



## Ontology with Chinese characteristics

### Homology as a mode of identification

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This article describes the cosmological and ontological assumptions of diviners in contemporary China with a view to contributing to current anthropological debates on ontology. Ethnographic examples demonstrate that divination based on the cosmology of the *Yi Jing* assumes a monist ontology characterized by continuity of physicality and interiority. This argument is supported by discussions of cosmogony and the separability of the person. The correlative character of *Yi Jing* cosmology assumes that resemblances between entities and phenomena are based on shared intrinsic characteristics rather than analogies. In relation to Philippe Descola's (2013) proposal of four modes of identification, this system posits continuity of physicality and interiority on a cosmic scale. It therefore constitutes a mode of identification—here labeled “Homologism,” unaccounted for by this model—in which it logically displaces Totemism as the structural counterpoint to Analogism.

Keywords: Descola, China, *Yi Jing*, cosmology, ontology, divination, analogy, homology

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Xiaoping, a professional from a local security company, was introduced to me by our mutual friend and teacher, Master Tao, a roadside diviner. Together with another of his students, we sat together in a quiet coffeehouse on a pedestrian street overlooking the Grand Canal in Hangzhou. Xiaoping was discussing the ins and outs of a recent prediction he had made with Master Tao. Having discussed the meaning of the lines of the hexagram, a six-line diagram derived in this case via the throwing of coins, we moved on to broader matters. The type of prediction in question is known as Six Lines prediction (*liu yao yuce*), a highly technical system based

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on the sixty-four hexagrams (*gua*) found in the *Yi Jing* (*I Ching; Book of Changes*), an ancient divination manual hugely influential in the development of Chinese cosmology. Xiaoping was eager to share with me his understanding of the predictive system's underlying principles. Explaining the intricacies of a cosmos based on a single energy-substance, *qi*, and knowable via the observation of natural patterns and phenomena, Xiaoping argued that Six Lines prediction was “scientific” (*kexue de*), and explicable in terms of modern physics. To illustrate this, he drew a diagram in my notebook, adapted below.

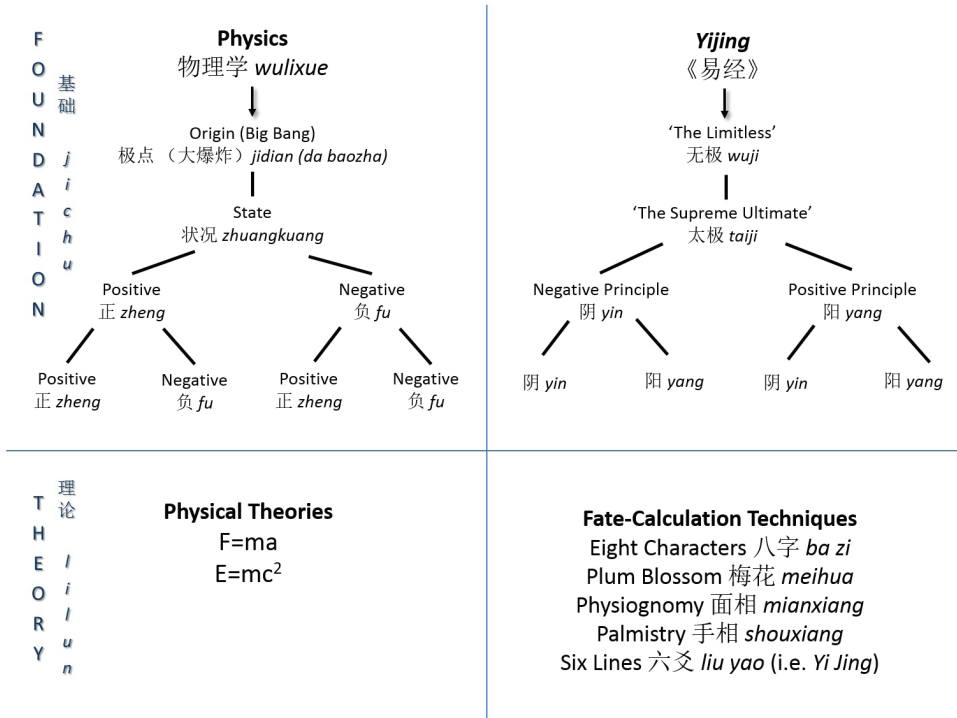


Fig. 1: Xiaoping’s Cosmogonic Diagram

Here, Xiaoping drew direct correspondences between his understanding of *Yi Jing* cosmogony, shown on the right, and his understanding of the cosmogony of modern physics. Thus, for example, the origin point of the Big Bang is identified with the “Limitless” (*wuji*) (Nielsen 2003: 253), the primordial state of the universe, prior to and bringing into existence the “Supreme Ultimate” (*taiji*), which encompasses all states of being and is here identified with the general concept of all “states” in physics; these may be positive or negative (as electrical charge), and Xiaoping identifies these with the positive principle *yang* and the negative principle *yin*. Below these cosmogonic diagrams are listed “theories” (*lilun*), Chinese predictive practices such as Six Lines bearing the same relation to Chinese cosmogony as physical theories such as mass-energy equivalence (a concept of great relevance to *Yi Jing* cosmological professionals) do to physical cosmogony. In explaining his diagram, Xiaoping did not simply say that the two systems were analogous; he described them both as fundamentally the same, “definitely not conflicting” (*yiding meiyou chongtu*), and while being better suited to addressing particular phenomena

(the physical and the human), nonetheless being mutually convertible in the manner of binary and decimal numeration. The same point was made by Ma Jianglong, who uses distinct but related methods of *Yi Jing* prediction; he described binary code, positive and negative charge, and *yin* and *yang* as all expressing “one meaning” (*yi ge yisi*). For these individuals, physics thus proves or “resolves” (*jiejue*) the validity of *Yi Jing* cosmology, and vice versa.

In this article, I argue that *Yi Jing* cosmology indicates an underlying ontology based on fundamental continuity. Taking up the project begun by Philippe Descola in *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), I present the case that what is found in the practices and arguments of my informants is a mode of identification predicated on continuity of both physicalities and interiorities. Rather than the Analogist mode proposed by Descola for which China was an archetype, the mode suggested by my ethnography constitutes the inverse of this on a cosmic scale, and therefore displaces Totemism in his fourfold schema. I call this mode “Homologism.” I turn first to a brief review of Descola’s proposal and the discussions it has generated. This is followed by a general overview of *Yi Jing* cosmology and the methods of Six Lines prediction, the underlying assumptions of which are then examined in relation to cosmogony and beliefs concerning the separability of the person. The second part of the article considers this ethnographic evidence in terms of a distinction between analogy and homology as modes of identification, which are discussed in relation to Descola’s fourfold model. I conclude by reiterating the case for taking Homologism seriously as a distinct mode of identification.

