

Home> Cultural Trends> Worshipped and Cursed--The Turtles' Place in Chinese Culture

Worshipped and Cursed--The Turtles' Place in Chinese Culture

Chang Chin-ju / photos Cheng Yuan-ching / tr. by Jonathan Barnard

June 1996

[中文](#)







The way people read the turtle's appearance in primitive society was very different from how people see them today. Turtle Mountain Island, shrouded in mist, looks like a turtle swimming across the sea.

(photo by Diago Chiu)



While the turtle may be slow, unhurried composure gives it a placid character that Chinese compare to hermit sages. It's the kind of beast that runs out of energy just when it needs it most.

More even than using its shell for medicine, Chinese people's favorite use of the turtle is for cursing each other. The turtle plays the leading role in many Chinese derogatory expressions. Yet it is also regarded as one of four divine animals, taking an august place

alongside the dragon, the phoenix and the chimera. Turtles are even worshipped in temples. How have turtles managed to crawl the gamut from exaltation to degradation?

At a Buddhist ceremony of mercy on Taiwan's northern coast at the end of last year, quite a few freshwater green-headed turtles were mistaken for sea turtles and set free. Most died. For the survivors, the Life Conservationist Association went looking for kind-hearted people to adopt them. During their search, they got a call from a fortune teller who said he wanted to adopt some of the turtles that had already ascended to heaven instead, so that he could use their shells as instruments of divination.

Even if the request was "for making use of something that would otherwise be wasted," it was refused by this environmental group, which hopes to halt the over-exploitation of natural resources by changing people's unloving attitudes toward nature. In fact, many fortune tellers have prohibitions against killing turtles and use brass stand-ins.

Still, there's something here that tickles people's curiosity: How is that turtles, which seem to have no control over their own lives, have control over human destiny?

Worshipped and cursed

As *dajiale* and *liuhecai* (local versions of the numbers game) have grown in popularity and Taiwanese have shown a willingness to risk all they own playing them, traditional cake shops, though quite innocent of any impropriety themselves, have seen their own fortunes fall. In the good old days, people would run to the baker's to buy flour turtles to use as offerings at temple festivals or big family events like weddings or major birthdays. But now because of a Taiwanese expression that means "losing your shirt" but translates literally as "knocking turtles," gamblers steer clear of anything to do with chelonians, and consequently business for turtle cakes is way down.

Apart from gamblers' fears that eating a flour turtle will turn their luck sour, turtles have many other bad connotations in modern Chinese society. In fact, when people curse each other these days, the first thing to come out is often "turtle egg" or "grandson of a turtle," which serve as cuss words for all occasions. More narrow in meaning is "turtle hair," which describes a hedger or waffler unwilling to stick his neck out for anything, and indeed some ethnologists conjecture that the turtle's cowardly habit of pulling in its head and playing dead at the slightest whiff of trouble is at the root of its devaluation in the minds of modern Chinese.

The Yuan dynasty song "Dan Bian Duo Su" mocks Li Yuanji, son of the Tang emperor Tai-zong, for copying the turtle's method and shirking from danger. During the Yuan, weak and cowardly husbands who allowed their wives to have affairs were described as turtles with their heads pulled in. As a result, the turtle (and the tortoise too, since the Chinese don't distinguish between them) became bound up with insinuations of cuckoldry.

But if humanity has gradually come to an understanding of nature as it has built its own creation of civilization, then let's turn around to look at the early years of civilization, before there were many curse words or sarcastic expressions. Back then people had an entirely different view of the turtle.

Heaven and earth

In primitive times, when only natural objects were available, people were happy to discover hard and durable turtle shells, in which they saw the shape of the universe. From a belief that the sky was round and the world was flat, they would create many objects representing heaven and earth. Yet here was the tortoise, a creation of nature that carried its round shell over the ground, like heaven, and had a flat bottom, like earth. With a profile resembling a mountain and the turning motion of its four toes, it seemed to be a depiction of heaven and earth changing constantly through the seasons.

