

The Heavenly Stems, Early Origins and Development

The 天干 *Tiān gān*, the ‘Heavenly stems’ also known as the ‘Celestial stems’ are a group of ten ordinals of great antiquity. Older than the earliest records of the 五行 *Wǔxíng* or ‘Five Elemental Phases’ they predate their counterparts, the 地支 *Dì zhī*, ‘earthly branches’ by some hundreds of years. Unfortunately in modern times there seems to be a convention developing to replace these stems with numbers or recognise them only by their elemental equivalents (eg. *Yang* Wood). This is a misrepresentation however, neglecting their true meanings and placing an unnecessary limit on the depth of our knowledge.

The stems are some of the oldest Chinese characters known. Their first recorded use seems to be during the 商 *Shāng* dynasty, around 1500 BC, where they appeared on oracle bones. These ‘oracle bones’ were usually the scapula of oxen or tortoise plastrons that were drilled with small holes then subjected to fire to form many tiny cracks, the relative auspiciousness (or inauspiciousness) of which could be read by a skilled diviner.

The original use of the stems was as Calendrical symbols, an early demarcation of what was then a 10 day week in the Chinese empire, known as a 旬 *xún*. It is theorised that these names for days of the week were taken after various celestial deities, now long forgotten, similar to our own western culture and use of the Norse and other gods, in our days of the week.

The philosophy of the heavenly stems was developed over time and recorded in ancient classical texts. They were adopted to describe the circulation of the *qi* of the *Wǔxíng* in the sky (the earthly branches referring to its material forms on earth) its motion and rest, expansion and contraction etc. The early pictograms and characters symbolise these transformations, information from which is summarised in the table below.

The famous court astrologer of the former Han Dynasty 司马迁 *Sīmǎ Qiān* in his epic work the *Shǐjì* 史记 ‘Records of the Grand Historian’ written around 109 – 91BC, describes the stems thus - ‘The growing, thriving, declining and dying of all living things in the universe and the development and transformation of all natural phenomena.’

Sīmǎ Qiān and authors of other classic texts such as the 內經素問 *Nèijīng sùwèn*, ‘Simple Questions of the Inner Classic’ authorship attributed to *Huangdi* the Yellow Emperor in approximately 300BC, talk of the stems in terms of analogy, using the growth of crops to describe the energetic changes.

Perhaps the most extensive information though can be found in the more recent 清 *Qīng* Dynasty classic work by Yunlu Mei *Juecheng* & He Guozhong the 协纪辨方书 *Xiéjì Biàn fāng shū* – ‘Treatise on Harmonizing Times and Distinguishing Directions’. Written in 1740 by

imperial decree, it borrows heavily from many of the earlier sources and interpretations.

Evolution of the stems continued and scholars classified the odd numbered as *yang*, the even as *yin*. They then combined with the earthly branches (*yin* to *yin* and *yang* to *yang*) to make up the 甲子 *Jiǎzǐ* (named after 1st combination) or the ‘60 binomials’. Stems were assigned the elemental correlations they are perhaps best known for, as well as trigrams – the 纳甲 *Nàjiǎ* ‘Received stem’ system. It was also determined that opposite stems combined to form additional elemental energies according to the 河图 *Hétú* ‘river map’, along with varied other permutations of lesser fame.

This theoretical construct was then associated with various fields of Chinese philosophical science. Examples of which include in Astronomy – for the location of the four major constellations of seven star clusters (also known as the 28 Lunar mansions) in *Feng Shui* - to directions and their auspices as the 24 mountains; and in medicine – to body parts via the channels, opening acupuncture points, pulse diagnosis and days upon which death may occur!

