

Divination and the State

Classifying Technical Texts in Han China

By Hur-Li Lee

Aiming at diversification and expansion of classification research, this in-depth study examines one of the six main classes in a two-thousand-year-old Chinese library catalog, the Seven Epitomes (Qilue 七略). The target class, the Epitome of Divination and Numbers, represents a group of divination manuals that are further divided into six subcategories. Through a contextualized analysis of the Epitome itself and other related texts, the study identifies a number of classificatory principles at work. The scope of the Epitome was evidently determined by government functions rather than objective observations of similarities and differences between topics represented in the library collection. In other words, the Epitome included technical manuals, as opposed to philosophical writings, collected by the offices in charge of divination in the imperial government. The study also examines the order between divisions and between individual texts within the Epitome. Further, the nature of the Epitome and its association with two modern-day concepts, science and religion, are clarified in the appropriate cultural and historical context. The final section discusses the significance of the current study and offers suggestions for future classification research.

Ancient writings in China were used for communication not only among human beings but also between human beings and spirits. In fact, communication with spirits was probably even more important to the early development of written records

—Tsuen-Hsueh Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk*¹

Hur-Li Lee (hurli@uwm.edu) is Associate Professor, School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.

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Research has shown that people in different cultures often categorize similar objects and concepts in drastically different ways.² These differences in categorization reflect people's diverse world views and understandably affect their information seeking and use in significant and substantive ways. What does it mean to librarians who serve increasingly diverse user groups? Presumably, an information system, such as the library catalog, with a classification structure that is based on a singular cultural perspective, is no longer adequate, attesting a genuine need to expand and enrich classification theory in terms of its cultural multiplicity. Beginning with such a broad goal, this paper investigates a classification system embodying a standpoint distant from what is currently familiar to most librarians, both culturally and chronologically. More specifically, the study focuses on classification of a particular group of technical writings that belonged to one of the six main classes in an ancient Chinese classification—the scheme applied in the *Seven Epitomes* (Qilue 七略), the first documented library catalog in China more than

two thousand years ago.³ I choose this topic for a thorough analysis after considering three factors. First, little research on classification of technical writings in the Chinese tradition has appeared, and the target class (the fifth Epitome) was one of the three classes in the *Seven Epitomes* devoted to technical writings. Second, texts belonging to this group are said to have originated from some of the oldest writings that served a central communication function between human beings and spirits in an early society. Third, this class covered topics that mixed methodical observation with mantric practices, drawing much criticism and contempt from the twentieth century onward.⁴ An investigation of the chosen class thus provides an opportunity for in-depth research into an area in early Chinese classification that is the least systematically analyzed and the most misunderstood. The goal of this study is to contribute to diversification and expansion of classification research by examining an early classification system within the context in which it was created.

The rest of the paper begins with a three-part discussion of the literature: background and makeup of the *Seven Epitomes* and the class on divination that was chosen for this study, research on the chosen class, and challenges presented by the texts. The subsequent section will identify the principles underlying the chosen class, the Epitome of Divination and Numbers. Due to the alienness of the classification and its culture to present-day readers, a section is added as a bridge to help clarify two related key concepts (namely, science and religion) in the appropriate historical context. The paper concludes with a deliberation of the significance of its findings in classification research and with suggestions for further research.

Related Literature

The *Seven Epitomes* and Its Epitome of Divination and Numbers

The current study targets the Epitome of Divination and Numbers, one of the six main classes in the *Seven Epitomes*, known as the first classified library catalog in imperial China (see table 1 for the six classes). The Epitome of Divination and Numbers (*shushulue* 術數略) included a group of divination manuals written before the Common Era. For convenience, the class is called the “Epitome of Divination” throughout this paper. Table 2 displays the Epitome of Divination’s six divisions and the estimated numbers of titles and volumes in individual divisions.

The catalog was one of the two bibliographic tools produced at the conclusion of a collation project commissioned by the throne in 26 BCE to develop and organize the imperial library collection in the Former Han Dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE). The project was described in its preface:

Emperor Cheng . . . summoned the Imperial Household Grandee Liu Xiang to check the canons, their commentaries, the masters, lyric verse, and rhapsodies; the Commandant of Infantry Ren Hong to check the military writings; the Grand Historian/Astrologer Yi Xiang [*sic*] to check [writings on] numbers and divination . . . and the Attendant Physician Li Zhuguo to check [writings on] formulae and techniques. (Translated by Lewis; bracketed inserts in the original translation).⁵

Lasting for about a quarter of a century, this monumental project began a Chinese tradition that many succeeding dynasties followed. Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE), a renowned classicist scholar, was the first principal on the project to lead a team of scholars, including his son Liu Xin 劉歆 (53 BCE–23 CE) and specialists working on the project for almost twenty years. After Xiang’s death, Xin continued and completed the work in a few years. During the project, Liu Xiang composed a résumé, sometimes quite lengthy and detailed, for each collated and finalized book as a report to the emperor. Each résumé variably contained bibliographic information, the history of a work, information about its author, the process of collating a work, and

Table 1. The *Seven Epitomes*’ Six Main Classes and Their Division and Volume Counts