When humanity was still groping toward an understanding of nature and its myriad beasts, the body of the turtle seemed to encapsulate the order of the universe. Seen in this light, turtles became a link between heaven and earth, and were frequently used in divining ceremonies.

After the archeological remains of the Shang oracle bones and turtle shells were unearthed, scholars began to understand something of the life of Shang monarchs 4000 years ago. Early each morning, the court historian and court diviner would prepare a turtle shell and fire a charcoal stove. Upon rising, the king would immediately go to have a divination. Whether he asked about the weather, or military matters or hunting, the court diviner would take a burning stick and move it over the shell, which, when exposed to the heat, would crack into shapes that the diviner would interpret for the king. (It would often crack in the shape of 𠄎, which became the Chinese character meaning divination.) The interpretations, which were also recorded on the shell, would give direction to the nation's policies. This went on every day during the rule of 12 kings, and the custom was practiced as late as the Han dynasty.

The I-Ching describes tortoise divination as the best method for making sense of the events of this world. Since the turtle was a godly beast by nature, sages would act in accordance with what was

revealed on its shell, which would tell whether luck would be good or bad, whether action should be taken or not.

Sages weren't the only ones to use tortoise shells for divination. Ancient statesmen and military strategists would consult them too. And some time in the course of the 4000-year history of Chinese divination, common folk picked them up. To this day, at fortune-telling stands all across Taiwan, you can see heavy bowls containing tortoise shells and bronze coins. A passerby who wants to know his fate sits down, and the fortune teller shakes the coins in the shell before reading the customer's future.

The tortoise is also known as the "xuanwu," which means "black soldier." The Book of Rites explains that turtles and tortoises have armor-like exteriors (hence "soldier"), and they are dark in color (hence "black").

The Chinese have always sought stability and order, and they make a big deal about how their residences and tombs are oriented. "With a dragon on the left and tiger on the right to ward off bad luck and with a rose finch and a black soldier to regulate the Yin and Yang," it was believed, "children and grandchildren will surround you and your ancestors will be happy and prosperous."

The turtle, dragon, tiger and rose finch each govern one direction. In traditional Chinese cosmology, space was divided into four directions, each of which had seven stars. Because the seven northern stars formed the outline of a turtle, the turtle came to represent the north. The universe was thought to be built of five basic elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Since the turtle lives in water, it also came to represent the element of water.

In March of this year, Chou Jen-huang, a resident of Sanhsing Rural Township in Ilan County, was out walking when he saw something moving the roots of a big tree in the vicinity of Changpi Lake. Upon closer examination, he discovered that a turtle was caught up in the tree's roots and couldn't break loose. Chou used some tools to hack and pry at the roots, allowing him to pull free the turtle, which had been trapped so long that its shell had already changed shape. Chou recalls hearing that turtles could live for 100 years without food. But it wasn't until he saw this turtle's oddly shaped shell that he really believed it.

All turtles and tortoises move with slow, carefree gaits. They breathe less often than humans and eat and drink little. They have inoffensive personalities, don't harm other beasts and never lose their composes. As a consequence, it's easy to understand why a lifetime of 300-500 years was thought well within a turtle's grasp. The divine turtle, "peacefully living a hermit-like existence for thousands of

years in a spring's waters" has much the flavor of a Taoist immortal who has removed himself from the troubles of the world. Indeed, teachers of qi gong breathing techniques always want their students to model themselves on the turtle. And in popular kung-fu novels, heroes escape danger using "turtle breathing" to play dead.

Mountain moving power

To Chinese of an earlier era, turtles seemed to possess an enviable and god-like resistance to aging, and so they came to symbolize longevity. People would pray and make offerings to them for long lives. To someone passing a birthday, they would say: "May the turtle and crane extend your life." Then there was its appearance symbolic of heaven and earth, its powers of augury, and its inside-out body (with the bone on the outside and meat on the inside). Taken together, these qualities caused the Chinese to attach great spiritual significance to the turtle, and they are at the root of the many myths and traditions regarding it. In a nutshell, the turtle had an elegant appearance and spiritual significance, which caused the ancients to chose it as a companion of the dragon, the phoenix and chimera in the ranks of China's most godly of animals.

