

Adaptation in Institutional Interstices: Legitimacy-Building Strategies of Physiognomists and Their Social Roots ——A Case Study of a Historic Street in Shanghai

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork conducted on a historic street in Shanghai, this study employs in-depth interviews and participatory observation to investigate how street physiognomists construct legitimacy within modernity dominated by scientific rationality. As intermediaries connecting the public with divinatory practices, physiognomists deploy five core strategies: (1) quasi-kinship solicitation (physical contact and kinship terms); (2) hyper-pragmatic content production (focusing on life issues like marriage and career); (3) moralized discourse (ethical exhortations and lifeworld narratives); (4) techno-commercial modernization (online divination and priced lot-drawing); (5) religious-traditional rationalization (invoking Buddhist/Daoist authority). These strategies rebuild the legitimacy of divination within institutional interstices by responding to three structural dilemmas: translating systemic occupational/romantic risks into individualized fortune narratives for risk society; substituting absent emotional support with pseudo-familial bonds for atomized society; and repackaging mysticism as symbolic security commodities for consumer society. The findings reveal that contemporary divination's vitality stems from physiognomists' adaptive practices of hybridizing traditional resources and modern elements to navigate China's social transformation contradictions.

Keywords

Divinatory practices; Physiognomists; Risk society; Atomized society; Consumer society

1. Introduction

Fortune-telling activities are a prevalent folk cultural phenomenon in Chinese society, deeply rooted in its traditional culture. Despite the rise of the market economy, rationality, globalization, and nationalism, these activities, often dismissed as feudal superstitions, continue to thrive in modern society, occupying a significant niche.

This paper examines why fortune-telling, considered a remnant of traditional dress, retains such vitality in an era of advanced science and technology. As a marginal yet common folk belief practice, fortune-telling lacks mainstream ideological legitimacy but enjoys substantial demand in daily life. Street physiognomists, as intermediaries between physiognomy and the public, play a crucial role. Through in-depth interviews and participatory observation, this study investigates the strategies employed by street physiognomists in their practice, thereby elucidating the enduring vitality of fortune-telling in contemporary society.

It is important to clarify that the term "fortune-telling practice" used in this paper specifically refers to the determination of a person's fate and character through palmistry and physiognomy. This does not encompass the broader definition of fortune-telling. For the sake of clarity and accessibility, this general term is used. The precise definition of fortune-telling and the internal factions within the practice are beyond the scope of this paper.

2. Literature Review on Fortune-Telling and Physiognomy

Fortune-telling activities, as non-institutionalized and marginalized yet widely practiced folk beliefs, have long been stigmatized as "traditional dregs" by mainstream discourse. However, in contemporary Chinese society, where modernity has permeated every aspect, these activities have not only persisted but also demonstrated remarkable vitality and even expansion. This paradox has garnered sustained academic attention.

Existing research primarily addresses this phenomenon through two core dimensions. The first dimension is the macro-structural perspective, which emphasizes how social transformations systematically cultivate a demand for fortune-telling practices. The second dimension is the micro-level actor perspective, which focuses on the agency of individuals in the diverse belief market. However, research on the key intermediaries who bridge the macro-structure and micro-individuals and actively engage in fortune-telling activities—namely, the fortune tellers and physiognomists—and the systematic strategies they employ to respond to and exploit these socio-structural contradictions remains underdeveloped.

2.1. Structural Perspective: Risk, Atomization, and Non-Institutionalized Comfort

In the Western academia, explanations for the persistence of mysticism in modern society mainly revolve around the concepts of the "risk society" [1] and the dilemmas of individualization. The "cultural resource theory" and the "experience-centered approach" are the two primary interpretive pathways currently in use.

The cultural resource theory posits that the motivation for the public to seek divination stems from their positions within the social structure. Supernatural experiences, which diverge from scientific ethics, primarily provide meaning support and social relational networks for groups in economic and social disadvantaged positions[2].