## A review of modes of identification

Beginning with the well-founded proposition that human beings universally distinguish in some way between what he calls “physicality” (exterior manifestation of being) and “interiority” (internal subjectivity), Descola (2013) argues that four ontological possibilities, or “modes of identification,” logically follow, and that these play a foundational part in human collective behavior. Beings can be held to possess common physicalities but discontinuous interiorities (a system termed “Naturalism”<sup>1</sup> characterizing the post-Enlightenment West), discontinuous physicalities but continuous interiorities (Animism), continuous physicalities and interiorities (Totemism), or discontinuous physicalities and interiorities (Analogism). These in turn may be combined with six distinct modes of relation, thus accounting both for the variety of human social and cultural formations and, via changes in dominant modes of relations, profound historical transformations in the ontological assumptions underlying collective behavior.

This proposal forms part of a broader anthropological turn to the study of ontology, a trend that encompasses a diverse range of perspectives, from the reconceptualization of anthropological questions as “ontological” questions (e.g., Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2006; Holbraad 2012), to extended exchanges across the borders of anthropology and science and technology studies (Latour 2013, 2014). Descola’s position, however, while it might be considered along with Latour’s work

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1. For clarity, all references to Descola’s ontological types are capitalized.

in terms of a French particularization of the “ontological turn” (Kelly 2014), takes a more traditional approach, reinvigorated as a neostructuralist project of mapping human ontological variation (Kapferer 2014); in this sense, it has more in common with other works that take the ontological assumptions underlying “cultural” behavior as the object of anthropological analysis (e.g., Scott 2007; see Puett 2004 for relevant arguments concerning early China, though not explicitly framed in terms of “ontology”). This picks up the Lévi-Straussian project of charting cultural variation in relation to universal cognitive structures. Diverging from many other figures associated with the “ontological turn,” Descola anchors his project in cognitive science, most notably through his elaboration of ontological variation as variation in the “schemas of practice” by which individuals and groups cognitively apprehend the world (Descola 2013: 91–111). This approach promises nothing less than a return to broad explanatory anthropological frameworks that (hopefully) are able to preserve the nuance and richness of “thick description” (Geertz 1973) while taking seriously the findings of the cognitive sciences regarding universal mechanisms of human thought; that is, a socio-cultural anthropology that is up to the “cognitive challenge” (Bloch 2012).

In this article, I embrace the spirit of Descola’s ontological taxonomy and, out of a desire to take it further, approach it critically from the standpoint of my own ethnographic work in Hangzhou, a major city in east China. I hope also to thus contribute some Chinese examples to the wider anthropology of ontology, which has so far been dominated by discussions of other ethnographic contexts (typically small-scale societies or the modern West), references to ontology in China being found in responses to Descola’s book (Feuchtwang 2014; Scott 2014) or coming from outside anthropology (Lloyd 2014). Indeed, it has been objected that Chinese philosophy was historically not preoccupied with questions of “being” in the manner of its Western counterpart, focusing rather on process and maintaining relational order, and that therefore the use of the term “ontology” is problematic (Feuchtwang 2014: 387). However, any cosmology, including one that privileges process and relation over classes of being, necessarily assumes that certain kinds of things do exist; insofar as these are subjected to any meaningful degree of reflection, the nature of their being is problematized, regardless of whether a given philosophical tradition accords this analytical priority. Here, following Descola, I use ontology in this broader sense, in reference to those most fundamental kinds of things, which the beliefs and practices of individuals suppose to exist.

I term the individuals I describe here *Yi Jing* cosmologists; they come from a variety of backgrounds and engage in a variety of practices, but all are united by a concern with a cosmological system that they see as rooted in the *Yi Jing*, and that they hold to be based on a set of universal cosmic laws that may be employed to predict and explain real-world events. They are cosmological specialists operating in a highly textualized divinatory tradition traceable to the late Warring States period (475–221 BC). While their key ontological assumptions can be plausibly generalized to the literate expert tradition of orthodox Chinese correlative cosmology, rooted in the concepts of *qi* and the Five Phases (see below), their understandings of their practices are considerably different from those of their clients, who typically lack their specialist cosmological knowledge. The claims I make concerning their ontological assumptions should therefore not be generalized to China as a

whole. As Xiaoping's diagram makes clear, these cosmologists' concerns, not unlike those of anthropologists of ontology, are with what exists, how it comes to exist, and whether different notions of what exists are compatible—ontological concerns through and through. The next section introduces some of the answers *Yi Jing* cosmology and Six Lines prediction give to such questions.

### Qi and systems of correspondence

Doing justice to the intricacies of *Yi Jing* cosmology would extend far beyond the confines of a journal article; plenty of comprehensive overviews of the salient concepts exist elsewhere (e.g., Feuchtwang 1974; Graham 1986; Li and Perkins 2015; R. Wang 2012). In this section I seek only to outline some of the most essential concepts employed by my informants. Most important of these is *qi*, which I translate here as energy-substance, considered the “ultimate constituent of all things in the world” (Liu 2015: 33), a vital energy in constant flux. For *Yi Jing* cosmologists, especially relevant is the concept of a *qi*-field (*qichang*), the particular configuration of *qi* as spatiotemporally manifest in a specific entity, place, or situation; it is this configuration that is expressed in Six Lines prediction as a hexagram that can then be interpreted. *Qi* may be considered in two modes, *yin* (negative or passive) and *yang* (positive or active), which are defined relationally and may be further divided to describe the process of change inherent in a given situation: “young *yin*” (*shaoyin*) develops into “old *yin*” (*laoyin*), which gives way to “young *yang*” (*shaoyang*), which develops into “old *yang*” (*laoyang*), which once again gives way to “young *yin*.”

