

# Planchette<sup>1</sup>

By P'u Sung-ling

At Ch'ang-shan there lived a man, named Wang Jui-t'ing, who understood the art of planchette. He called himself a disciple of Lu Tung-pin,<sup>2</sup> and some one said he was probably that worthy's crane. At his *séances* the subjects were always literary—essays, poetry, and so on. The well-known scholar, Li Chih, thought very highly of him, and availed himself of his aid on more than one occasion; so that by degrees the literati generally also patronised him. His responses to questions of doubt or difficulty were remarkable for their reasonableness; matters of mere good or bad fortune he did not care to enter into. In 1631, just after the examination at Chi-nan, a number of the candidates requested Mr. Wang to tell them how they would stand on the list; and after having examined their essays, he proceeded to pass his opinion on their merits. Among the rest there happened to be one who was very intimate with another candidate, not present, whose name was Li Pien, and who, being an enthusiastic student and a deep thinker, was confidently expected to appear among the successful few. Accordingly, the friend submitted Mr. Li's essay for inspection; and in a few minutes two characters appeared on the sand—namely, “Number one.” After a short interval this sentence followed:—“The decision given just now had reference to Mr. Li's essay simply as an essay. Mr. Li's destiny is darkly obscured, and he will suffer accordingly. It is strange, indeed, that a man's literary powers and his destiny should thus be out of harmony. Surely the Examiner will judge of him by his essay;—but stay: I will go and see how matters stand.” Another pause ensued, and then these words were written down:—“I have

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<sup>1</sup> Planchette was in full swing in China at the date of the composition of these stories, more than 200 years ago, and remains so at the present day. The character *chi*, used here and elsewhere for Planchette, is defined in the *Shuo Wên*, a Chinese dictionary, published A.D. 100, “to inquire by divination on doubtful topics.” no mention being made of the particular manner in which responses are obtained. For the purpose of writing from personal experience. I once attended a *séance* at a temple in Amoy, and witness the whole performance. After much delay, I was requested to write on a slip of paper any question I might have to put to the God;” and, accordingly, I took a pencil and wrote down, “A humble suppliant ventures to inquire if he will win the Manila lottery.” This question was then placed upon the altar, at the feet of the God; and shortly afterwards two respectable-looking Chinamen, not priests, approached a small table covered with sand, and each seized one arm of a forked piece of wood, at the fork of which was a stumpy end, at right angles to the plane of the arms. Immediately the attendants began burning quantities of joss-paper, while the two performers whirled the instrument round and round at a rapid rate, its vertical point being all the time pressed down upon the table of sand. All of a sudden the whirling movement stopped, and the point of the instrument rapidly traced a character in the sand, which was at once identified by several of the bystanders, and forthwith copied down by a clerk in attendance. The whirling movement was then continued until a similar pause was made and another character appeared; and so on until I had four lines of correctly-rhymed Chinese verse, each line consisting of seven characters. The following is an almost word-for-word translation:—

“The pulse of human nature throbs from England to Cathay,  
And gambling mortals ever love to swell their gains by play  
For gold in this vile world of ours is everywhere a prize—  
A thousand souls shall meet the prayer that on this altar lies.”

As the question is not concealed from view, all that is necessary or such a hollow deception is a quick-witted versifier who can put together a poetical response *stans pede in uno*. But in such matters the unlettered masses of China are easily outwitted, and are a profitable source of income to the more astute of their fellow-countrymen.

<sup>2</sup> A recluse who flourished in the eighth century of our era, and who, for his devotion to the Taoist religion, was subsequently canonised as one of the Eight Immortals. He is generally represented as riding on a crane.

been over to the Examiner's yamên, and have found a pretty state of things going on; instead of reading the candidates' papers himself, he has handed them over to his clerks, some half-dozen illiterate fellows who purchased their own degrees, and who, in their previous existence, had no status whatever,—'hungry devils' begging their bread in all directions; and who, after eight hundred years passed in the murky gloom of the infernal regions, have lost all discrimination, like men long buried in a cave and suddenly transferred to the light of day. Among them may be one or two who have risen above their former selves, but the odds are against an essay falling into the hands of one of these." The young men then begged to know if there was any method by which such an evil might be counteracted; to which the planchette replied that there was, but, as it was universally understood, there was no occasion for asking the question. Thereupon they went off and told Mr. Li, who was so much distressed at the prediction that he submitted his essay to His Excellency Sun Tzü-mei, one of the finest scholars of the day. This gentleman examined it, and was so pleased with its literary merit that he told Li he was quite sure to pass, and the latter thought no more about the planchette prophecy. However, when the list came out, there he was down in the fourth class; and this so much disconcerted His Excellency Mr. Sun, that he went carefully through the essay again for fear lest any blemishes might have escaped his attention. Then he cried out, "Well, I have always thought this Examiner to be a scholar; he can never have made such a mistake as this; it must be the fault of some of his drunken assistants, who don't know the mere rudiments of composition." This fulfillment of the prophecy raised Mr. Wang very high in the estimation of the candidates, who forthwith went and burned incense and invoked the spirit of the planchette, which at once replied in the following terms:—"Let not Mr. Li be disheartened by temporary failure. Let him rather strive to improve himself still further, and next year he may be among the first on the list." Li carried out these injunctions; and after a time the story reached the ears of the Examiner, who gratified Li by making a public acknowledgment that there had been some miscarriage of justice at the examination; and the following year he was passed high up on the list.