Within this interpretive framework, science and technology not only represent the mainstream discourse, shaping the values of the younger generation, but also serve as practical tools that offer solutions to problems. In contrast, the experience-centered approach criticizes the cultural resource theory for its neglect of individual tensions, anxieties, depressions, and other negative emotions. It argues that the motivation for seeking divination should be grounded in individual experiences. The experience-centered approach highlights that the motives for seeking divination stem from individual-psychological factors. It emphasizes the subjective experiences and emotional needs of individuals, suggesting that the fast pace and pressures of modern society make individuals more prone to anxiety and loneliness. Divination practices, in turn, address this emotional void[3]. It focuses on how individuals regulate their emotions through spiritual consumption and self-narration, instead of merely understanding belief behaviors from the perspective of structural positions. This perspective helps reveal the “healing” and identity construction functions of divination practices at the micro level. Overall, these two approaches converge on the point that when institutionalized support (such as a sound social security system and psychological counseling) is absent, systemic risks (such as job instability, romantic crises, and economic fluctuations) and the state of atomized existence (the disintegration of traditional communities and the alienation of interpersonal relationships) give rise to the demand for non-institutionalized meaning systems and emotional support.

In the Chinese context, the structural perspective also holds strong explanatory power. Chinese society is currently in a complex stage of multiple overlapping transitions, and its structural characteristics provide a unique environment for the persistence of fortune-telling practices.

The deepening of social atomization, accelerated by market-oriented reforms and urbanization, has led to the disintegration of traditional communities such as families and work units. Individuals have become “disembedded” from the integrated state of “family and nation,” and interpersonal relationships have become increasingly alienated and utilitarian[4]. The rapid economic development, accompanied by “unbalanced and inadequate” contradictions, has exposed individuals to multiple systemic risks, such as occupational risks, marital and childbearing risks, and competitive risks[5][6][7]. Although the government continues to strengthen livelihood security, expand social insurance coverage, and develop inclusive childcare and elderly care services, there is still a significant gap in emotional support and the provision of meaning[8].

Against this backdrop, Dong Xianghui has pointed out that the social changes in contemporary China are far-reaching. Individuals, caught up in these changes, find it difficult to form a macro-understanding of the structure. The scope of the impact of local and sudden events is hard to predict. The balance between doubt and trust, as well as safety and risk, has been disrupted. Divination provides individuals with a

way to cope with and withstand various uncertainties[9].

Pan Tianshu (2016) emphasized the trend of "individual - centered" belief choices, which is rooted in the institutional void created by the failure of the state and the market[10]. Xing Tingting and Pan Tianshu (2017) noted that the drastic changes in social structure (such as the loosening of family structures, intensified occupational competition, and urban - rural divide) have led to a highly atomized existence for young people. With its low threshold, high personalization, and immediate feedback, divination has become an important channel for non - institutional emotional support[11]. Liu Hanbo (2020) attributed the rise of divination sub - culture to the imbalances brought about by economic development and social structural transformation, as well as the conflict between instrumental and value rationality. These factors have led to fragmented information, atomized communities, and increased systemic risks, which in turn have caused anxiety and panic among individuals[12]. However, while structural explanations have revealed the macro - environment that sustains divination practices, they have rarely touched on how these practices specifically unfold at the micro-level and how they maintain themselves through strategic adjustments and legitimacy - building. Overall, these two approaches remain relatively separate, lacking a systematic analysis of the co - constitutive process between structure and action. They have also failed to pay sufficient attention to the practice strategies and their significance of the "intermediaries" in fortune - telling - the physiognomists.

2.2. Actor-Oriented Approach: Individual Experiences and Diverse Religious Practices

Another category of research begins with the subjective agency of actors, emphasizing individual autonomy and strategic use. These studies focus on the daily life practices of diviners or believers, interpreting them as ways for individuals to respond to uncertainty and construct a meaningful world. Xing Tingting and Pan Tianshu (2017) argue that the highly private nature of divination enables it to effectively integrate into the daily lives of contemporary youth. Its problem - solving - oriented attribute distinguishes it from traditional religious beliefs and makes it closer to an "atomized religious practice"[11]. Xing's recent research (2024) further deepens this view. She points out that divination does not provide static answers, but helps young people reconstruct narratives of destiny, compensate for emotional connections, and resist traditional labels of meaning in a risk - filled society. The use of divination by the youth is actually a dynamic "self - dialogue practice"[13]. This view is further validated in the research of Sun Boya (2024). Her survey of 403 Gen Z youth samples and interviews with 18 cases found that behind the widespread dissemination of digital divination among the youth, there are three types of "hidden motives" that point to the deep - seated psychological pressures faced by individuals in modern society. Divination passively takes on the function of psychological ad-

justment and emotional comfort here[14]. Through the media practice of digital divination, the youth are not only consuming "narratives of destiny" but also reconstructing a controllable imagination of the future.