This cycle of *yin* and *yang* operates in conjunction with a cycle of “Five Phases” (*wuxing*), typically rendered in English as the nouns Metal (*jin*), Wood (*mu*), Water (*shui*), Fire (*huo*), and Earth (*tu*), though, as Geoffrey Lloyd (2014: 23) reminds us, better understood as verbs (rather than “Water,” “soaking downward”; rather than “Fire,” “flaming upward”). Here I will translate them as nouns, but it should be borne in mind that they describe processual phases rather than discrete elements. *Yi Jing* cosmologists understand the Five Phases as modes of *qi*, which transforms according to two cycles, one of production (*sheng*) and one of conquest (*ke*). As a *fengshui* master I interviewed explained to me, the Phases should also be understood in terms of *yin* and *yang*, proceeding from most *yin* to most *yang* as Water, Wood, Earth, Metal, and Fire. Practices such as Six Lines prediction and *fengshui* rely on discerning and manipulating the mutual influences of different Phases of *qi* (i.e., adjusting *qi*-fields) so as to produce “auspicious” (*ji*) results and avoid anything “inauspicious” (*xiong*). The Five Phases are each correlated with various other phenomena, including colors, cardinal directions, seasons, flavors, and organs. The system of the Five Phases also operates in conjunction with further systems of correspondences, the most relevant here being the cycles of Heavenly Stems (*tiangan*) and Earthly Branches (*dizhi*), which play important roles in spatiotemporal reckoning (including the Sexagenary Cycle of the lunar calendar). Each of these is associated with a particular Phase and additional correspondences, and between them exist various relations of conflict and accordance that may produce different Phases.

Together with these cycles, fundamental to Six Lines prediction, and indeed all reckoning systems related to the *Yi Jing*, are the Eight Trigrams (*ba gua*), diagrams

consisting of three broken (*yin*) or unbroken (*yang*) lines, each of which is again associated with natural phenomena, processes, cardinal directions, animals, and so on. When combined in vertical pairs the trigrams form the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Yi Jing*, each of which represents a particular configuration of the cosmos at a given spatiotemporal juncture. In Six Lines prediction, as I will describe shortly, two hexagrams may be derived for a single prediction. Thus, there exist 4,096 (64x64) possible configurations of the cosmos knowable via the hexagrams alone. In Six Lines prediction, these are combined with additional correspondences based on the year, month, date, and time of prediction, perhaps along with the birth date and place of the client, the direction from which the client approaches, and so on, the actual number of configurations knowable rapidly exceeding comprehension.<sup>2</sup> As Charles Stafford (2009: 118) points out regarding the cognate practice of Eight Characters (*ba zi*) fate calculation, this sheer volume of possibilities disaggregates the situation of the client from that of the collective, meaning that any prediction is highly specific; the relatively few cosmic laws of *qi* and correspondence systems are thus able to account for the peculiarities of *qi*-fields relating to particular aspects of individual lives at any given spatiotemporal point.

Given the complexity of the cosmological system and its application in Six Lines prediction, I hope I will be forgiven for presenting a highly generalized account of how this process works, to better concentrate on the explicit exegesis of practitioners regarding cosmogony, continuity of energy-substance, and the separability of the person.<sup>3</sup> The explanation here should serve the purpose simply of demonstrating that the ideas discussed below are rooted in a mutually influential relationship with diviners' practice.

While the method of Six Lines prediction is specific, the broad ways in which correspondences are considered and manipulated apply similarly to cognate divinatory practices, including alternative forms of *Yi Jing*-based divination and *fengshui*, at least as practiced by *Yi Jing* specialists (who often offer this and other services in addition to their specialism). The procedure, as conducted by Xiaoping's and my teacher Master Tao, uses three Qing-dynasty coins (ideally from the Qianlong emperor's reign, as the character *Qian* that appears on the coin is the same as the character of the first of the *Yi Jing*'s hexagrams). One side of each coin displays Chinese characters and the other Manchu script; the combination of sides indicates young *yin*, old *yin* changing to *yang*, young *yang*, or old *yang* changing to *yin*. The coins are thrown together six times, each combination giving a broken or unbroken line to yield a full hexagram. The presence of any lines changing from *yin* to *yang* or vice versa yields a second hexagram incorporating the transformed lines (this indicates change in the client's circumstances). The diviner notes down the hexagram, annotating it according to the fixed Earthly Branches of each component trigram.

2. The standard Six Lines addition of "Six Beasts" (*liu shou*), indicating relational properties of particular lines and arranged one per line in a set sequence, the starting line of which changes depending on the date, immediately increases the number of configurations to 24,576.
3. Doing justice to any specific prediction would require the explanation of at least several layers of the correlative system and run to many pages; for such a description, see Matthews (2016).



In this system, the hexagrams are classified into “Eight Palaces” (*ba gong*), each of which is characterized by one of the Five Phases mentioned above. The relationship of conquest, production, or commonality between the Palace Phase and the Earthly Branch of each line expresses a type of relationship between the client and another individual, situation, object, et cetera. These relationships are classified metonymically in terms of kinship relations (e.g., an Earthly Branch Phase that produces the Palace Phase indicates any [protective or nurturing] relationship classified as “Father and Mother” *fumu*; the same Phase in each case indicates “Brothers,” which can also indicate financial competitors, and so on). Each line of the hexagram is thus annotated with a relationship category, and also with one of the Six Beasts (see footnote 2), which indicate overall effects of a particular relationship (harmful, causing anxiety, auspicious, etc.). The result of this is that, given that correlates are fixed, while in practice no two predictions will produce the same results there is in theory a *correct* prediction to be made in every case. Master Tao operates on the twin axioms that a good fortune-teller will achieve an accuracy rate of 70–80 percent, and that anyone who claims to achieve a success rate of 100 percent is a fraud. He compares Six Lines prediction to meteorology—one observes a given situation and changes taking place, and makes more or less accurate predictions accordingly.

What is immediately apparent is that relationships of transformation are crucial to cosmological reckoning; rather than being the discontinuous singularities that characterize Descola’s Analogism, the terms of this cosmology refer to stages of transformation (see also Feuchtwang 2014: 386; Lloyd 2014). Diviners speak about these transformations in terms of transforming *qi*-fields, indicating a conception of common energy-substance that changes according to interlocking spatiotemporal cycles. Moreover, this energy-substance, *qi*, underlies both physicality and interiority; *qi*-fields both affect and are affected by beliefs and emotions, are knowable via the “feeling” (*ganjue*) one gets from a person, and of course, via Six Lines prediction, may be mobilized to accurately determine the past, present, and future mental states of individuals.