It was believed that when the emperor was moral, divine turtles would appear as signs of his high virtue. When he ruled benevolently and paid proper respect to his forebears, dragons in the heavens and turtles on earth would carry signs of good fortune. Monsters would disappear and lucky clouds would blow in. Yu the Great paid little attention to the luxury of his palace, putting all his energy into regulating the waterways. Busy during those years, he passed the palace gate three times but never even entered, and as a result the owled turtle was moved by his diligence and told him the secret of how to stop the floods.

The eastern fairy mountains, in a distant fog, were a paradise in the ancient Chinese imagination, a place where gods and immortals lived. Those mountains were said to be carried on the back of a strong-shelled turtle, which would rise and sink on the ocean waves, causing the mountains to be visible for only fleeting glimpses. The god of the sea was also said to ride on a turtle's back. One dragon was said to have nine sons, each of whom had his own special talent. One, a turtle named Baxia, could carry heavy loads. Turtle tablets, which were stone tablets with bottoms that looked like turtles, appeared in the Han and Tang dynasties. The stone tortoises under their shells would strain their necks upward, with big eyes and open mouths. Their four feet gripped the ground, as their shells bore their heavy loads. On the tablets would be recorded great moral achievements. The Yanping Chun Wang Temple in Tainan has nine turtle tablets, by which visitors line up to have their photos taken.

Eventually the "black soldier" of nature was anthropomorphized into the black-clad warrior God of the Northern Heavens, who carries a sword and stands on turtles and snakes. Legend has it that before the God of the Northern Heavens died, he cut open his own body and took out his stomach and intestines. His intestines became a snake and his stomach became a turtle. Erroneously, butchers adopted him as their patron saint, and Taiwan now has many temples devoted to him.

Chelonian geomancy

The image of the turtle as a spiritual beast became deeply implanted in people's minds. One ancient text warns its readers not to act rashly when catching turtles and always to carry out the proper ceremony to worship them first. There are also many legends among the people about how those who killed turtles eventually met with misfortune as their just desert. Common Buddhist restraints against the killing of animals evolved into the Buddhist ceremony of releasing turtles, and in modern Chinese society there are probably more people who release turtles than who eat them.

Having an unusual appearance and symbolizing good fortune and long life, when the turtle left the rarefied air of myth to seek an earthy life among the people, its cultural significance grew only richer. The truth is that the turtle served to make life more convenient for our ancestors. Besides writing on turtle shells, people also used them as a trading currency in the era before the Qin dynasty.

The archeological remains of the Hemudu culture in Zhejiang show that 5800 years ago people there wore ornaments made from turtle shell just as people today wear gold or jade jewelry. Back then they placed a high value on turtle shell. Later turtle shapes were often carved into the gold chops used by ministers and lords during the Han dynasty. By the Tang dynasty, tombs were being made in the shape of turtles. The symbol of the eight diagrams, commonly used among Chinese as a charm, was derived from the strong and simple lines found on turtle shells.

During the Han and Tang dynasties, people thought up all sorts of ways of putting "gui," the Chinese character for turtle, into their own names. Besides the famous Tang dynasty musician Li Gui-nian, Bai Juyi, whose poetry could be understood even by old women, named his beloved nephew Gui-lang. The Japanese followed suit, and today the character appears in Japanese surnames and given names.

Flour turtles turn to gold turtles

Because in the southern Fujianese dialect, the word for turtle is a homonym for the number nine and for the word meaning long in time, and because freshwater turtles and tortoises have five toes on their front

feet and four on their back feet, adding up to nine, turtles were thought to have lived as long as the world existed. From this arose the tradition of praying to turtles on the coasts of southern Fujian and Taiwan (where the dialect is also spoken).