This approach emphasizes the "de-institutionalization" and "contextualization" of divination practices, which is quite enlightening for understanding individual - level belief strategies. However, these studies often focus on the users of divination (customers) and lack detailed analysis of the suppliers of divination practices - such as street physiognomists and online diviners - who act as cultural intermediaries.

2.3. "Fortune Tellers" Research: Adaptation and Construction of Marginalized Groups

Fortune-telling, as a folk belief practice that is both marginal and widespread, lacks legitimacy in the mainstream ideology but faces significant demand in daily life. Fortune tellers and physiognomists, as intermediaries connecting fortune-telling practices with the public, play a crucial role.

Currently, there is a scarcity of academic research on physiognomists and fortune tellers. However, some scholars have begun to pay attention to the strategies employed by these groups to expand their own survival space and that of fortune-telling activities in contemporary society. Xu Hong (2007) conducted a case study on blind fortune tellers in Anhui, revealing the survival wisdom of rural physiognomists in the interstices between national policies and village traditions. This study provides a grassroots perspective for understanding the resilience of folk beliefs during rural social transformation[15]. Bai Jiancheng (2010) presented the embeddedness and strategic flexibility of a physiognomist in local society through his life history, emphasizing how he redefined his service model to adapt to the commercial tide[16]. Li Geng (2014) analyzed how physiognomists actively construct their "legitimate image" through religious legitimacy, professional ethical discourse, and cultural inheritance logic, and attempt to embed themselves in the modern system from the "gray area"[17]. Jiang Zheng (2022) used participatory observation to focus on street physiognomists outside temples, revealing how this group creates a credible identity through rhetoric, layout, attire, and other "bodily techniques," and carves out a survival path in the urban gray space. These studies collectively point out that physiognomists are not mere cultural remnants but highly strategic actors growing in the interstices of institutions[18]. Zheng Yufu, editor of "Corners of the City," collected brief surveys of various gray industries conducted by his master's students, including one student's investigation of a street fortune teller outside Renmin University of China. He introduced how street fortune tellers solicit customers from the customer's perspective in a descriptive manner[19].

However, the aforementioned studies have not sufficiently elaborated on the unique theoretical value of physiognomists as "cultural intermediaries" connecting traditional beliefs with modern society, especially how they blend traditional resources

(religious ethics, physiognomy knowledge) with modern elements (technology, market logic) to cope with structural tensions. Therefore, this paper attempts to further advance this research path.

2.4. Theoretical Positioning and Innovation of This Study

In summary, existing literature has revealed the social roots of fortune-telling at the structural level, demonstrated individual strategic choices at the actor level, and made preliminary explorations into the adaptive wisdom of physiognomists and fortune tellers. However, there is still a lack of an analytical framework that can integrate structure and action, as well as micro and macro perspectives. This paper proposes to regard street physiognomists as the key intermediaries connecting divination practices with the structural tensions of contemporary society. By systematically analyzing the strategies used in their fortune-telling practices, this study reveals how they respond to and exploit the uncertainties created by a risk society, an atomized society, and a consumer society through multiple mechanisms such as language, emotion, commerce, and religion, thereby "growing in the interstices."

3. Research Methods and Process

This paper takes street physiognomists as the research subjects. Through participatory observation and case studies, it systematically investigates the practical strategies that street physiognomists use to maintain and expand their fortune - telling business in modern society. This research further reveals how folk beliefs, traditionally regarded as "dregs," can reconstruct their legitimacy through strategic adjustments. The study further inquires: in the present day dominated by scientific rationality, why can fortune - telling still form a stable market? What social structural contradictions does its continued vitality reflect ?