Now, it may be objected that quite apart from the processual character of *Yi Jing* cosmology, the correspondences it draws look very much like mappings of Analogical similarity between otherwise disparate phenomena—the relationship of production between Father and Mother and their child, for example, being simply analogous to the relationship between, say Earth and Metal. Here, it must be remembered that the pattern in which the coins fall is held to be determined by the particular configuration of cosmic laws manifest at a given spatiotemporal point in *qi*-fields, expressed by a hexagram. In this sense, a given hexagram comprises a natural category of situations united by a *common* configuration of *qi*. It follows that the categories of correspondence, including the Five Phases and the Earthly Branches, also express common configurations of *qi*, and that therefore the human-scale relationships to which each hexagram line refers are not simply analogues of the relationship between cosmic configurations but *manifestations of those configurations on a human scale*. That is, the relationship between parents and children, for example, is predominantly characterized by productive configurations of *qi* (it should be noted though that the complexity of any given phenomenon at different scales produces a fractal effect, in which certain configurations, relationships, and processes may be dominant but are never absolute). To elaborate

this, I turn now to the ways in which diviners discuss cosmology more broadly, looking first at cosmogony, a topic that is notably absent from Descola's discussion of Analogism (Scott 2014) but that, as Michael Scott has argued elsewhere (2007: 4–5) following Marshall Sahlins (1987), can be invaluable for informing analyses of ontology; “cosmogonic myths not only offer accounts of the origin of all things, they also often explicitly formulate the relations and distinctions thought to exist in the cosmos” (Scott 2007: 4).

### Cosmogony and knowing the world

Ma Jianglong, teacher of *Yi Jing* courses for business, diviner (using methods distinct from but cognate with Six Lines), and author of a commentary on the *Yi Jing* (Ma Jianglong and Chang Weihong 2013), neatly encapsulated one of *Yi Jing* cosmology's key tenets: “Heaven, Earth, Humanity, and the Ten Thousand Things [i.e., all entities in the cosmos] are of one body, and therefore they mutually influence [one another]” (*tian di ren wanwu yi ti, suoyi xianghu yingxiang*). Ma describes the principles of *yinyang*, the Five Phases, and so on as being similar to mathematics—universal laws that accurately describe all things in the cosmos. In this sense, they do not require empirical “verification” (*zhengming*)—though in common with other *Yi Jing* cosmologists, Ma holds that the principles were originally derived as described in the *Yi Jing*, via the observation of natural phenomena such as seasonal transformation and the patterns on animals. Hence also Xiaoping's identification of physics as a manifestation of *Yi Jing* cosmological principles, physical theories being likewise derived from observations, corresponding directly to real phenomena, and universally applicable beyond the original instance of observation. In the spirit of Descola's project, I suggest that this similarity is not coincidental. A cosmology based on a single energy-substance stemming from a single origin and characterized by constant transformation, the surface effects of which can be observed and used as a basis for deriving universally valid cosmic principles, suggests a particular set of ontological assumptions that is not directly accounted for by Descola's four-fold framework. I return first to Xiaoping's diagram.

The cosmogony that he presents is based ultimately on the text of the *Xi Ci* (“Appended Phrases”), an immensely influential commentary that has existed in something close to its received form since around 300 BC (Smith 2008: 38) and forms part of the commentaries appended to the main body of the *Yi Jing*. The English translation of the often-quoted Section 11 of the *Xi Ci I*, adapted from Richard John Lynn, is as follows:

Therefore, in change there is the great [supreme] ultimate. This is what generates the two modes (the yin and yang). The two basic modes generate the four basic images, and the four basic images generate the eight trigrams. The eight trigrams determine good fortune and misfortune, and good fortune and misfortune generate the great enterprise. (Lynn 1994: 65–66)

The “four basic images” are generally interpreted as young *yin*, old *yin*, young *yang*, and old *yang*—the four kinds of lines that may exist in a hexagram, which itself is



thus seen to be a direct representation of cosmic forces stemming from a single origin. This quotation from the *Xi Ci* is one of various statements affirming cosmogonic unity frequently quoted by *Yi Jing* diviners; others include a famous line from the ancient classic the *Dao De Jing* (*Classic of the Way and Its Power*), “the *dao* [way] produces the one, the one produces the two, the two produce the three, the three produce the Ten Thousand Things,” and the aphorism “Heaven and Humanity are joined as one” (*tian ren he yi*). Cosmogony, in these instances, is reduced to simple, axiomatic sentences, a minimum of narrative required to monistically anchor the practically more important cosmic laws through which the world may be understood. *Yi Jing* cosmology is thus better understood, again like physics, as explaining the world “legislatively” according to constant laws, as opposed to “narratively” via myth (Valeri 2014: 264).

Indeed, when explaining his diagram, Xiaoping’s focus was on the way in which cosmic laws can be employed, the cosmogonic process itself serving as an explanatory backdrop. He explained that both cosmogonies portrayed are “objective” (*keguan*), and both have been developed from long-term observations of “Heaven and Earth” (*tiandi*). As far as he was concerned, the two systems deal with different scales of phenomena, physical and psychological, “neither being prior to the other” (*meiyou xianhou*) but rather being compatible as “different methods [to] resolve different problems” (*bu tong de fangfa jie jue butong de wenti*). Ma Jianglong offered a similar account, but explicitly phrased in terms of “epistemologies” (*renshilun*) revealing aspects of the same underlying reality—“one meaning, different expressions [of it]” (*yi ge yisi, bu tong de biaoda*). The “objective” character of both systems as derived from observation grants them explanatory power. It is thus that Six Lines prediction and related practices are characterized by practitioners as being “scientific” (*kexue de*) or as compatible with science, as well as being described as having a certain degree of accuracy pertaining to the fidelity of correspondence between prediction and subsequent lived experience. In this way, Six Lines prediction and cognate practices differ fundamentally from certain other forms of divination, such as the “metis” fundamental to Western astrology as described by Patrick Curry (2004a: 104–6), which like Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *bricolage* provides a reservoir of salient connections that help the enquirer answer the question not of “what will happen” but of “what should I do?” (Curry 2004b: 57–58).<sup>4</sup> In Six Lines, while clients may ask about what they should do to achieve a certain outcome, the act of divination itself yields only descriptive information, and the response of the diviner is to mobilize this information to address the client’s normative query.