"Qi gui" refers to making dough turtles out of red yeast and flour to serve as offerings to the gods. For temple fairs, people made offerings of turtles to gods, and when their prayers were answered they would make new offerings to show their gratitude. The entire village or a few households on a rotating basis would pay for making these turtles. In times of rich harvest and peace, a dough turtle to which villagers pray can range in weight from 300-600 kilograms. After the ceremony, each household takes a portion of it home to eat. It is split up so that everyone can enjoy the turtle's prosperity and good fortune, and so that all can follow the turtle to the territory of longevity and enjoy peace at home. It is said that when a master teaches novices the art of making flour turtles, he exhorts them not to put too few or too many toes on their feet, or otherwise risk incurring the customers' wrath.

As society has become industrialized and commercialized, qi gui turtles have appeared made out of cans, coins or gold. This year during the lantern festival, devotees of Penghu's Tienhoukung Temple made a gold turtle that was nearly 80 taels. Not to be outdone, the director of activities for next year has said that he will put together a gold turtle of 90 taels.

In a paper entitled "Turtle Worshipping in Ancient China," Ling Chun-sheng, the first director of the Institute of Ethnology of the Academia Sinica, wrote that Taiwan's dough turtle tradition comes from the southern Fujian coast. For early Han settlers in Taiwan, putting food on the table was most important. Since people enjoyed eating turtle meat in the here and now, they figured it shouldn't be any different in the hereafter. Turtles joined oxen, sheep and pigs as one of the animals most commonly used as offerings in ceremonies honoring ancestors. At first living turtles were used in these ceremonies. After the ceremonies they would be released. But later, when it became hard to find living turtles, turtles made from flour and all kinds of other substances began to be used in their place.

The truth is that red dough turtles can be offered to all gods from the local earth god on up. With more than 200 days a year on which gods' birthdays fall, the altars are always jammed with sacrificial offerings and gifts of red turtle cake. Red turtles are tied up with all the days traditionally considered important in the life of Taiwanese: from birth, to reaching a full month of age, to major birthdays, to death. When people reach 60 years of age, relatives and friends give them 62 red turtles, and when they turn 70, they get 72.

First the legend, then the ceremony

From the stuff of myth to the stuff of folk customs, China's turtle culture is colorful and diverse, Li Feng-mao, a fellow at the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, points out that the forms of Chinese turtle culture can in fact be traced back to ancient people's observations about nature. For instance, people living along coasts observed that sea turtles floated on the sea, and from this arose the myth about turtles on the sea carrying the mystic signs and markings. Once legends about turtles carrying spiritual objects were established, it was just a short hop to cultural activities like making turtle tablets and offering dough turtles.

It is difficult now to establish a time-table for the process in which turtles were mythologized, but from their use by ancient kings to their use by modern fortune tellers, there are connections and continuity between all the various legends relating to turtles, with each being one link in the chain of divine turtle culture. "At a basic level, each show some characteristics of the actual turtle, with meanings that have been explained or expanded upon by humanity," Li says.

But what are the actual characteristics of a turtle? In nature do turtles actually "live for hundreds and thousands of years"?

The turtle and the dinosaur

Though the soft-shelled turtle has a soft, leathery shell, all chelonians (turtles, tortoises and terrapins) show little variation in their basic structure. Zoologists believe that today's chelonians have evolved from a kind of dinosaur that lived during the Carboniferous Period. They and other reptiles such as lizards, chameleons, snakes, and alligators were among the first animals to adapt to life on dry land. Through them, life has made the transition from fish to mammal.

Why didn't turtles die out like dinosaurs? Regardless of what led to the dinosaurs' demise, today's reptiles have been able to avoid the same fate by making advantageous adaptations to the environment. Turtles and tortoise represent a major breakthrough in self-defense: their scales have evolved into a hard shell over their backs, and bone supports their undershells, leaving their bodies encased in strong, unbreakable armor. When they come across danger, their head and legs pull back into their shells. When Taiwan's native turtle *Cuoro flavo-marninata* is faced with danger, its pulls so snugly inside itself that not even a small crack is available for predators to pry at.