3.1. Research Logic and Design

This study selects two street physiognomists active in a well - known historical and cultural block (hereinafter referred to as "the Old Street") in Shanghai as the core cases for in - depth analysis. The case study method allows researchers to conduct multidimensional and longitudinal in - depth investigations of specific cases. Through "thick description," it presents the specific processes, situational factors, and potential motivations of their strategy use, thereby providing rich insights and theoretical inspiration for understanding the broader phenomenon (the vitality of fortune - telling). The selection of these two physiognomists as core cases is mainly based on the following considerations:

Firstly, they have been practicing in the area for a relatively long time. Their methods of soliciting customers, business content, value concepts, and modernization attempts (such as online services) are representative among the many physiognomists observed by the researcher and can reflect the main aspects of the group's

survival strategies. Secondly, compared with other physiognomists who are more vigilant or refuse to communicate and be interviewed, these two (pseudonyms: Physiognomist A and Physiognomist B) are relatively open and willing to engage in in - depth conversations and interactions with the researcher after establishing initial trust, which makes it possible to obtain in - depth data.

3.2. Research Site and Subjects

The research was conducted in November 2024 in a well - known historical and cultural block in Shanghai (hereinafter referred to as "the Old Street"). This block, characterized by its rich historical and cultural atmosphere, high - density tourist flow, and relatively relaxed management environment, has become a typical gathering place for street physiognomists, providing an ideal site for observing their practices in a natural state.

The core cases of this study are two in - depth studied physiognomists (hereinafter referred to as Physiognomist A and Physiognomist B). Physiognomist A, a middle - aged or elderly woman with over 30 years of experience, emphasizes Buddhist beliefs and has developed an online business. Physiognomist B, also a middle - aged or elderly woman with about 20 years of experience, uses highly colloquial discourse imbued with moral exhortations and is adept at using commercial means such as lot - drawing.

During the research period, the author conducted informal exchanges with approximately five individuals who had been approached by physiognomists or had prior experiences with physiognomy. These interactions provided valuable insights into the customer perspective and served as a background to understand the overall ecology and verify the typicality of the core cases.

4. Strategies Employed by Physiognomists in Fortune - Telling Practices

4.1. Solicitation Strategies

During the initial visit to the Old Street, the author and a companion were approached by a physiognomist. The physiognomist initiated contact by touching the companion's shoulder and then her arm, commenting on her attractiveness and temperament based on her facial features. Despite the lack of interest shown by the companion, the physiognomist persisted, shifting her attention to the author and offering a detailed reading of the author's temperament. The physiognomist continued to follow and solicit the author, highlighting her ability to provide comprehensive readings on relationships, career, and wealth for a fee of 35 yuan. The solicitation ceased only when the companion firmly expressed their disinterest and the group approached an area with security personnel.

Subsequent discussions with other researchers on the Old Street revealed that many had experienced similar unsolicited approaches by physiognomists. These encoun-

ters typically involved the physiognomists initiating conversations based on perceived personal attributes such as attractiveness or temperament. In group settings, if one individual did not explicitly reject the physiognomist's advances, that person often became the primary target for further solicitation.

Based on empirical observations and peer discussions, the study identifies three primary strategies used by physiognomists to solicit clients. First, the use of familiar nicknames and strategic physical contact serves to rapidly establish rapport with potential clients, expediting the solicitation process. Second, initiating discourse on salient life issues, such as romantic relationships for young female students, effectively captures client interest. Third, physiognomists selectively target individuals displaying ambiguous interest, while adeptly circumventing regulatory oversight. These tactics collectively facilitate the sustenance of their business operations within a competitive and regulated environment.

4.2. Content Strategies

To investigate the content strategies employed by physiognomists, the author engaged with two practitioners for in-depth analyses. One physiognomist (hereinafter referred to as Physiognomist A) began by examining the author's facial features. She noted that the author's light eyebrows indicated a hesitant and indecisive personality, advising the author to darken them to compensate for this perceived deficiency. Physiognomist A also commented on the author's elongated and narrow face shape, suggesting that an ideal partner would have a square or broad face to achieve a complementary balance. Additionally, she identified a "wealth reservoir" on the author's cheeks, indicating future financial prosperity.