Epitome	# Divisions	# Volumes
The Six Arts 六藝略	9	2,987
The Masters 諸子略	10	4,583
Lyrics & Rhapsodies 詩賦略	5	1,313
Military Texts 兵書略	4	1,207
Divination & Numbers 術數略	6	2,558
Formulae & Techniques 方技略	4	862
Total	38	13,510

Table 2. Title and Volume Counts in the Epitome of Divination by Division

Division	# Titles*	# Volumes
Patterns of Heaven 天文	22	419
Chronology 曆譜	18	566
Five Phases 五行	31	654
Milfoil and Turtle Shell 著龜	15	485
Diverse Prognostications 雜占	18	312
System of Forms 形法	6	122
Total	110	2,558

* Only one out of the 110 titles is extant.

often a critical annotation. All the *résumés*, the last few by Xin, were later gathered, possibly by Xin, into a collection entitled the *Separate Résumés* (*Bielu* 別錄) after the collation project was over. It is said that at the time, Xin felt the need for a more convenient tool to assist with organization of the library collection.⁶ He thus created the *Seven Epitomes* to include abbreviated *résumés* and a six-part classification scheme. The reason that the catalog was not titled the *Six Epitomes* was that it indeed contained seven epitomes. Not shown in any extant sources, the very first epitome is said not to represent a class. In fact, a popular belief by bibliographers is that the first epitome (the Collective Epitome) was a collection of introductions to the entire catalog and to its individual classes and divisions.⁷

Regrettably both of these two bibliographic tools are no longer extant. The *Seven Epitomes* is generally believed to have disappeared around the end of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE).⁸ Most scholars, however, concur that the “Bibliographic Treatise” of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (hereafter, “Han Treatise” for short), composed by Ban Gu 班固 in the first century CE, is an abridgement of the *Seven Epitomes*, with a significant amount of information in the original annotations removed.⁹ Some of those were incorporated into other chapters of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, and the others were replaced with a brief note referring to the same information in an earlier work, the *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian 司馬遷.¹⁰ Ban Gu also added a number of entries and relocated a few to different divisions, with clear notes, in the Han Treatise. However, the affected entries were only a small fraction of the total entries. The notes explaining the additions and relocations are a basis for estimating title and volume numbers in individual divisions of the *Seven Epitomes*. The original classificatory structure, its six classes and divisions, and the vast majority of the entries, although shortened, remained intact.

Research on the Epitome of Divination

Ideally, research on a classification scheme begins with the classification itself and its author’s writings that elucidate its composition and theoretical foundation. The *Seven Epitomes* is a challenging case for researchers because it has not been seen for more than a thousand years and its author Liu Xin left no writings about it or its classification. Furthermore, it seemed to be of little consequence in scholarship as its abridgement, the Han Treatise, served as a satisfactory substitute for it. Not until the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) did it reemerge when ten bibliographers individually attempted a reconstruction of the catalog, basing it on the Han Treatise with the addition of some fragments of the catalog cited in other sources.¹¹ These reconstructions have in turn led to some revived interest in studying the *Seven Epitomes* itself.

Nonetheless, writings on both the *Seven Epitomes* and the Han Treatise are equally relevant to the study of either because of the great similarities between the two.

As a whole, the literature about the *Seven Epitomes* pays limited attention to the theoretical underpinnings of the classification in question. A large portion of the writings on the classification is descriptive and at times interpretive, embedded as a minor component in a full-length treatise on or a brief introduction to the catalog.¹² Among those studies focusing on one or a few aspects of the classification, most either consider the entire scheme without breaking down to individual classes or examine only one of the first two classes, the Epitome of the Six Arts and the Epitome of the Masters.¹³ The other four “lesser” classes have individually received very little coverage in the literature. For example, Xu, in a well-researched book published in 2009, discusses the intellectual foundation of the classification in the *Seven Epitomes*, class by class.¹⁴ He gives only two points relating to the Epitome of the Divination: texts on divination were important in the Han Dynasty, and the contents of these texts were fraught with superstitions. Neither one relates to issues of classification. Contrary to this superficial treatment of the Epitome of Divination, his discussion and analysis of the Epitome of the Six Arts is much longer and includes, to name just three topics linked directly to classification, why the Epitome of the Six Arts was placed at the top of the classificatory structure, why the *Book of Changes* was placed as the lead of the Six Arts, and why the *Book of Filial Piety* was included in the Epitome of the Six Arts.

The only scholar who has articulated a number of classification issues concerning the Epitome of Divination is Zuo.¹⁵ He is not the first scholar to present these arguments. Nevertheless, his book is exceptional in taking a systematic and original approach to considering these issues. Three of the arguments he makes are noteworthy:

- A widely perceived dichotomy of knowledge in early China separated the learning of *dao* 道 (the “Way” of living and thinking) from the learning of *qi* 器 (the vessel or the skills for practical uses). Texts in the first two classes of the *Seven Epitomes* pertained to the teachings of *dao* while texts in the last two classes belonged to the latter.
- The Epitome of Divination was subdivided by object of study. This approach to classification was unusual in the Chinese bibliographic tradition in which subject of study (meaning author) and geography were more common criteria for subcategorization.
- The order of the divisions in this class was “from Heaven to Earth,” and that is why the divisions for astrology and chronology came first and the division pertaining to “siting,” or “geomancy,” was placed at the end of the class.