Zoologists believe that chelonians have a more advanced protective structure than is found in any higher vertebrate, which has allowed them to survive threats of all kinds. In fact, up to the present, their exteriors haven't changed to any remarkable degree. Turtles and tortoises have displayed remarkably slow evolution. But in comparison to later-arriving, tool-using humans, they come up short in many respects.

In the Qing dynasty work *Completed Collection of Graphs and Writings of Ancient and Modern Times*, it is recorded that the ancients were known to use turtles as the legs of their beds, but no turtle shell could really have borne this form of abuse. The veterinarian Chi Wei-lien once had to set a cast for a pet turtle whose master had accidentally smashed its shell. For turtles that die in the wild, their shells, through exposure to the wind and the rain, will disintegrate.

Although there are records of turtles that have lived past 100 years, today zoologists can look at rings in a turtle's shell much like the rings in a tree, to determine that most chelonians live only 20 or 30 years. True, some sea turtles can live 50 or 60 years, but in any case their lifetimes are far shorter than people had imagined.

Waddling out of prehistory

The British sinologist Joseph Needham, in his book *Science and Civilization in China*, points out that the worship of animals, besides being related to mistaken observations about the actual animals in nature, also reflects choices people made about identification. So-called folk beliefs were all originally selected and filtered from people's experiences. Some stem from a principle of analogy. For instance, since turtles have lower pulse and breathing rates than humans--and in fact some chelonians do live longer than most people--there arose a belief in the immortality of turtles. And so it has happened that folk beliefs differ from today's scientific understanding of turtles. But when the turtle has symbolic importance, the facts about actual turtles become no longer important. "Belief is belief, and some beliefs But folk beliefs aren't science, and don't need to turn into science," says Li Feng-mao.

Among the four spiritual beasts--the dragon, the phoenix, the turtle and the chimera--the turtle is the only actual animal. Yet the truth is that the other three were all based on real animals and then expanded upon with a little extra imagination. While the outward appearance of turtles is enough itself to excite people's imaginations, in the legends of some eras, it also appeared as an animal with a dragon's head and turtle's body. In *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, there appears a mythical turtle with a bird's head and snake's tail which looks quite different from its biological counterpart.

People started understanding the world by making categories, and today's zoological system of knowledge has accumulated from thousands of years of people putting animals into categories. The ancients didn't have modern science and technology. Myths can be described as being the result of our predecessors' attempts to sort out what they had experienced of beasts in their lives. Why does the turtle represent north and belong to the element of water? Because the north is frigid and full of water, and turtles live in the water. "The ancients used myth and their own methods to explain their geographical environment, building their conception of the universe," says Li Feng-mao. Myth was how humans created order out of confusion. It represents serious work in the development of humanity, and it is also a crystallization of the early wisdom gained from cultural development. Hence, one shouldn't look at the culture of divine beasts as being something absurd or weird.

Symbol of the people

Relics of ancient culture are most meaningful today in how they reveal a people's symbols. In particular, the culture of divine animals combines activities from both the old and new stone ages. These weren't created in an instant and weren't created by individuals: they represent cultural assets of the Chinese people. Culture is multifaceted, and different peoples have different cultural psychologies and different ways of explaining things.

In the West, early Christians didn't like turtles, and they viewed them as symbolizing evil forces during war. In Greece, turtles were once believed to be citizens of hell. But like the Chinese, Indians have a legend that "the world is supported by four elephants standing on a giant turtle." After hearing a Western scientist clearly give a scientific explanation for the formation of the world, one old Indian woman said that he was wholly mistaken, that the world was being supported by a giant turtle. When the scientist asked what was under the turtle, she said, "Of course there is an endless pile of turtles, one on top of another."