Physiognomist A then analyzed the author's palm, explaining that the hand contains three significant lines: the life line, career line, and love line. She observed that the author's life line had a forked pattern, suggesting that the author was raised by more than one caregiver. Regarding the career line, she remarked that while the author was intelligent, a tendency towards arrogance might lead to a lack of sustained effort, resulting in unmet expectations at the current educational institution. She also predicted a career change, the possibility of pursuing a Ph.D., and opportunities for overseas development in the future. For the love line, she noted potential relationship challenges around the ages of 25 and 26, advising that marriage during this period might be unstable and that the author would be better suited to late marriage. She further predicted that the author's future spouse would likely be the third romantic partner, with a good family background and a successful career. She also mentioned the likelihood of the author having a son.

Physiognomist A then inquired about the author's age and zodiac sign. Upon learning that the author was born in the year of the horse, she commented that the current year was not favorable and advised caution against potential adversaries. However, she noted that the following year would bring better fortune. She also

mentioned that the author's fortune would be stable between the ages of 35 and 45, with generally favorable prospects thereafter. She concluded by stating that the author would likely enjoy a long life, similar to the longevity observed in the author's maternal family. Finally, she advised seeking opportunities for development either to the north or south of the author's hometown.

In summary, the topics addressed by physiognomists are closely related to various aspects of people's lives, including personality traits, relationships, marriage, fertility, academic and career development, relocation, and financial matters. They also provide practical advice to address perceived deficiencies. This highly pragmatic approach aligns well with the anxieties of individuals navigating uncertainties in contemporary society during periods of rapid social transformation. It offers an explanation for the continued existence of traditional practices such as fortune - telling in modern society, despite their classification as "dregs" of tradition.

4.3. Language Strategies

During the physiognomy sessions, the author observed distinct linguistic tactics employed by the physiognomists.

Firstly, when questioned about the basis for their conclusions, the physiognomists often avoided specific explanations. Instead, they relied on their extensive experience to validate their assertions. For instance, when asked about the reasons behind certain readings, Physiognomist A would deflect by citing years of practice. In some cases, they would even redirect the question back to the client. For example, when discussing the author's romantic history, Physiognomist A stated that the author had been in two relationships, one satisfactory and the other not. Upon being pressed for details on the breakups, Physiognomist A would respond with vague statements or rhetorical questions, such as, "If he treated you poorly, isn't it obvious?" Additionally, Physiognomist A repeatedly emphasized certain points, such as warnings against arrogance and reiterations of financial prosperity indicated by the "wealth reservoir."

These linguistic strategies involve the use of vague and generalized language, coupled with frequent repetition. This approach facilitates client acceptance of the readings, as the broad and repetitive nature of the statements makes it easy for individuals to find personal relevance. This, in turn, enhances the perceived credibility of the physiognomists' readings and contributes to the legitimization of fortune - telling practices.

Secondly, during the session, the author's companion mentioned having unrequited feelings for a female senior. Physiognomist B responded with explicit value judgments, expressing aversion to homosexuality and labeling it as "deviant." She urged the companion to follow a "normal" life path, emphasizing the importance of meeting parental expectations and avoiding shame. When the companion highlighted the senior's positive attributes and questioned the judgment, Physiognomist B re-

mained firm in her stance. She cited a client's experience with an incestuous situation to illustrate the potential for public disgrace and warned against engaging in dishonorable acts. Physiognomist A, while not explicitly stating her views on non-traditional relationships, advised the companion against actions that could harm others, based on a reading indicating a future marriage with a man.

The discourse of physiognomists is characterized by strong value-laden expressions. Their statements are not merely presentations of fortune-telling outcomes but also contain significant ethical judgments and moral admonitions. Additionally, their conversations resemble the admonitions of elders to younger generations, creating a familiar and everyday atmosphere. These two aspects contribute to a sense of familiarity and acceptance among the public, preventing strong rejection of physiognomists and fortune-telling activities.

4.4. Modernization Strategies

During informal discussions, Physiognomist A shared her experience with online fortune-telling services. She highlighted the convenience of instant messaging, which has enabled her to maintain contact with many regular clients via WeChat. In cases where clients have needs but are unable to travel, she offers her services online. She also noted that facial and palm readings can be conducted quite accurately through video calls, with results that are nearly identical to those obtained in-person. Consequently, she actively promotes her online services.