Roy Willis and Patrick Curry (2004) distinguish between astrology as metis producing a feeling of enchantment, and “scientific astrology” as an attempt to

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4. It is true that the *Yi Jing* itself focuses on “images” (*xiang*) and “judgments” (*tuan*), which appear as short narratives offering advice. However, these are not referred to in Six Lines prediction, being superseded by the broad cosmology of the *Xi Ci* (a later addition to the original text) and the fixed line correlates (themselves later additions); in other forms of *Yi Jing* divination, such as those practiced by Ma Jianglong, the images are used purely as descriptors of cosmic configurations. In fact, when I asked practitioners about relying on interpreting the often-cryptic text that accompanies each hexagram in the *Yi Jing*, the notion was criticized as being either amateur or far too vague.

claim legitimacy for astrology via scientific investigation. For them, the latter is absolutely not what astrology should be about. Indeed, their preferred mode of astrology *cannot* address the question of what will happen, as like *bricolage* it is based on drawing analogical connections between things that “go together” (Lévi-Strauss 1974: 9) in a manner meaningful to the enquirer. This kind of astrology, as Descola himself notes (2013: 205), constitutes a manifestation of Analogist ontology, in which salient connections are imposed on a multifarious cosmos in an attempt to bring to it some degree of meaningful order. In this sense, astrology may be considered a practice of adding meaning. Conversely, Six Lines prediction is an operation of reduction. Each additional fixed correlate taken into account further limits the possible range of interpretations of a given hexagram. The more correlates accounted for, the more specific—and accurate—the prediction, and the lower the number of possible interpretations. All the subjective intricacies of the human situation in question are thus reduced to functions of cosmic laws operating in universally fixed ways. While these laws are themselves constant and held to describe universal processes, the real-world phenomena to which they refer are dynamic; the laws thus describe cosmic change. For such laws to describe such dynamism, a fundamental unity must be presupposed, for what is dynamic is held nonetheless to operate the same way in any two hypothetically identical situations. This fundamental unity is provided by *qi*, rendering every aspect of cosmic dynamism a particular configuration thereof.

The differentiation of the Ten Thousand Things is likewise a process by which *qi* differentiates itself—and as my informants would explain, in death, beings return to undifferentiated *qi*. Differentiation thus exists in the *Yi Jing* cosmos, but it is far from being *ontological* in character, something that would require either disparate points of origin or the intervention of an external force, such as a creator. While a created cosmos with a single origin may encompass ontologically discrete entities by virtue of its ontologically prior and discrete creator, a monogenetic self-generating cosmos like that under discussion cannot. In such a cosmos, while differentiations by degree may be profound these are not differentiations of ontological substance or process. Therefore, despite superficial similarities regarding correspondences, the mode of identification incipient in *Yi Jing* cosmology is fundamentally different from what Descola calls Analogism, the systems of correspondence actually expressing an underlying unity. Before moving on to a fuller theoretical consideration of these matters, however, I turn to the question of the separability of the person.

### **Qi and the soul**

The presence of conceptions of a separable person in Analogist systems indicates a fragmentation of interiority and physicality (see Descola 2013: 207–16). In such systems this gives rise to various attendant beliefs such as spirit possession, which are predicated on the constitution of a person from various ontologically distinct components (body, soul, and spirit, for example). In this section I wish to demonstrate that while some *Yi Jing* cosmologists do hold apparently analogous beliefs, these are in fact predicated on an assumption of a common substance that can exist

in different states; that is, personal components are differentiated forms of *qi*, distinct to be sure, but not ontologically so. While, as the following examples indicate, *Yi Jing* cosmologists hold a broad range of opinions, all share common cosmological assumptions; two of the individuals I discuss here describe themselves as “atheists” (*wushenlun zhe*), although some, like Xiaoping, profess Buddhism insofar as they occasionally visit temples despite not being obviously religious. Indeed, I suspect that many of the characteristics of the ontology of *Yi Jing* cosmologists, despite their use of shared concepts, differ markedly from those assumptions underlying popular religion, for example, particularly given its predilection for gods and spirit mediumship (as documented by, for example, Chau 2006; Feuchtwang 2004).

When I asked Master Tao about the separability of the “body” (*shenti*) and the “soul” (*linghun*), he told me firmly that the “soul” does not exist, despite its existence as a concept in Daoism alongside spirit possession. He added to this that within the broad field of *Yi Jing*-based prediction there is a “way of speaking” (*shuofa*) that the person somehow continues to exist in subsequent lives. He explained this to me in terms of a person’s *qi*-field, which in certain respects continues beyond the loss of the corporeal body (*routi*) insofar as a person’s “spirit” (*jingshen*) continues to influence others through memory and the effects of deeds they committed in life, rather than as a continued ethereal and intentional counterpart to the body. Master Tao, however, is notable for his unequivocal refusal of the existence of any kind of “soul” and his denial of continued existence of a complete person as anything more than dispersed *qi*, memory, and legacy. Both Xiaoping and Ma Jianglong explained to me that “souls” (*linghun*) do exist, but they, like the corporeal body, are manifestations of *qi*, yet configured such that they may depart the body. For Ma, this is confirmed by various phenomena including dreaming and extrasensory perception, which he considers real experiences of the independently moving “soul.” A person here is separable into components, then, but the components themselves are alternate manifestations of a common energy-substance existing in different states. Again, Ma couched these descriptions in the language of modern physics. *Qi* as a form of “energy” (*nengliang*) continues to exist after a person’s death owing to the “law of the conservation of energy” (*nengliang shouheng li*). The “soul” itself has two aspects, *yin* and *yang*, which together constitute “one thing” but with “different energy fields” (*nengliangchang bu yiyang*). As such, in the cosmology of Ma Jianglong, while the person is separable into “body” and “soul” this separation is not ontological in character, as both constitute alternate configurations of *qi*.

As an aside, it should be noted that the implication that what in the West might be considered “supernatural” entities are entirely within the purview of unified cosmic laws predates Marxist atheism and modern physics by millennia, being found in writings of the late Warring States period (475–221 BC). The same is true of disdain for beliefs in gods and spirits by certain intellectuals. Marxism, in common with earlier imperial administrations, has proven hostile to “superstition” (*mixin*), including divination, and while this contributes to practitioners’ emphasis on the “scientific” (*kexue de*) nature of their work, this in itself is insufficient to account for the similarities they draw with physics especially. The profession of atheism by cosmologists is likewise influenced by the prominence of Marxist discourse in China. This is especially true for Master Tao, who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and often draws explanatory analogies between Marxism in theory and

practice and the *Yi Jing* text and Six Lines. However, it must be remembered that *Yi Jing* cosmologists are interested in understanding and explaining the cosmos, and while Ma Jianglong has made a career of it, before retiring and taking divination up full time, Master Tao practiced it as a hobby, and this is also how it is practiced by Xiaoping and many of Tao's other students. Physics is prestigious in contemporary China but it, like religions and other cosmological systems, is naturally of interest to *Yi Jing* cosmologists as an account of the cosmos, and unlike other accounts, such as Christianity, it is considered compatible with, and mutually reinforcing of, *Yi Jing* cosmology. Genuine structural similarities exist between the two systems, historically as well as today—and this commonality of purpose and similarity of structure is what draws cosmologists to physics while saying little about other sciences or rejecting their central tenets, as in Ma's rejection of evolution and Marxism as adequate accounts of reality. While the comparison may have the effect of bolstering divination's credibility, it is insufficient to explain the motivation of practitioners. In any case, as I argue below, the case can be made for Chinese Homologism long before the introduction of modern scientific ideas.