Different cultures may have similar views about certain things, but no culture has completely the same views about the symbolic import of turtles as the Chinese, because the turtle has gone through repeated interpretations in China, seeping deep into Chinese culture. For example, when the Buddha promoted the concept of showing mercy to animals by setting them free, it was meant to be applied indiscriminately, but when the idea came to China, the Chinese applied it especially to turtles. Of course in China it means more than just showing mercy to animals. After this concept entered Chinese culture, the people put their own understanding into it, and releasing turtles became something that is done to earn favor with the gods. The idea of good works being their own reward turned into something tinted

with hoped-for personal gain. This transformation also illustrates how cultural concepts are not passed along intact.

Upending the mythical turtle

In reality, just as culture is multifaceted, so is just about everything else, and 100 people are likely to interpret the same thing 100 ways. Although spiritual turtle culture still flourishes today, turtles' reputation in the Song dynasty had already fallen. The Chinese characters "wang ba" (king eight) are said to mean turtle because lines on the back of a turtle shell resemble the character "wang," which is the eighth of the 100 Chinese surnames. But how is it that "wang ba" became a curse word? The anthropologist He Lien-kuei believes that this an example of the pendulum swinging, of things reversing direction when they reach an extreme.

In former times people would build huge turtle tablets to honor people's achievements. Yet in the Song dynasty, after the lot of the common people improved, they would use the word "turtle" to make sarcastic references about the nobles. In the Qing dynasty book *Chihbei Outan*, Wang Shizhen says that during the Han, Tang and Song dynasties many people used the character for turtle (gui), in their names. But by the Ming dynasty, no one was using it. Its disappearance was hard to figure.

The southern Fujianese are masters of making examples out of turtles. It is said that the turtle belongs to the element of water, and that water represents money (because of the expression that runs "one will hit it rich when meeting water." And so "knocking the turtle over" is used to describe money running out, and has been a very common expression among Taiwan's gamblers in recent years.

Li Feng-mao points out that things take on new meanings in new situations. This is normal and natural. In particular, folk culture has a strong continuity to it: When a kind of belief enters the system and becomes collectively acknowledged, it is hard to eliminate. But people find it easy to distinguish between the turtles' various seemingly contradictory qualities, and there's no fear of confusion. The same person who curses someone as a grandson of a turtle will also eat turtle cakes for good luck. For a long time now dough turtles have been offered to the gods in temples along the coasts of Southern Fujian and Taiwan. And this custom won't disappear overnight just because of gamblers' fear of knocking the turtle over.

But all of these cultural turtles, created as they were in the minds of the Chinese, are well removed from the actual reptile. For an actual living turtle, say a freshwater turtle "mercifully" released into the sea, life doesn't seem entirely like something that they control.

Abracadabra shallakazam. . . . Would a turtle shell reading accurately forecast the fate of the turtle?



Among the four divine animals--the turtle, the dragon, the phoenix and the chimera--only the turtle is a real flesh-and-blood creature. In fact, Chinese depictions of the "divine turtle" often vary considerably from its biological counterpart. The photo shows a dragon-headed turtle carved out of jade.



The turtle tablets of Yenping's Chunwang Temple show that in the view of the ancient Chinese, turtles could bear extremely heavy loads.



Are turtles made from rice and flour out of date? At temple fairs only g old turtles seem to impress people these days. The problem is that turtles presented as offerings are supposed to be divided up and eaten afterwards. How will they divvy up the gold?