All three assertions will be individually examined in the following analysis.

While not directly focusing on the principles behind the classification, literature that sheds light on the nature of individual topics relating to divination provides useful information for studying the target class.¹⁶ Recent scholarship on a large number of divination manuals discovered in archeological sites during the last century is also invaluable.¹⁷ Although none of the 109 missing titles in the catalog's Epitome of Divination have been found, scores of excavated texts represent divination manuals in a wide range of topics, thus offering actual textual examples for what might be cited in the *Seven Epitomes*.

To date, classification research in the West has yet to turn attention to the Chinese tradition. This does not mean, however, that traditional Chinese bibliographic classification is totally unknown outside of China. Anglophonic scholars of the so-called Confucian canon, for example, frequently cite the *Seven Epitomes*, especially its view toward the Classics (the most valuable and the oldest of all texts) as expressed in its main and sectional introductions and treatment of the Classics in the classification. One example of this is Jensen's *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization*.¹⁸ From time to time, sinologists interested in early Chinese intellectual developments reference the *Seven Epitomes*, critiquing its categorization of either the masters or texts in technical classes.¹⁹ Their main goal is not to investigate the classification itself. Instead, they compare Liu Xin's opinion with others' or present arguments against his way of classifying philosophers and texts. The results of this scholarship, while profitable in intellectual history, make no advancement in classification research.

Data Sources for the Current Study

Research on the *Seven Epitomes* presents two major concerns. First, researchers must be cognizant of the fact that the catalog is not available in its original form. The prolonged time lapses between the initial creation of the catalog and the present time (two thousand years) and between its disappearance and its recent reconstructions (almost a thousand years) no doubt increase difficulties in the study of this ancient work. From the twentieth century onward, researchers have relied on one of the reconstructions assembled by Qing scholars. Among its various reconstructed versions, the one by Yao Zhenzong at the end of the nineteenth century is known to be the most comprehensive and the closest to the original in terms of format and arrangement; the current study bases its analysis on a recent republication of this version, edited and supplemented by Deng.²⁰

Second, the *Seven Epitomes*, like the majority of its successors, did not come with a handbook that provided explanations of its principles and classificatory structure.

Any attempt to study it needs to supplement the catalog itself with other data sources to arrive at useful insights—data sources to contextualize the catalog to avoid being historically and culturally insensitive. Contextual information that is of particular importance to this study includes an extensive knowledge of the language used, intellectual developments and the written and technical culture in early China, the Han government, and the personal background of Liu Xin, the cataloger and classificationist. Scholarship of archeologists and intellectual historians specializing in early China accumulated in the last few decades is also highly illuminating because it presents improved knowledge of early Chinese culture on the basis of newly excavated evidence and more rigorous research methods.

Such an archaic library classification presents great challenges to researchers. To achieve a thorough understanding of the entire scheme, one must perform detailed analyses of the scheme and its individual components with a multifaceted approach. The current study takes a snapshot of one of its main classes, reserving the rest for future research.

Classificatory Principles

A Class Defined by Government Offices

The introduction to the Epitome of Divination began thus: "Numbers and divination (*shushu* 數術) were the responsibilities of the Ming Tang, Xihe, astrologers and augurs."²¹ This statement referred to the duties performed by several government offices and officials, both real and legendary, in earlier times. Besides the epitome being considered, the catalog linked a number of other categories of texts to particular government offices of the past. This was not the result of a random or thoughtless decision. Two reasons may explain why the catalog presented a parallel between the structure of books and the structure of the state apparatus.

First, for centuries writing was only accessible to a small group of people in their official capacities. None of the extant texts dated before Confucius (551–479 BCE) were private writings.²² During the Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties (1766–771 BCE), the government gradually added various offices for handling increasingly diverse affairs. The emerging specializations within the government also meant specialized texts composed and maintained by each agency, a practice very much in effect through the Former Han Dynasty even as private individuals became involved in their own writing activities.²³ In Liu Xin's time, traditional textual specializations perceived to have originated from the idealized government structure still showed significant relevance and utility, especially in the eyes of classicists like Liu.

Second, the *Seven Epitomes* was an official government document. Its creation was a direct result of a collation

project commenced by the throne to organize the imperial library collection. Apparently, the library was built to serve the emperor who often needed to consult written records in his running of the empire.²⁴ Many Chinese bibliographers believe that the catalog's six main classes were not an invention of Liu Xin.²⁵ From the outset of the collation project, the work was divided among the collators (all of whom were government officials) according to their scholarly reputation and expertise in government (see the above quoted preface to the *Seven Epitomes*). Thus continuing the same structure in arranging the library collection—writings of a technical nature in particular—by bureaucratic specialty was both logical and pragmatic for the cataloger.²⁶