### Analogy and homology

I have noted that *Yi Jing* cosmology does demonstrate various surface similarities with Descola's Analogism, within which he classifies the predominant Chinese mode of identification. Most obvious of these is its sophisticated system of correspondences—though as I have already mentioned, and has been pointed out by Stephan Feuchtwang (2014: 386) in direct response to Descola, these are more accurately construed as processes rather than fixed elements. I agree with Descola (2014: 436) when, in response to this objection, he writes that the questions posed in *Beyond nature and culture* concern the point at which differences “become relevant according to the type of contrast that one wishes to emphasize.” Here that contrast is between modes of identification: whether or not interiorities and physicalities are held to be continuous. If the cosmos is conceptualized as comprising various distinct processes which are held together Analogically and characterize particular classes of relations between entities based on discontinuities of interiority and physicality, then Descola's response to Feuchtwang's objection, that at the level of modes of identification the distinction between process and element ceases to have relevance, stands. If, however, the processes constitute methods of describing the continual transformations of a single energy-substance into all existing entities, and back again, then the difference between process and essence becomes fundamental. This is, indeed, the entire point of *Yi Jing* prediction, which consists of observing the relations between processes at a given spatiotemporal point and predicting sensible, human-level changes based on knowledge of the universal sequences of these processes. The interactions between entities taken into account in this practice are likewise conceived in terms of their mutually transforming *qi*-fields. Such processes are, to again borrow Valerio Valeri's distinction, legislative rather than mythic, and as I have already argued, make sense only in terms of ontological continuity between all the phenomena they describe (here, the cosmos in all its physical and interior aspects). It is true that *Yi Jing* cosmologists speak of

“essence” (*jing*) as an attribute of a specific entity, but this once again is not to be understood in terms of ontological discontinuity, *sensu* Descola; rather, as Ma Jianlong put it, the “fixed nature” (*dingxing*) of a being is the product of a particular configuration of *qi*, much as humans are composed of a particular configuration of chemicals—unique to humans, to be sure, but comprising a substance continuous with all else in the cosmos and stemming from a single origin. This conception is in fact the inverse of Descola’s Analogism, which “becomes possible or thinkable only if the terms that it compares are initially distinct and if the ability to detect similarity between things and thereby partially to remove their isolation is applied to single items” (2013: 202). Continuity in such a conception exists only on the level of appearances as an imposed order, “the ordinary state of the world [being] one of difference infinitely multiplied, while resemblance is the hoped-for means of making that world intelligible and bearable” (2013: 202).

Relevant here are three important questions that have been raised by others concerning the terms of Descola’s fourfold schema. The first, raised by Feuchtwang (2014: 386), concerns whether or not the correspondences (and attendant systems of divination and ritual) of Chinese cosmology are of a type with those of the great chain of being and other Analogist systems. The second, raised by Scott (2014), is that of whether an Analogical mode of identification can, through its efforts to unify disparate entities, evolve into a system unaccounted for by Descola’s grid, which he relates to the third, that of where a system of twin continuities of interiority and physicality on a cosmic scale might fit into the model. I will attempt here to address Scott’s question of cosmos-level twin-continuity via Feuchtwang’s, to which my response, unlike his, is that at least in the cosmology of my informants the correspondences involved are of a different type from those which characterize Analogism. This is a direct result of *qi* monism, which as Six Lines prediction demonstrates treats the similarities between entities and situations as evidence of an underlying common configuration of cosmic processes; this is similarly suggested by a passage in Ma and Chang’s book, in which they explain that “resemblances” (*xiang*) between individual people and natural phenomena indicate shared characteristics, themselves the product of the composition of the Earth as governed by the principle *Kun* (2013: 014–015). Whereas Analogist correlative systems are based on imposed order and draw connections between entities that do not form natural kinds, the correlations of *Yi Jing* cosmology stem from common configurations and thus do form natural kinds.

Such correlations are diagnostic of a different mode of identification, which I label Homologism. The terminology is borrowed from evolutionary biology (see, for example, Atran 2004: 25), in which “analogy” is used to refer to resemblance between organisms based on functional convergence from distinct phylogenetic origins (a bird’s wing, for example, is analogous to a dragonfly’s wing); “homology,” in contrast, refers to characteristics derived from a common phylogenetic origin that may or may not demonstrate functional convergence (such as a bird’s wing and a human arm). Transposing this terminology to correlative systems, Analogical systems identify resonant features between disparate entities (entities that “go together” in the Lévi-Straussian sense), whereas Homological systems identify causal relationships underlying the fractal recurrence of patterns. Analogical pairs are necessarily ontologically discontinuous, whereas Homological pairs are predicated



on ontological continuity. This does not preclude Homologist systems from creating additional systems of correspondence based on analogy—but such systems constitute a problem of taxonomy rather than ontology, existing on a different scale from “modes of identification.” Here, the phylogenetic example is again instructive; on the scale of comparative locomotor anatomy, the dragonfly is distinct in kind from the bird and human, but zooming out to the scale of all life forms, we find that all share a common origin and are, as such, of a common substance, and that their wings, while evolving along distinct phylogenetic paths and developing according to different ontogenetic processes, on a more fundamental level are governed by common principles of genetics, chemistry, and physics. The relevance of correlation to questions of ontology all depends on where the tree is cut, as this determines whether the correlated phenomena ultimately stem from one or several origins. Analogy is thus only “a result or a consequence” (Descola 2013: 202) until hypotheses of a single-origin, self-generating cosmos are taken seriously in the development of cosmological ideas; beyond this point, what were once Analogical resemblances, already obscured by myths of “a presumption of either original wholeness or pre-relatedness that has been fractured” (Scott 2014), become Homological reflections of what is perceived to be the true continuity of the universe.