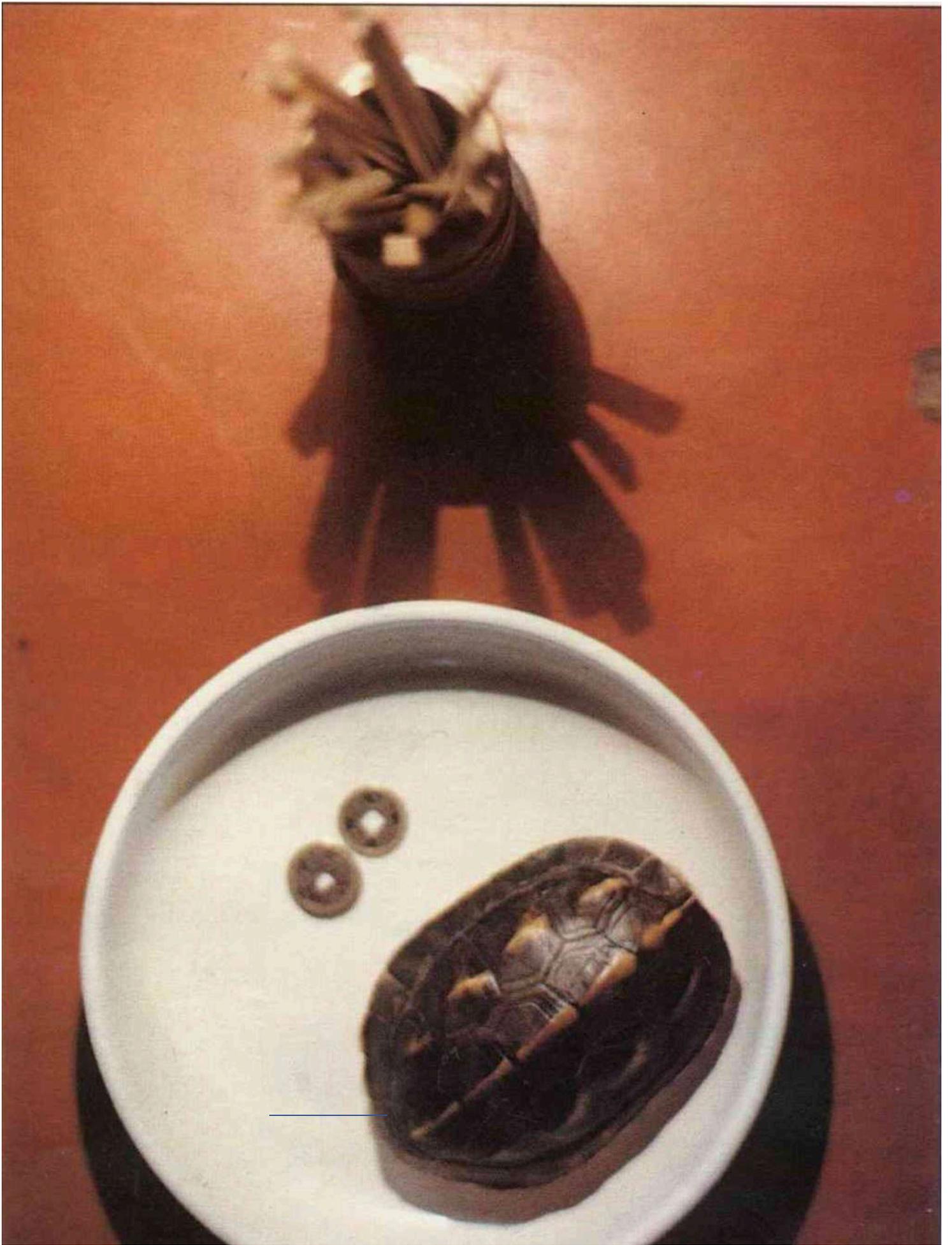


Red dough turtles play essential roles in all sorts of ceremonies in Tai wan. (photo by Vincent Chang)





The eight diagrams, which work as a charm against evil, are said to have been based on the lines on a turtle's shell.