A Class of Divination

The epitome under study included six divisions, all pertaining to technical knowledge and skills of divination (table 2). The translation of the divisions' names and their contents poses many difficulties. Among the six divisions' names, the translation of the fifth division *zazhan* 雜占 as "Diverse Prognostications" is probably most disputable. I will explain the reason for choosing this translation in a later section, "Ordering of and Within Divisions." Regarding the contents of the individual divisions, all descriptions are more or less educated guesses because only one of all texts in the class is known to have survived. Fortunately archeological discoveries in recent decades have given an enormous amount of data that contribute to a significant improvement of the overall understanding in this area. The next section will discuss some of them in context. Below are the six divisions.²⁷

1. Patterns of Heaven or *tianwen* 天文 (including astrology/astronomy, meteoromancy) "is used to arrange in order the twenty-eight 'mansions' [translator's note: i.e., the twenty-eight Chinese constellations] and note the progressions of the five planets and of the sun and the moon, so as to record thereby the manifestations of fortune and misfortune. It is in this way that the Sage-king conducts government. The *I* [i.e., *Book of Changes*] says: 'Looking at the signs in the heavens, one thereby ascertains the changes of the seasons.'"²⁸
2. Chronology or *lipu* 曆譜 (including calendars, related astrological and hemerological calculations, related mathematics, and genealogical tables of kings and feudal lords) "serve[s] to arrange the positions of the four seasons in order, to adjust the times of the equinoxes and solstices, and to note the concordance of the periods of the sun, moon, and five planets, so as thereby to examine into the actualities of cold and heat, life and death. Therefore the Sage-king must keep the almanac in proper order, so as to define the clothing and

color regulations of the Three Systems. Furthermore, by his investigations, he knows the times of the conjunctions of the five planets and the sun and moon, while through his arts, the miseries of calamities and the happiness of prosperity all appear manifest." The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines chronology as "The science of computing and adjusting time or periods of time, and of recording and arranging events in the order of time."²⁹ Being broader than its common usage referring to only historical chronology (i.e., the second part of the definition), this *OED* definition is a better representation of this division. The first part of the definition is sometimes called technical chronology.

3. Five Phases or *wuxing* 五行 (including various systems of numerological calculation modeling on divinations in the above two divisions): "The Five Elements [another translation of the Five Phases] are the corporeal essences of the Five Constant Virtues. . . . If one's personal appearance, speech, vision, hearing and thought lose their proper order, the Five Elements will fall into confusion and changes will arise in the five planets. For these all proceed from the numbers connected with the almanac, and are divisions of one thing (i.e., of the movements of the Five Elements). Their laws all arise from the revolutions of the Five Powers (i.e., Elements), and if they are extended to their farthest stretch, there is nothing (in the universe) which they will not reach to."
4. Milfoil and Turtle Shell or *shigui* 著龜 (divinations by milfoil stalks and turtle shells) "are used by the Sages. The *Shu* [i.e., *Book of Documents*] says: 'When you have doubts about any great matter, consult the tortoise shell and divination stalks' . . . And the *I* says: 'For making certain of good and bad fortune and accomplishing things requiring strenuous effort, there is nothing better than the divination plants and tortoise shell'; 'Therefore, when the Superior Man is about to do something or carry out some action, he asks, making his enquiry in words. They receive his order, and the answer comes as the echo's response.'"³⁰
5. Diverse Prognostications or *zazhan* 雜占 (including oneiromancy, demonology, incantation, and exorcism) "serve to keep records of the phenomena of various things and to observe the manifestations of good and evil. . . . These various methods of divination are not all of one kind, but that of the dream is most important."³¹ My interpretation of this summary differs somewhat from the quoted translation. See the discussion below under "Ordering of and Within Divisions."
6. System of forms or *xingfa* 形法 (including siting and physiognomy) "deals with general statements about

the influencing forces in the entire nine provinces, in order to erect a walled city, its outer wall, a house or a hut. In this system of forms, the measurement and number of the bones of men and of the six domestic animals (the horse, ox, pig, sheep, dog and fowl); also the containing capacities of vessels; are examined, so as to find out whether their sound and matter are noble or mean, and are of good or evil omen. This is like the pitch-pipes, each of which, according to whether it is long or short, produces its own special sound. This is not because of the existence of divine beings, but is the natural result of their own measurement.”³²

Why did divination occupy one of the six main classes in the *Seven Epitomes*? And why was it recognized or accepted by Liu Xin as one of the three categories of technical writings? To understand the importance of divination in early China, we must look back in history.

According to historical records and excavated artifacts, mantic practices began in China thousands of years ago.³³ Recorded information about divination from earliest times showed a wide range of purposes for divination—those related to agriculture, governing, war, and many day-to-day activities. Both the Shang and Western Zhou courts conducted elaborate rituals in divination. At court, divination was not only a way to give advice for mundane activities but also a strategy for legitimizing and perpetuating the ruling of the royal house. As such, diviners were able to hold high positions and tremendous power in the government; in some cases, the king was the diviner. Gradually the kingdom further developed and bureaucracy expanded. Divination also grew in its complexity and required extensive training, giving rise to specialized offices and officials such as astrologers and augurs.