Now, we have seen that in *Yi Jing* cosmology there are no cosmic laws that relate exclusively to either physicality or interiority. A key question is thus whether *qi* rescinds the distinction between physicality and interiority entirely. Here it is necessary to distinguish between what Pascal Boyer (2010) calls “intuitive” beliefs, governing very basic, nonreflective expectations of perception, and reflective beliefs that extend the content of intuitive ones.<sup>5</sup> *Qi* is most certainly a reflective belief, requiring conscious consideration in order to be mobilized. A basic distinction between physicality and interiority, on the other hand, is intuitive—and “modes of identification” concern the means by which this intuitive distinction is elaborated. In *Yi Jing* cosmology, in telling parallel with “materialist theories of consciousness” mentioned in passing by Descola (2013: 119), there is no *ontological* distinction between physicality and interiority, but the capacity to hold this belief reflectively does not mean that individuals do not intuitively *perceive* a difference; it would be very difficult for them to productively engage with other humans if they did not. What *qi* rescinds is not any distinction between physicality and interiority, but the *ontological character* of such a distinction (something that could be diagnostic of both Homologism and Analogism). What is diagnostic of modes of identification is ontological continuity or discontinuity of these intuitive categories across entities, rather than the ontological status of physicality and interiority per se. As such, while Homologism is a precondition for ontological monism, the theoretical possibility exists of a dualist Homologism in which physicality and interiority are ontologically distinct but continuous in parallel across all beings. Emphasis on the continuity of all beings may strongly favor assumptions of continuity between physicality and interiority—this certainly appears the case for the Homologisms of *Yi Jing* cosmology and the contemporary natural sciences—but the possibility of dualist Homologism should be left open.

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5. For an extended discussion of the relationship between ontology and intuitive and reflective beliefs, see Matthews (2016).



Turning now to Scott's questions, that of whether an Analogist system may develop to such a degree that it entirely eclipses its initial premises of discontinuity unfortunately goes far beyond the scope of this article. However, I would suggest that Homologism, in the case of *Yi Jing* cosmology, constitutes an example of what such a mode of identification looks like. Early (Shang to Warring States) Chinese cosmological systems as described by Michael Puett (2004, 2015) and Aihe Wang (2008) do indeed appear more obviously Analogist in their attempts to communicate with gods, discontinuous with the human realm, by subsuming them into human-imposed categories. This is particularly so given that *qi*, so crucial to contemporary *Yi Jing* Homologism, did not become an established component of Chinese cosmologies until at least the second century BC, and appears to have been "a later scholastic rationalization of resonant effects" assumed by the extant correlative systems (Henderson 1984: 24). Indeed, in Puett's (2004) view the monist cosmologies this precipitated served as means of rejecting prior conceptions of divinity, but various Warring States texts, including the *Xi Ci*, are indicative of Homologism (Matthews 2016). Over a millennium later, during the Song dynasty, the Neo-Confucian Zhang Zai espoused a philosophy generally regarded as a form of *qi*-monism (though cf. Kim 2015 and Ng 1993). This line of thought was picked up by the prolific Ming-Qing philosopher Wang Fuzhi, who saw *qi* as constituting all things, including morality (Liu 2010)—that is, both physicality and interiority—as part of what Ng (1993) sees as a general trend in the Qing period toward a monistic, anti-metaphysical *qi*-vitalism. Echoes of these later conceptions are certainly evident in the cosmologies of my informants. Obviously, such a brief survey is hardly adequate, but it does lend initial support to the hypothesis that certain strands of Chinese cosmology as articulated by literate cosmological specialists have historically tended toward eclipsing the assumed discontinuities of the Analogist mode. Leaving aside this question, in the following section I address that of how Homologism, a system of twin continuities on a cosmic scale, might be accommodated by Descola's grid.

### Homologism, Totemism, and the fourfold grid

Beginning from Descola's (2013) own premise of basing modes of identification on their assumptions of continuity or discontinuity between physicalities and interiorities, and following his neostructuralist logic of orienting the modes in relation to one another, Homologism forms the logical counterpart to Analogism, a position that he grants to Totemism. However, the logical counterpart to Analogism's ontological pluralism, in which every entity is distinct absolutely from every other, is not a system in which every entity is subsumed into a more limited number of classes, which, despite their members being ontologically contiguous both as physicalities and interiorities, are still absolutely discontinuous with one another. Rather, the inverse corollary of Analogism, in which all is plural, is a system in which all things are one—that is, ontologically continuous. In this section, I argue that Homologism logically replaces Totemism, my arguments being confined to Totemism as Descola defines it as part of the fourfold model.

Totemism is more properly considered a highly specific subset of Analogism. As Scott (2014) points out, the twin continuities of Totemism exist only *within* classes; these classes, however, are necessarily characterized in relation to one another via twin discontinuities, the hallmark of Analogism. Moreover, while each Totemic class has the appearance of a self-contained whole, it makes sense as a class only in relation to other classes with which it is discontinuous; social institutions require the establishment of relations *between* these classes (see, for example, Descola 2013: 148–57, 265–67), as members of a particular Totemic group are compelled to associate with members of other such groups precisely because those groups are entirely different in terms of both physicality and interiority. Moreover, given the cosmogony of separately originating Dream beings from which Totemic classes descend in the paradigmatic Australian cases, on the level of the cosmos discontinuity is ontologically prior to the continuity within classes (as such, while within-class continuity provides an obvious and fascinating contrast to the other three modes, it is unclear why this is given analytical priority on the same level; Lambek [2014: 416] similarly suggests that Totemism and Analogism constitute different levels of abstraction). The original Dream-beings being ontologically discontinuous with one another in terms of both interiority and physicality, and these (dis)continuities constituting the ultimate arbiter of a given mode of identification, Totemism must logically be classified as a genus of Analogism, albeit a highly derived one.

As for the continuity that exists within Totemic classes, this certainly demonstrates many deep similarities with Homologism; indeed, as Scott (2014) points out regarding continuity of interiority differentiated by degree within Totemic classes, these “classes resemble analogisms that have developed into perfectly synecdochic continuities.” Such Analogisms, in positing differentiation by degree rather than kind, repudiate their foundations of ontological discontinuity, shedding their Analogical character; a Totemic class is rather a Homologism within a cosmic Analogism. Members of a Totemic group, in Descola’s analysis, “[possess] the same intrinsic characteristics that define the group’s identity as a species” (2013: 161); moreover, such characteristics are not easily teased out into unambiguous physicalities or interiorities. If we consider again the use of hexagrams in Six Lines prediction, a similar relationship is evident; situations that produce a particular hexagram possess the same intrinsic characteristics (physical and interior) in the form of a configuration of *qi*. Similarly, recall Ma and Chang’s (2013: 014–015) explanation of resemblances as revealing shared characteristics. Describing matrilinear Totemism, Descola (2013: 151) notes that the identifying substance of moieties is traced back to their eponymous species; ontological continuities are the product of a common substance stemming from a single origin, again characteristic of a Homological system.