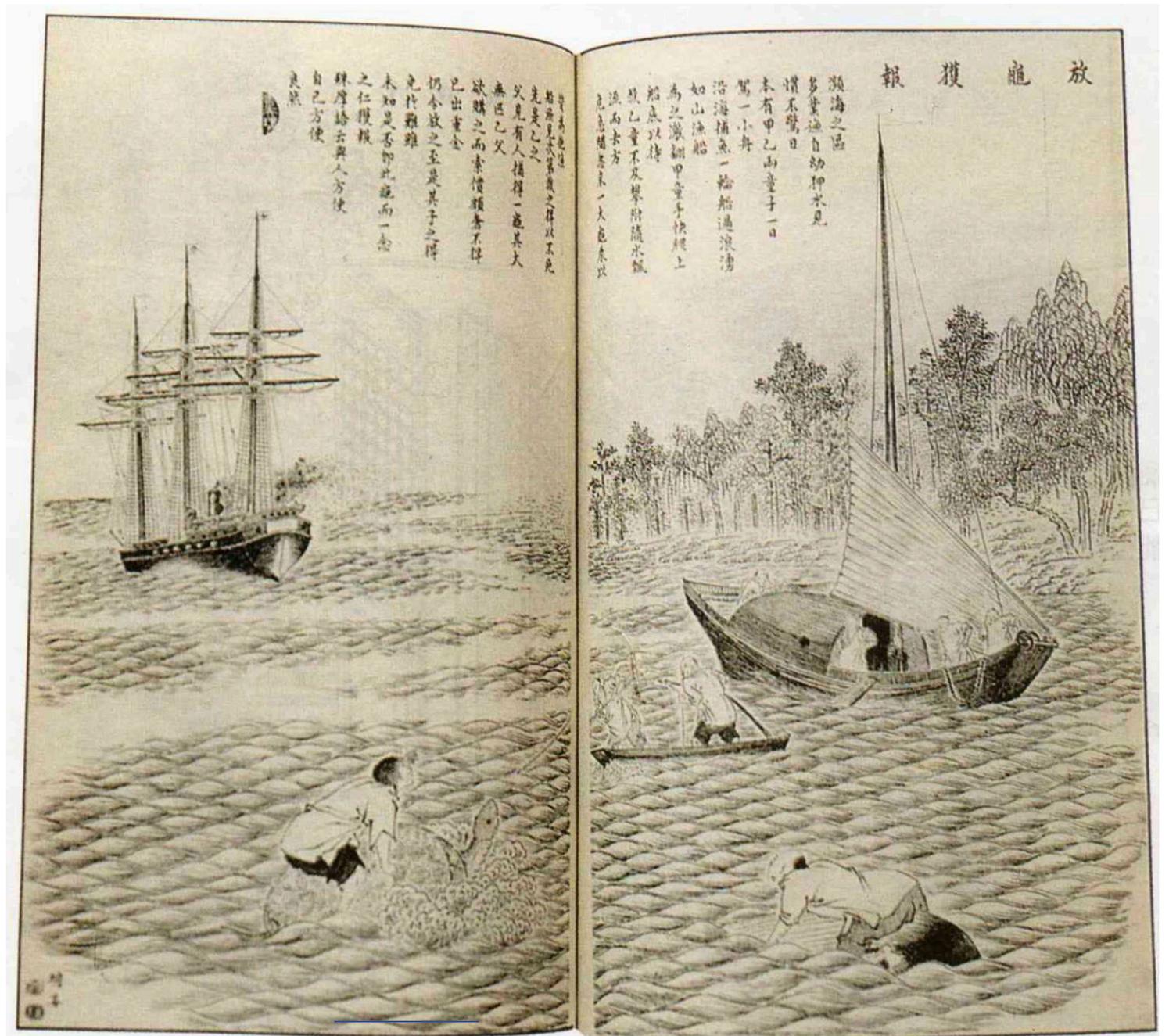


Abracadabra.... The ancients believed that turtles served as conduits between heaven and earth, and they would go to them for questions about what fate held in store. Fortune tellers have long used turtle shells. (photo by Yang Wen- ching)





Turtle shells are hard and have long been used by people in their daily lives. The undershells of turtles' bellies were used to record writing 4000 years ago. (courtesy of the Academia Sinica's Institute of History and Philology)



Showing mercy by releasing turtles (and thereby being blessed with good fortune in return) has been a popular activity since ancient times. Of all animals, turtles are the ones the Chinese most like to set free.