From about the eighth century BCE onward, the central government began to weaken, rigid social institutions loosened, and literacy spread. As a result, the next five hundred years (approximately corresponding to the Spring and Autumn era and the Warring States era) came to be known as the most creative period in Chinese intellectual history. Rationalized thinking emerged and developed into a number of philosophical approaches to considering central human concerns that became the new elite knowledge. Traditional technical knowledge (divination and medicine, for example) that was mostly passed down from father to son, on the other hand, lost its prestige. Divination nonetheless had its place in the Han government. While no longer at the top level of the administration, the Prefect Grand Astrologer, the most technically trained post in the Han according to Bielenstein, and the Prefect Grand Augur, assisted by their subordinates, continued their divinatory functions for the empire.³⁴ Liu Xin compiled the *Seven Epitomes* in this context. Because divination had been central to the state for hundreds of years

and divination manuals existed in a large number (110 titles and 2,558 chapters in the *Seven Epitomes*; see table 1), the importance of divination in the text culture of the Han was unquestionable.

Being “Technical”

The distinction between philosophical and technical texts was a significant one in the *Seven Epitomes*. As Zuo points out, the *Seven Epitomes* dichotomized all texts in the imperial library into two camps: texts speaking to the Way (*dao*) and texts of a technical nature.³⁵ The latter comprised three classes including the Epitome of Divination. In effect, the collation project that resulted in the *Seven Epitomes* had a labor division that also reflected this dichotomization. The preface to the *Seven Epitomes*, believed to be written by Liu Xin, indicated that the emperor placed the collation of philosophical and literary texts in the hands of a scholar/official and the collation of technical texts in the hands of three other officials with distinct technical specialties.³⁶

In view of this dichotomy, the reason for some texts on divination being placed in classes other than the Epitome of Divination becomes clear. The *Book of Changes*, for example, was all about divination, but it was considered one of the six Classics and was included in the Epitome of the Six Arts because of its theoretical nature. On the contrary, the texts on *yin-yang* and the Five Phases in the Epitome of Divination got separated from the writings by the *yin-yang* masters (a division in the Epitome of the Masters) because the former were applied to techniques of divination and the latter were entirely philosophical.³⁷

Classification by Object of Interest

In describing the traditional Chinese classification of knowledge, Zuo asserts that it was classified chiefly by the person undertaking the study and geography instead of the object or topic of study.³⁸ The *Seven Epitomes*, he concedes, was an exception because three of its main classes consisted of technical writings, each of which centered on an object of interest: military arts, divination, and medicine. His assertion lacks accuracy (a worthy topic for a future study); however, he is correct in saying that the last three classes are focused on three objects of interest. As pointed out previously, the bureaucratic structure influenced the formation of the three technical classes in the *Seven Epitomes*. The classificationist Liu Xin did not set out to study the knowledge universe deductively or inductively so that concepts, things, events, and so on could be grouped in relation to their innate similarities or differences—the latter a Western approach to classification.³⁹ In other words, a state bureaucracy provided a framework for the work and thinking in the collation and cataloging project so that the objects of interest applied to

categorizing the technical books came straight out of that framework. Although calling them “disciplines” in the narrow sense by which disciplines are understood today would be inappropriate, these three textual categories demonstrated specialties entailing highly trained technical skills that had served the ruling class exclusively. The six divisions under the Epitome of Divination clearly exhibit how objects of interest determined the divisions as well:

- Patterns of Heaven: elements and phenomena in the sky
- Chronology: calendars and genealogical tables
- Five Phases: application of the *yin-yang* and Five Phases theories to divinations modeling on the above two groups
- Milfoil and Turtle Shell: divinations by milfoil stalks and turtle shells
- Diverse Prognostications: an assortment of divinations based on events, activities, and phenomena without physical forms
- System of Forms: divinations based on interpreting forms of the land and of some physical things

These represented six broad types of divination. The *Seven Epitomes* itself did not further associate these divisions with particular government organs.

Ordering of and Within Divisions

One of the first principles of classification is ordering.⁴⁰ A clear order underlying the entire scheme is especially crucial in traditional Chinese bibliographic classification. A consensus among Chinese scholars stresses that value (or importance) of a category and age of a work were two major factors that determined the order of the classes and divisions in the *Seven Epitomes*.⁴¹ The best examples are the placements of the Classics in the foremost class and “*ru* classicists” (儒家) (known in the West as Confucians whose teachings were the most valuable among the masters) as the lead division in the Epitome of the Masters. Classicist values dominated decision making in this regard. The same criterion also resulted in the prioritization of the three nontechnical classes over the three technical ones because of a long-held classicist belief in favoring the philosophical over the technical. Technical texts in the *Seven Epitomes* were so unimportant, especially after the Han, that almost all of them were allowed to disappear. Only one out of the 110 titles in the Epitome of Divination and one out of the thirty-six titles in the Epitome of Formulae and Techniques have survived. Within the Epitome of Divination, one can detect the effect of the value factor on the arrangement of the divisions despite the lack of explanations by the classificationist. Unfortunately, few clues are available for the age

or authorship of most texts in this class, making the verification of whether the age of a work was a factor in ordering the divisions difficult.