It is in 术数 *Shùshù* ‘astrology and divination’ that the stems are perhaps most extensively used though. In the 子平 *Zǐpíng* method (*Bazi*/4 Pillars) they represent the upper layers of interpretation of a chart. The 紫微 *Zǐwēi* (purple star) calculations place them according to the lunar calendar, allowing location of certain major and minor ‘stars’. They also appear on the cosmological divination boards of the 遁甲 *Dùnjiǎ* (Hidden Stem), 六壬 *Lù Rén* (Six Stem) and 太乙 *Tàiyǐ* (Great Stem) techniques.

It is through greater understanding of these foundations that we can better fathom the wisdom of the Chinese Metaphysical arts. This knowledge can also help to establish the future directions of our own practices. There are of course many other applications of the heavenly stems, beyond the scope of this brief essay and too numerous to mention here. This is in itself a testament to the humble stem’s longevity, flexibility, and willingness to be interwoven with a myriad of things.

References

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Character & Pictogram	Pinyin & Pronunciation	<i>Nèijīng</i> The Inner Classic	<i>Sīmǎ Qiān</i> Court Astrologer	Interpretation
甲 甲	<i>Jiǎ</i> (‘jar’)	Breaking through, a sprout breaking through the earth	‘Tender buds split pods’ shell – the myriad things make the ritual prognostication on the tortoise shell and proceed out [in the royal manner]	The character also means carapace or armour. The image is of cracks forming as a movement is about to break through its protective husk. Softness overcomes hardness.
乙 乙	<i>Yǐ</i> (‘yee’)	Early growth with and young bending stems and branches	‘The seedling grows up day by day’ crashing – the myriad things are born in a crashing mass	A symbol of impetus, the violent force needed to blossom forth.
丙 丙	<i>Bǐng</i> (‘bing’)	Life force expanding like a beautiful bright fire	‘the growing up becomes notable’ the way of <i>yang</i> shines brightly	The figure shows ‘fire in the house’ suggesting greater <i>yang</i> is building.
丁 丁	<i>Dīng</i> (‘ding’)	New life becoming fully grown	‘the seedling becomes big and strong’ the myriad things are stout and vigorous	The ideogram can also refer to man, family, profession. It concerns maturation of strength and power
戊 戊	<i>Wù</i> (‘woo’)	Luxuriant growth and prosperous development	‘The crop is growing luxuriantly’	A man holding a scythe can be seen in the picture – in readiness to begin reaping, or destruction? This may have also been an early war god.
己 己	<i>Jǐ</i> (‘jee’)	Distinguishable features and attributes	‘the crop is ripe’	Other meanings include oneself, personal. A thread for weaving can be seen, implying patterns are able to be discerned, decisions and actions can be made. Materials and opportunities.
庚 庚	<i>Gēng</i> (‘geng’)	The beginning of energy reversal, energy retreating until the next spring	‘a renovation takes place’ transform – the <i>yin qi</i> transforms the myriad things	The alternate translation concerns time. The age/s taken to change something’s polarity. The pictogram represents two hands slowly pounding rice to make flour.
辛 辛	<i>Xīn</i> (‘shin’)	Withdrawing	‘a new life begins to shape’ laborious – the myriad things have great difficulty in [holding onto] life	Can be interpreted as suffering and bitterness. The hardship associated with allowing an end. The early drawing is of an acrid herb or flower. This was perhaps as well an ancient goddess of medicine.
壬 壬	<i>Rén</i> (‘wren’)	Life energy nurtured deeply within, like a pregnant mother nourishing the foetus	‘it is becoming pregnant’ cultivating - <i>yang qi</i> cultivates the myriad things below	The lines describe a person bearing a load of some kind. This is potential energy stored and ready to be realised.
癸 癸	<i>Guǐ</i> (‘gway’)	The regathering of a new life force, underground and invisibly cultivated, awaiting a new breakthrough	‘the second generation begins to sprout’ measuring – the myriad things can be weighed and measured.	The tenth day was one of sacrifice / worship. Possibly too an old deity concerned with divination. The graph suggests hands lifted in prayer holding ritual ornaments. A pre-heavenly unfathomable energy.