Moreover, Descola’s (2013: 241–42) discussion of Totemism and prototypic and contrastive forms of classification can be read as the inverse of my above description of analogical classifications within a Homologist system. He suggests that Totemic classes are based on prototypical categories of intrinsic properties; while these intrinsic shared properties may give the appearance of classification by attributes (characteristic of Analogism), such a classification relies on contrasts. This is true at the level of the Totemic cosmos—members of a given class are “round” in contrast to members of another, who are “flat” (a contrastive classification by

attributes)—but within classes “each attribute expresses a complementary characteristic derived from the initial prototype that confers coherence upon this class” (2013: 242). Beings within classes thus derive their similarity because they are “materializations of the same generative model” (2013: 242), their similarity is *ontological* in character. In Homologism, this is the case on a cosmic level, as I have already demonstrated, but this does not preclude the creation of analogical taxonomies within it (these are not ontological in character as they do not correspond to natural kinds). Therefore, Homologism, given that in common with Analogism, Naturalism, and Animism its configurations of physical and interior (dis)continuity operate on a cosmic scale, better fits the fourfold grid. Totemism, considered on this level, is more parsimoniously incorporated within Analogism. However, Totemism constitutes a particularly unusual Analogical formation in that it contains within it Homological categories of being, raising the intriguing possibility that modes of identification may incorporate one another at different scales. Such hybrid modes would be distinct from incidences in which individuals shift between modes depending on context (as when, for example, normally Naturalist moderns consult their Analogist horoscopes), in that the component modes depend on one another for the coherence of the overall system. Analogism seems particularly suited for this kind of incorporation, as any other mode could in theory be subsumed as its own singularity (hence it can incorporate Homologism to produce Totemism, but Homologism is unable to incorporate Analogism without stripping it of its ontological character).

### Conclusions: Homologism as an ontology

Homologism constitutes a mode of identification unaccounted for by the fourfold model set out by Descola in *Beyond nature and culture*, found in *Yi Jing* cosmology as practiced and articulated by diviners and other cosmological professionals in contemporary China. While this cosmology appears on the surface to be a system of Analogical correspondences, its ontological assumptions belie the discontinuity of physicalities and interiorities that this would require. *Yi Jing* cosmology, as understood by its adherents, roots correspondences in a single energy-substance: *qi*. Apparent contrasts such as *yin* and *yang* and the Five Phases are not the heuristic tools of a retrospectively imposed order but rather universally valid cosmic laws, correspondences here stemming from shared intrinsic characteristics of phenomena rather than *bricolage*-style “going together.” This is demonstrated particularly well by the practice of Six Lines prediction as understood by the diviner, in which clients’ situations are reduced to the products of cosmic laws governing particular configurations of *qi*, which can then be used to accurately predict change. Such predictions are thus of a different order from the *bricolage* or “metic” character of other divinatory systems. Practitioners draw direct comparisons between their methods and physical formulas, and see the two systems as compatible explanatory frameworks. If individuals conceive of the existence of separable components of the person, they do so in terms of different states of *qi*. All of these elements suggest a mode of identification predicated on fundamentally different assumptions from Analogism, which replaces Totemism as its logical counterpart. Totemism is better

considered a kind of Analogism. Further, Homological systems may represent Analogical systems, which have inverted themselves by eclipsing their foundational assumptions of ontological discontinuity. Some salient features of Homologism may be summarized as follows:

- Beings demonstrate ontologically continuous interiorities and physicalities on the level of the cosmos (the key diagnostic feature).
- Dual continuity in the cases discussed here is predicated on a single substance (or energy-substance), of which all phenomena, including physicality and interiority, are specific configurations, with a single origin. This extends to separable components of a person. This substance is self-generating and continually transforming. I leave open the possibility that dualist Homologism could exist, in which physicality and interiority are considered ontologically distinct. The other diagnostic criteria would still apply.
- The replication of structures and processes across scales is a function of homologous configurations of cosmic principles rather than the identification and imposition of analogical resemblances.
- This form of homological resemblance based on universal cosmic principles allows the formation of predictive and explanatory models based on a legislative, rather than mythic, cosmology.

In closing, I reiterate the point that I am not suggesting that all Chinese cosmologies be considered Homologist. The practitioners to whom I have referred here are cosmological experts, and in common with the historical figures to whom I referred concerning the possible development of Homologism from a prior Analogism, devote a vast amount of time to the consideration of cosmological and ontological questions not so far removed from those with which many anthropologists and others are currently engaged. Their cosmological and ontological assumptions cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the population at large, any more than can those of a Western physicist. On this note, I end with the observation that Xiaoping's comparisons with physics appear to indicate a genuine ontological affinity, one not gone unnoticed by Descola (2013: 300) in his observation of the predilection of certain biologists and physicists for "Eastern wisdom" (Willis [2004] in an Analogist reading of astrology, similarly turns to Homologist cognitive science). Here he is discussing the transition from Analogism to Naturalism, suggesting that "Zen, Buddhism, and Daoism" offer an apparent, though in his view still Analogist, universalism particularly attractive to would-be monists in the West. I would add that "Daoism" at least, as it exists in the West in its received philosophical form embodied by the *Yi Jing* and Laozi and stripped of many of its more overtly religious aspects, sits on the Homologist side of a parallel transition between Analogism and Homologism. Cosmological specialists such as physicists, and the chemists, biologists, and cognitive scientists (and anthropologists!) who subscribe to their conception of a monist cosmos composed entirely of matter-energy, within which interiority is subsumed, and explicable according to fundamental, universal laws, may be considered the practitioners of a parallel Homologism.



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### Une ontologie avec des caractéristiques chinoises: l'homologie comme mode d'identification

Résumé : Cet article, qui s'inscrit dans les débats anthropologiques actuels sur l'ontologie, décrit les présuppositions cosmologiques et ontologiques de certains devins en Chine contemporaine. Des exemples ethnographiques montrent que la divination fondée sur la cosmologie du Yi Jing présuppose une ontologie moniste, qui se caractérise par la continuité entre le monde physique et l'intériorité des personnes. Cet argument s'appuie sur des discussions à propos de la cosmogonie et de la séparabilité de la personne. Le caractère de corrélation de la cosmologie Yi Jing suppose que les ressemblances établies entre entités et phénomènes sont fondées sur des caractéristiques intrinsèques plutôt que des analogies. Ce système, qui n'est pas sans rapport avec les quatre modèles d'identification établis par Philippe Descola (2013), établit une continuité entre monde physique et intériorité à l'échelle cosmique. Il constitue donc un mode d'identification - appelé ici "Homologisme", absent dans le modèle de Descola - dans lequel il déplace logiquement le totémisme comme contrepoint structural de l'analogisme.

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