Observation of the sky and making of the calendar, according to experts of early Chinese culture, were of great importance to the imperial government because of their application to political affairs and utility for legitimization of a ruling house; carrying out these activities in private during certain times was even illegal.⁴² This particular way of thinking is the very essence of classicist thought, as reflected in Heaven’s preeminence in the “Trinity” (i.e., Heaven, Earth, and Man) of the moral universe depicted in the *Book of Changes*.⁴³ When looking closely, the prioritization of astro-calendrical practices over the other types of divination in the epitome is evident in that Patterns of Heaven and Chronology occupied the first two divisions. Not coincidentally, the person named by Emperor Cheng to lead the collation of divination texts was the director of the Han office (i.e., Prefect Grand Astrologer) who was charged with observing the sky, keeping records of those observations, and performing functions related to the official calendar.⁴⁴

Ranganathan’s “Principle of Later-in-Time” for arranging arrays (or subclasses) seems applicable to the order between Patterns of Heaven and Chronology.⁴⁵ The introduction to Patterns of Heaven stated, “Looking at the signs in the heavens, one thereby ascertains the changes of the seasons.”⁴⁶ Because ascertaining seasonal changes, along with other calculations of time, was part of chronological work, Liu Xin logically placed Chronology after Patterns of Heaven. Similarly, Ranganathan’s “Principle of Later-in-Evolution” is useful for explaining the placement of Five Phases to be the third division because the types of divination in Five Phases used methods or tools imitating the observed patterns (in the sky, seasons, and so on) that belonged to the first two divisions.

Among the rest in the remaining three divisions, divination by milfoil stalks and turtle shells stood out. The summary of this division unwaveringly linked these types of divination to the legendary sages while no such connection was made to other mantic practices in the last two divisions. Based on the text, milfoil and turtle shell divinations were more important than oneiromancy, demonology, exorcism, and divinations by form according to the assessment of the classificationist. This judged importance led to a decision to place Milfoil and Turtle Shell before Diverse Prognostications and System of Forms. Other reasons made milfoil and turtle shell divinations more prestigious. On the one hand, the most important Classic, the *Book of Changes*, was originally a manual of divination by milfoil stalks.⁴⁷ On the other hand, turtle shells used in divination had to be of certain sizes, signifying their age and thus their prognosticative power, and in turn divination by this means was exclusively used in central state functions.⁴⁸ The associations with

a Classic and with state rituals provided elevated prestige to these types of divination.

To date, no reasonable explanations have been proposed for the order of the last two divisions in the Epitome. The problem appears to stem from the definition of the character *za* 雜 (as in *zazhan* 雜占, the fifth division); some scholars interpret it as “miscellaneous.”⁴⁹ But placing “miscellaneous divinations” before a category that is not miscellaneous (i.e., System of Forms) seems odd in classification. It would contradict the Chinese tradition to have the miscellaneous (implying things that are mixed, impure, disordered, and trivial) precede anything else.⁵⁰ I believe that *za* meant something different in Liu Xin’s conception. According to a philological work, *Fangyan* 方言, written by Yang Xiong 揚雄, a contemporary of Liu Xin, another definition of *za* is “to assemble (*ji* 集),” and an authoritative second-century dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, by Xu Shen 許慎, defines *za* as the blending of five colors.⁵¹ A better definition of *za* being an adjective might be “eclectic” or “diverse” in this context. Similarly, a better translation of *zazhan* might be “eclectic divinations” or “diverse prognostications.”⁵² I also propose an alternative reading of the introductions to the last two divisions that suggests a dichotomization of all types of divination not included in the first four divisions into those without concrete forms (i.e., the division of Diverse Prognostications) and those with concrete forms (i.e., the division of System of Forms). At the center of this new interpretation is the character *shi* (事), the sixth character in the introduction to Diverse Prognostications. The usages of this character in early texts seem to place it opposite another character, *wu* 物, sometimes with *shi* (meaning work, activities, events, and affairs that are abstract) and *wu* (meaning objects of concrete form). An example of them directly opposite each other can be found in the *Analecets* by Confucius.⁵³ In applying this definition, my interpretation of the first sentence in the division’s introduction differs slightly from the translation quoted above. If one follows the common Chinese practice of preferring the abstract to the concrete, the order of Diverse Prognostications preceding System of Forms is logical. This interpretation is not yet conclusive. One unresolved issue is that ascertaining the contents of all books listed in Diverse Prognostications is challenging because none of them are extant. The last four titles in the division present special difficulties because no similar works are extant. Without archeological excavations providing texts equivalent to all types of divination included in this division, any definitive conclusion about the division is unlikely.

Somewhat differently, Zuo maintains that the order of the divisions in the Epitome of Divination was “from Heaven to Earth.”⁵⁴ This is a simplistic generalization that accounts for only the order of some divisions, but fails to explain why the divisions Milfoil and Turtle Shell and

Diverse Prognostications came between Heaven and Earth.