Physiognomist B's approach is more direct. In addition to offering physiognomy readings, she also performs paid rituals. For instance, after examining the author's facial features and suggesting the presence of "negative energy" that required cleansing with talismans, she offered to conduct a ritual for a fee. When the author declined, she took out a set of fortune-telling sticks from her bag and encouraged the author and companion to draw lots to check their fortunes. She charged 2 yuan per draw and suggested three draws per person. Many people might not pay close attention and assume that three draws cost only 2 yuan, when in fact it should be 6 yuan. This subtle marketing tactic allows physiognomists to increase their profits. Subsequently, the author's companion drew an extremely auspicious stick with the message "188 yuan for good luck." Both the author and companion were puzzled and asked Physiognomist B for an explanation. She mentioned that only two people had drawn this stick in the past year, and the second one was the author's companion. According to tradition, the person who draws this stick should give 188 yuan as a token of good fortune. However, considering that they were students, she waived the fee.

From these two conversations, the author concludes that in modern society, physiognomists are able to actively adapt to the modernization process by closely integrating modern technology and embracing commercialization. They expand traditional fortune-telling methods to seek greater survival space for themselves.

4.5. Self-Legitimization Strategies

Physiognomist A claimed adherence to Buddhism, asserting that her practice was grounded in genuine belief rather than mere superstition. She emphasized her regular visits to the City God Temple for worship, positioning herself as more pious and credible than other fortune tellers. However, historical records indicate that the City God was originally a Taoist deity, and since the Ming and Qing dynasties, most City God Temples have been under Taoist management, not Buddhist.

Another physiognomist cited the "Ma Yi Shen Xiang" as the source of her skills, claiming it was rooted in Buddhism and not a heretical practice. Yet, research shows that the Ma Yi Shen Xiang is derived from Taoist theories and is part of one of the five major branches of Taoism, not Buddhism.

These instances illustrate how physiognomists leverage orthodox religious beliefs and traditional culture to legitimize their practices. By aligning with recognized religious systems, they appeal to the public's reliance on "expert systems" in modern society. This strategy effectively confuses individuals with limited religious knowledge, thereby gaining their trust and establishing a degree of legitimacy for their activities.

5. From the Strategies of Physiognomists to Social Roots: A Deep Dive into the Vitality of Fortune - Telling

The ongoing prevalence of fortune - telling in contemporary society is fundamentally a result of the interplay between structural contradictions during social transformation and individual survival strategies. Rapid urbanization and marketization have led to the disintegration of traditional family and community ties due to generational estrangement and occupational mobility. Intense competition and pervasive uncertainty have heightened individual anxiety. Meanwhile, the lack of institutional support, such as psychological counseling and social security, has driven people to seek solace through informal means. In this context, the strategies employed by physiognomists not only address individual needs but also reflect the micro - dynamics of social risks and atomization.

5.1. Individualized Predicaments in the Risk Society and the Narrative of Destiny

The concept of the "risk society," as articulated by Ulrich Beck, elucidates the manner in which systemic risks—such as occupational precariousness, romantic instability, and economic volatility—exert pressure on individuals within the trajectory of modernization[1]. These risks are not sporadic occurrences but rather are ingrained as a constitutive element of the social structure. When macro - level issues—such as the phenomenon of "involution" in competition and the burden of high housing costs—cannot be effectively addressed through institutional channels, physiognomists employ "narratives of destiny" to recast these structural contradic-

tions into symbols that are intelligible to individuals. This process involves the simplification of structural contradictions into "character flaws" and "vicissitudes of fortune," accompanied by the provision of specific recommendations, such as "changing one's fate by drawing eyebrows" or "seeking complementary marital matches." For instance, the assertion that young individuals will encounter "romantic setbacks at the age of 25 and should consider late marriage" serves as a metaphor for the uncertainties inherent in the marriage market during periods of social transition. The fundamental nature of this strategy is to transmute uncontrollable social risks into modifiable personal destinies, thereby fabricating an illusion of control for individuals grappling with anxiety.

