines.

In previous presentations of my study in Kau Cim, I have encountered audiences

expressing concerns regarding the transmission of the fortune-tellers' professional knowledge upon hearing that most of the fortune-tellers are elderly. Although I failed to collect samples of interpretations with my friend during 2025 Chinese New Year, I still paid a visit to Wong Tai Sin Temple to observe Kau Cim during the festival. To my surprise, many young local people in their 20s was participating in the divination: most of them I saw at the Arcade were walking in pairs with their friends or romantic partners; and inside one of the booths there were four young men, who looked as if they were students, squeezed in front of a table listening attentively to the fortune-teller, arms around one another's shoulders. There were also three to four more younger fortune-tellers in their 30s than my previous field trips. Despite the craft of Taoist fortune-telling being labeled as a profession for older generations, the youth are still actively engaging in the divination, thus validating Kau Cim's lasting relevance. As illustrated in the thesis, Kau Cim is a tradition that is capable of shaping a social order in which individuals from different backgrounds in the community cross paths annually, and in which their wishes or concerns are acknowledged or assured. Conversations within the divination context as demonstrated in this study, ensure that the future of Kau Cim is not a pessimistic one.

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Resümee

Taevased Sõnad Surelikele Soojuseks:

Kogukonna Kaasamine Taoistliku Kau Cimi Ennustamise Kaudu

See magistritöö uurib inimlikku tõlgendamisprotsessi ja sotsiaalseid funktsioone läbi taoistliku Hiina ennustusmeetodi nimega Kau Cim. Ennustus sarnaneb mõnevõrra tarot' lugemisele: osalejad tõmbavad juhuslikult oraakelluuletuse, mis annab jumaliku juhise nende isiklikele küsimustele, ning annavad selle tõlgendamiseks ettekuulutajale. Kuna olemasolevad uurimused kipuvad käsitlema Kau Cimi ilma reaalse eluga seotud andmeteta ja keskenduvad ainult oraakelluuletustele, on selle töö eesmärgiks pakkuda esmakäelist etnograafiat ning nihutada akadeemilist fookust tagasi inimfaktorile.

Väheste uurimuste seas, mis käsitlevad ettekuulutajate tõlgendusprotsessi Kau Cimis, on Taiwani semiootik Lee Chin-Yang avastanud, et oraakelluuletused on oma olemuselt kõikuvad märgid, mis ei toimi korralike tähistajatena enne, kui neid manuaalselt sobitatakse tähistatavaga ettekuulutajate poolt. Intervjuud ja kirjutised Taiwani ettekuulutajatest näitavad samuti, et vestluslik tõlgendamisprotsess on võtmetähtsusega Kau Cimi personaalse ja isiklikkuse säilitamisel. See töö oma inimvahelise, tõlgendava ja edasiandva iseloomu tõttu käsitleb Kau Cimi rahvaliku religiooni rituaalina ning tõlgendusi rahvaliku teadmisena.

Andmed koguti osalusvaatluse teel palvetajana, kuna vestlused palvetajate ja ettekuulutajate vahel on orgaaniliste ja autentsate andmete kogumiseks üliolulised. Välitöö toimus mitmes taoistlikus templis Hongkongis 2024. aasta jaanuarist 2025. aasta

veebruarini. Välitöö käigus selgus, et: 1) ette määratud õnnehinnangud ja luuletuste sõnasõnalised tähendused ei ole alati määravad; 2) ettekuulutajad kasutavad sageli muid ennustusmeetodeid tõlgenduses; 3) tõlgendussessioonid arenevad tihti isiklikumateks vestlusteks; ja 4) väiksemaid dialekte emakeelena kõnelevad ettekuulutajad, kes pakuvad teenust neis keeltes, suudavad mõnikord luua sidemeid oma keelekaaslastega.