The order of texts within each division was also said to be of meticulous design.⁵⁵ Little information exists that could help understand this order. This is a serious problem in the class under study because the majority of texts in it had no known authors, no content-related annotations were provided, and only one of the texts in the class has survived today. Lü identifies a few ordering criteria on the basis of his analysis across divisions in the entire *Seven Epitomes*.⁵⁶ One of the applicable criteria is collocation by character or form of writing. Applied to the target class, it means that all texts about the same type of divination under one division were collocated. An example is that all texts on turtle shell divination were placed before the texts on milfoil divination in the division Milfoil and Turtle Shell. The second relevant criterion enumerated by Lü is age of a text. In the division Chronology, for example, works attributed to two authors active slightly earlier than Liu Xiang were followed by works attributed to two authors approximately contemporary with Liu Xiang and Xin. Although not mentioned by Lü, value, too, is a visible factor. For example, the first two titles in the division Diverse Prognostications were about oneiromancy, precisely the most important type of divination in the division as declared in the division’s introduction.

A Unique Cultural Perspective

A classification is a cultural artifact, thus examining a classification within the framework of its cultural context is imperative. In the above analysis, I tried to understand part of the classification in the *Seven Epitomes* by situating it in its historical, political, and intellectual context. This section, on the other hand, builds a bridge for readers unfamiliar with that particular culture. More specifically, some explanations are provided for linking the core ideas covered in the Epitome of Divination to two modern, broad fields—science and religion—that are recognizable readers today.

Science or Natural History

In investigating ancient Chinese scientific endeavors, sinologists in the West often bring up the *Seven Epitomes* (or the Han Treatise), particularly its Epitome of Divination and Epitome of Formulae and Techniques.⁵⁷ The former, they explain with qualification, contained some knowledge that would fall under natural science. Sivin lists premodern Chinese science in two groups: quantitative (mathematics, mathematical astronomy, and mathematical harmonics) and qualitative (astrology, medicine, alchemy, siting, and physical studies).⁵⁸ Mathematical harmonics studied measurement of resonant pipes that produce music in court rituals. “Physical studies” is used by Sivin as “a grab bag of

traditions that considered a great range of natural phenomena in the light of fundamental concepts.⁵⁹ The *Epitome of Divination* covered topics in astrology, mathematical astronomy, mathematical harmonics, siting, and physical studies.

The definition of science is an important issue to address here. In their comparison of science between early China and Greece, Lloyd and Sivin emphasize that the modern conception of science does not apply to what they examine. What they mean by science in ancient times is “the bid to comprehend aspects of the physical world.”⁶⁰ It is their notion of science that is used in this study. Thus readers need to be aware of the difference and not apply the familiar concept of modern science to understanding that of the past. This is not to say that the ancient Chinese achieved nothing worthy of being called science by today’s standards. They simply pursued such knowledge with a markedly different epistemological and institutional mindset.

Mathematics was part of the *Epitome of Divination* only as it was applied to astronomy and harmonics. Nowhere else in the *Seven Epitomes* did mathematics hold a spot. Surely other types of mathematical texts were present at the time. The best proof is the *Writings on Reckoning* (*Suanshu shu* 算術書), a recently excavated manuscript, which is dated by archeologists to about 200 BCE but was not included in the *Seven Epitomes*.⁶¹ This book is a collection of mathematical problems that deal with elementary arithmetic as well as everyday accounting work in government. Some scholars rationalize that the collation project was only supposed to cover books within a limited scope as outlined by the emperor, leaving out writings such as elementary mathematical texts and legal documents that were responsibilities of other government agencies.⁶² This thinking is consistent with the previous assertion that the departmentalization of the state machine was a significant consideration in the cataloging project. The influence of government was apparent in the classification of the three types of technical writings and in the exclusion of others.

Religion or Occult Thought

Similarly, one should not apply the modern concept of religion in the West to understanding religious elements in early China. The ancient Chinese, like many other peoples in past times and in some present-day societies, mixed ancestor veneration, religious beliefs, magic, mythology, and manticism into one. Sinologists, like Kalinowski and Harper, writing about early Chinese religious beliefs often need to describe them as magico-religious (or occult) or add many qualifiers to the concept of religion.⁶³ Furthermore, readers need to keep in mind that the *Seven Epitomes* was the catalog of the Han imperial library, which means

that texts in the *Epitome of Divination* recorded religious practices at the court and among the elite. They were not representative of those practiced by the populace.

Another characteristic emphasized in the study of early Chinese religion is its inseparable connection to *li* (禮), a concept central to *ru* classicism. *Li*, often translated as “rites” or “ceremony,” embodied a set of principles that prescribed proper conduct for all members of society. To Confucius and classicist masters after him, *li* included both propriety and rituals.⁶⁴ The latter, formalized rituals performed at religious and other ceremonies, recorded in divination texts thus fit into an orderly world, of which the supernatural, nature, and humankind were all integral part.⁶⁵ According to Collins, the success of classicists in getting their ideology canonized by the Han throne was a direct result of their establishment of a tie to state divination rituals.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The *Seven Epitomes* was one of the most influential written records in imperial China. Its importance, however, has not always been apparent or fully appreciated. One possible reason for the past inattention to the catalog is that few made an effort to understand its design fundamentals. As an unfortunate result, its abridged version, the Han Treatise, took precedence and later made the catalog seem dispensable, leading to its eventual disappearance almost a thousand years ago. The renewed interest in and recognition of the catalog in the Qing Dynasty was a crucial step in giving it a new life that, in turn, formed a critical foundation allowing future researchers to examine the catalog and its classification.