5.2. Individualized Predicaments in the Risk Society and the Narrative of Destiny

In the context of "liquid modernity," the dissolution of traditional communities has precipitated a state of atomized isolation among individuals. The younger generation, bereft of emotional sustenance from estranged familial bonds and unable to forge stable connections within a society of strangers, finds itself particularly vulnerable[20]. Physiognomists emerge as purveyors of "elderly - like solicitude," filling this void through tactile gestures (such as a reassuring pat on the shoulder) that evoke a semblance of intimacy, ethical exhortations (such as "bring honor to your parents") that replicate familial authority, and endearing appellations like "young lady" that foster a pseudo - familial atmosphere of trust. When confronted with the author's fabricated account of a same - sex romantic experience, the physiognomist invoked the notion of a "family scandal" as a means of moral admonition. Ostensibly, this appears as a defense of traditional ethical norms, but in essence, it repurposes the "filial piety" pressure inherent in intergenerational conflicts into an instrument of discipline. The underlying rationale of this strategy is the commodification of emotional support - customers remunerate for the experience of being heard and validated, while physiognomists assume the role of informal "emotional laborers," carving out a niche in the marketplace in the absence of institutional provisions.

5.3. The Symbolic Appropriation of Mysticism in Consumer Society

The vitality of fortune - telling is also inseparable from the colonization of the spiritual realm by market logic. Physiognomists package divination as a "quantifiable commodity": online video consultations cater to the fast - paced demand, "2 - yuan lot - drawing" blurs the boundaries of consumption, and the "188 - yuan lucky money" creates symbolic value through pricing strategies. The essence of these tactics is to transform uncertainty into consumable "symbolic security"[1][21]. For instance, the claim that "online physiognomy is as accurate as in - person" essentially uses the immediacy of technology to mask the ambiguity of divination. Meanwhile, "fortune analysis" and "career line interpretation" convert esoteric knowledge into "fast -

food - style comfort" for coping with a risk - filled society through highly pragmatic rhetoric. This market - oriented strategy not only adapts to modern consumer habits but also reveals a deeper paradox: when institutionalized support fails to mend social rifts, even a symbolic and potentially manipulative service can thrive by catering to individuals' longing for a sense of belonging and certainty.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This study examines the paradoxical vitality of fortune - telling in an era marked by significant advancements in science and technology, focusing on the role of physiognomists as key intermediaries. Through in - depth interviews and participatory observation, it is evident that physiognomists employ a diverse array of strategies to navigate the complex interplay between tradition and modernity. These strategies encompass flexible solicitation tactics, highly pragmatic and life - related content strategies, vague and value - laden colloquial language strategies, modernization strategies that are closely intertwined with commercialization and technological development, and self - legitimization strategies that draw upon orthodox religious beliefs and traditional cultural practices. Collectively, these strategies serve to expand the survival space for fortune - telling activities.

The contemporary resilience of fortune - telling cannot be simplistically attributed to residual "feudal superstition." Instead, it emerges as a consequence of multiple structural tensions during periods of social transformation. Within the framework of a risk - prone society, systemic risks such as occupational instability and romantic uncertainty are reframed as individualized narratives of "fortune fluctuations." In the context of an atomized society, the weakening of traditional family bonds and the absence of institutionalized emotional support give rise to the emotional compensation provided by physiognomists through "pseudo - familial relationships." Meanwhile, consumer society appropriates mysticism through symbolic means (such as online fortune - telling and lottery promotions), repackaging it as a quantifiable "symbolic security" commodity. The existence of these strategies not only reveals the inadequacies of institutional support in social security and psychological services but also underscores the pervasive infiltration of market logic into the spiritual realm. When society fails to provide an outlet for individual anxiety, any practice that can create an "illusion of certainty," regardless of its marginality, may emerge as a temporary palliative for the dilemmas of modernity.

This phenomenon corroborates a cross - cultural thesis: in the process of rationalization, globalization, and the rise of nationalism, so - called "unscientific" belief practices do not simply vanish but persist through self - adjustment and strategic renewal. This study further underscores that the rapid transformation of Chinese society provides a unique evolutionary context for fortune - telling. Physiognomists, as "intermediaries" between traditional practices and modern society, rely on religious ethics and traditional culture for self - legitimization while actively incorpo-

rating modern elements such as technology and commerce. They carve out a survival space in the interstices of tradition and modernity. This cultural resilience serves as a reminder that "tradition" and "modernity" are not binary opposites but rather continuously intermingle and reconstruct each other during periods of social transformation.

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