Välitööst kogutud andmed näitavad, et Kau Cim on kui traditsioon pidevas muutumises ning selle tuum seisneb tõlgendamises ja tähenduse loomises nii selle kandjatele kui ka vahendajatele. Tõlgendamine rõhutab sidemete loomist palvetajate isikliku ajaloo ja püha oraakelluuletuse vahel, mitte pelgalt luuletuse otseses mõistmises. Kau Cimi ei tohiks käsitleda ühepoolse teenusena, vaid kui dialoogilist protsessi, mis põimib selle isikliku ja sotsiaalse olemuse usuliste tekstidega. See protsess tagab ka Kau Cimi asjakohasuse pidevalt muutuvast ja moderniseeruvast ühiskonnas.

Tõlgendamisprotsess võimaldab ka ettekuulutajatel — kes on enamasti eakad — luua sidet ülejäänud ühiskonnaga. Hoolimata sellest, et nad on tihti tähelepanuta jäänud osa Hongkongi ühiskonnast, suudavad vanemad ettekuulutajad jõuda nooremate inimesteni – nende laste ja lastelaste põlvkondadeni — olles samal ajal austatud autoriteedid Kau Cimis. Ettekuulutajad aitavad Kau Cimi ajakohasena hoida, tõlgendades oraakelluuletusi ümber, loomaks Kau Cim põlvkondade vahelisi sidemeid, näidates traditsiooni võimet kujundada sotsiaalset tegelikkust.

Appendix I: Photos from Fieldwork, January 2024 – February 2025

Figure 1. Kau Cim area at Wong Tai Sin Temple (January 2024)

Figure 2. Cim stick lending booth at Wong Tai Sin Temple (January 2024)

Figure 3. Cim container with Cim sticks from Wong Tai Sin Temple (January 2024)

Figure 4. Wong Tai Sin Fortune-telling and Oblation Arcade, Wong Tai Sin Temple (January 2024)

Figure 5. Poem slips of oracle poem no.48 and no.61 from Wong Tai Sin Temple with notes made by different fortune-tellers (scanned in May 2025, materials acquired in January 2024 and June 2024)

Figure 6. Sign at a fortune-teller's booth in Wong Tai Sin Temple listing out the language and service options available (January 2024)

Figure 7. Soothsaying counters at Che Kung Temple (February 2024)

Figure 8. Booth lending Cim containers and selling Poem slips at Che Kung Temple (February 2024)

Figure 9. Poem slips of oracle poem no.83 and no. 26 from Che Kung Temple (February 2024)

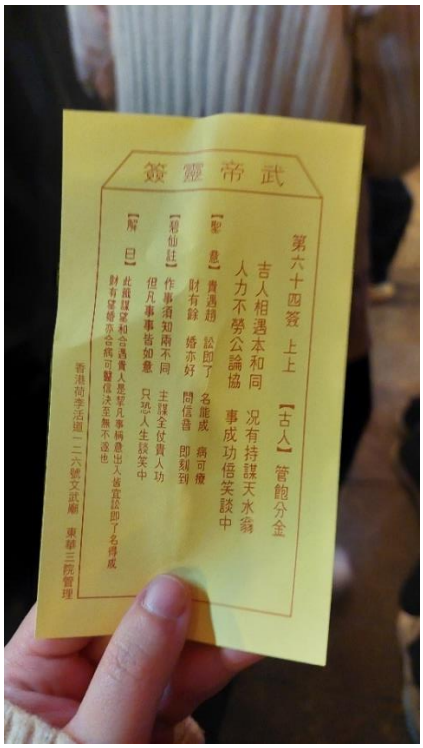

Figure 10. Poem slip of oracle poem no.64 from Man Mo Temple (January 2025)

Figure 11. Stand board next to a fortune-telling booth selling oracle poem slips in Wong Tai Sin Temple (February 2025)

Figure 12. Kau Cim area at Wong Tai Sin Temple during Chinese New Year (February 2025)

Figure 13. Wong Tai Sin Fortune-telling and Oblation Arcade with Chinese New Year decoration (February 2025)

Figure 14. Inquirers waiting for their turn outside a fortune-telling booth at Wong Tai Sin Temple (February 2025)

Figure 15. A fortune-teller resting in his booth, Wong Tai Sin Temple (February 2025)

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18/05/2025