Building on this foundation and recent research on mantic literature and practices in early China, this paper has offered an analysis of the classificatory principles applied to the *Epitome of Divination* in the *Seven Epitomes*. This analysis affirmed that the *Epitome of Divination* was a category for manuals collected by government offices responsible for all types of divination. In other words, governmental functions, rather than observed topical similarities or differences, dictated the establishment of the class. The manuals categorized into the *Epitome of Divination* detailed technical rules and procedures for the divinatory rituals while ethical concerns behind the rituals were topics treated in philosophical or literary texts belonging to other classes. Another classificatory principle seen in the *Epitome of Divination* was its focus on objects of interest in the formulation of both the class and its divisions—an uncommon approach to classification in the Chinese bibliographic tradition. Lastly, evidence seemed to corroborate and reinforce a long-held belief in establishing an order between vertical as well as horizontal categories. There are five noticeable

factors for determining order in the Epitome of Divination:

- value of a category or subcategory
- collocation by characteristic similarity
- chronological sequence of the objects in question
- evolutionary sequence of the objects in question
- age of a text

In a way, the classification in the *Seven Epitomes* is similar to the United States Superintendent of Documents classification system (i.e., SuDoc system) because they both organize texts by government office, demonstrating the commonality of institutional consideration in classification across some cultures. The former, however, lacked rigor and consistency and did so only to organize a portion of, rather than all, texts. Judged by the fact that divination occupied a whole class in a six-section classification, one might reasonably conclude that divination was important to the Han government.

A key objective of the current study was to understand the classification of a targeted group of texts in their appropriate historical and cultural context. I made efforts to avoid the pitfalls of viewing a two-thousand-year-old Chinese bibliographic tool through the lens of the modern knowledge framework that has emerged from the West. For instance, the analysis presented here revealed that grouping technical texts on divination was a result of a functional consideration in government rather than an observation of topical similarities. While this approach would be at odds with present thinking in organizing most library collections, it worked well for the intended purpose of an imperial library catalog. An instructive example was the categorization of mathematical texts in the Epitome of Divination. The mathematics covered in those texts were developed as a tool for assisting in the study of astronomy. Thus collocating these with other texts on astronomy and astrology during a time with no distinction between astronomy and astrology was logical. Regarding this instance in the classification as a mistake or weakness is ignoring both history and culture.

With a sensitivity and attention to the context, the study was able to identify several classificatory principles in the *Seven Epitomes*. These findings are not meant to be an end by themselves, and I do not claim to have completed the investigation of the classification in the *Seven Epitomes* or the entire Chinese tradition of bibliographic classification in this paper. The classification scheme itself is complex and requires extensive further research. Some research questions of significance include the following: How was the classification structured? What was the principle or principles for structuring? What was its epistemological approach? Was the classification applied to organizing physical items in the library? If it was, did it mean that the classification assisted in the retrieval of physical items? The other five main classes

in the scheme also need thorough study individually. The first two (the Epitome of the Six Arts and the Epitome of the Masters) have been the favorite topics of Chinese intellectual historians, who have focused on interpreting intellectual developments and often attempted to break away from the existing classification to generate new ways of realigning the masters. Contrary to that, classification research ought to focus on the classification itself. The increased knowledge of the Chinese tradition provides a valuable window on alternative approaches to classification that, in turn, broaden our view toward service and system design.

References and Notes

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 27. The quotation under each of the divisions is from the original text of the Han Treatise, somewhat abbreviated, translated by Bodde (in Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 1: 26–28). Romanization in that translation is Wade-Giles. To help readers understand the translation, I have added several notes in brackets. Many works on excavated texts similar to those in the Epitome of Divination provide valuable information regarding this class; for example, see Li Ling 李零, *Jianbo gushu yu xueshu yuanliu* (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xizhi sanlian shudian, 2004).
 28. Most scholars describe *tianwen* as astrology or astronomy because no clear-cut distinction was made then between the two. See Michael Loewe, "The Religious and Intellectual Background," in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, 649–725 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1986). In addition, a prominent astronomer Chen Zungui 陳遵媯 explains that *tianwen* before the modern time included study of elements and phenomena in both the outer space and the earth's atmosphere, which means that *tianwen* also covered meteoromancy. See Chen Zungui, *Zhongguo tian wen xue shi*, 3 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2006). Three of the books listed in the division of Patterns of Heaven clearly mentioned in their titles clouds, rain, and rainbow.
 29. Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford, England: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2000), s.v. "Chronology" [proprietary source] (accessed June 15, 2010).
 30. The text quoted from the *Book of Changes (I)* in this summary is actually from two separate passages. The translator mistakenly puts them into a single set of quotation marks. Hence, correction is made with additional punctuation.
 31. A couple of books in this division seemed to cover divination topics relating to agricultural activities such as planting trees and raising silkworms.
 32. "Siting" is an English term used by Bennett to replace the old translation, "geomancy," to mean the selection of a site with good energetic qualities that is suitable for a walled city or any building, relying on observation of celestial phenomena and other mantic methods. See Steven J. Bennett, "Patterns of the Sky and Earth: A Chinese Science of Applied Cosmology," *Chinese Science* 3 (1978): 1–26.
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