

Traditional Chinese Astronomy

Tyler J. Rowe BTCM-Acu BICM-Chm Dip-Tn CertIV-Fs Cert-CA Cert-ONM

Chinese Astrology, as it is practiced today, usually refers to various methods of divination and fate calculation, most of which do not require any significant understanding of the stars or their constellations. The traditional astrological systems associated with observing the skies were mostly reserved for imperial concerns and matters of state. They did not generally involve the drawing of horoscopes for individuals.

Nevertheless, there are numerous examples in early Chinese writings, of how planetary bodies and other celestial phenomena affect personal health or prosperity. An understanding of these would surely add depth to any study of the various Chinese Astrological systems now available.

Historically, in both Europe and China, astronomy and astrology were not independent of each other. It was only with the introduction of modern science (which came much later to the middle kingdom) that they became separate. However, the grouping, naming and associated correlations of the heavens in ancient Chinese culture, differ significantly from their Western counterparts. It is somewhat appropriate then, to firstly appreciate the Traditional Chinese view of Astronomy, before being able to apply that to Astrology.

The sun and moon

It is simple to begin with the two most noticeable figures in our sky and cultures – the sun and the moon. The Chinese view on these is straightforward and can be clearly derived from analysis of their respective characters - 太阳 *tài yang* 'sun' and 太阴 *tài yīn* 'moon'.

太 *tài* means 'greatest, utmost, extreme or ultimate' it can also indicate 'old or most senior'. Therefore *Tai yang*, the sun could be translated as 'Greatest Yang' and *Tai yin*, the moon, 'Greatest Yin'.

Further, the characters for 阴阳 *Yīn yang* 'negative and positive' or 'the polar opposites' are composed of the radical 阝 *fū* on the left, which in this position means 'mound' paired with the ideogram 月 *yuè* 'moon' for *yīn* and 日 *rì* 'sun' for *yang*. (Hence their traditional derivation - 'the shady side of the hill' / 'the sunny side of the hill'.)

It is easy then to see how interwoven the Chinese concept of sun and moon is with the theory of *yīn yang*. The sun is the physical embodiment of *yang* and the moon, of *yīn*. They therefore govern everything these represent and control all that they correspond to. The sun is the emperor, the masculine and the moon, the empress and feminine.

Solar eclipses were considered a conflict between *yīn* and *yang* and generally a bad omen.

The five planets (五曜 *Wǔ Yào* 'Five Luminaries')

From an early time the five visible planets were observed by Chinese astronomers. Principal texts such as the 淮南子 *Huái nán zǐ* 'Masters of the South River' in chapter 3 - 天文 *Tiān wén* 'Celestial Patterns', described them thus -

'The stars and planets mark the appointed times of heaven'.

So it can be said that the earliest recognition of the planets effects on our world was through mapping the seasons and developing the calendar. Astrologers then began to establish theories as to how the planets effected not only direction and time, but also the cyclic flow of events. It was believed that all things in the cosmos were interconnected and that human affairs were subject to cycles and correlations that could be measured. If these cycles could be understood then all manner of phenomena could be known or predicted.

A key source for this information is the 天官 *tiān guān* the 'astrology treatise' of the 史记 *Shǐ jì* 'Records of the Grand Historian' written by the famous Court Astrologer 司马迁 *Sīmǎ Qiān*. From the text -

The wood planet is 岁星 *Suì xīng* the 'Year Star' or Jupiter.

It correlates to the east, spring and the heavenly stems 甲 *Jiǎ* and 乙 *Yǐ*. The mineral associated with Jupiter is malachite and when the planet descends to earth in human form it manifests as a 'noble official'. Its' virtue is 仁 *rén* 'benevolence or kindheartedness'.

Jupiter is traditionally associated with the emperor and therefore the fate of the realm. If it is in a favorable position then a ruler can govern with 'the mandate of heaven' (heaven's approval) and humaneness, so bringing happiness to the population. If it is not so, there will be difficulties for the people.

The effects of Jupiter can also be seen to be reflected as one's own personal 'mandate'. The higher authority in oneself and being true to it, or not. According to Chinese philosophy it is the 魂 *hún* 'ethereal soul' that makes our connection to the divine or heaven. It is said to be housed in the liver and thereby also associated with the wood element.

Jupiter is the largest planet and like the wood element represents growth. Differing from traditional western astrology, it is considered the 'female planet' and resides over love and sexual pleasure.

Finally Jupiter governs certain cycles of time. As the planet in charge of the year and 12 divisions, it is also responsible for the theory of the 'Counter Jupiter' or 太岁 *Tài suì*.

The fire planet is 荧惑 *Yíng huò* the 'Sparkling Deluder' or Mars.

It correlates to the south, summer and the heavenly stems 丙 *Bǐng* and 丁 *Dīng*. The mineral associated with Mars is Cinnabar (Mercuric Oxide) and when the planet descends to earth in human form it manifests as a 'merry youth singing folk songs'. Its' virtue is 礼 *lǐ* 'propriety, ceremony or courtesy'.

In a typical Chinese paradox however Mars is traditionally associated with war (in itself similar to western philosophical counterparts). It was understood in ancient China that certain rites needed to be observed by a government and individuals. It was when these etiquettes were neglected that Mars would seek retribution and war resulted. Thereby Mars also represents the government, armies and ritual tasks such as funerals.

On a personal level it is possible that when we 'lack the way' and do not behave with appropriate ethics or morals, we incite the wrath of Mars - disorder, violence, sickness and death. 'Winning a war' is achieved when respects are performed in the correct manner.

The earth planet is 镇星 *Zhèn xīng* the 'Quelling Star' or Saturn.

It correlates to the centre, late summer and the heavenly stems 戊 *Wù* and 己 *Jǐ*. The mineral associated with Saturn is Realgar (Arsenic Sulphide) and when the planet descends to earth in human form it manifests as 'an elderly rustic or an old wife'. Its' virtue is 信 *xìn* 'trustworthiness or sincerity'.

Saturn is traditionally associated with the elementally earthly attributes of stability and foundations. When it is in auspicious locations it was said to bring expansion and prosperity - increase in land holdings, harvest, fertility and from a patriarchal perspective, women. When out of place it could herald natural disasters such as earthquakes and famine.

It is easy to see how this could translate to a concept of good health by being true to oneself and having the faith to follow the natural order of things. Not fight against it. A good home, reliable and dependable, built in accord with the surrounds also reflects this view. The inverse on a human level, would be sickness and disease.

The metal planet is 太白 *Tài bái* the 'Great White' or Venus.

It correlates to the west, autumn and the heavenly stems 庚 *Gēng* and 辛 *Xīn*. The mineral associated with Venus is Arsenolite and when the planet descends to earth in human form it manifests as 'a stout forester'. Its' virtue is 义 *yì* 'righteousness'.

In complete opposition to the Western Venusian ideal, in Chinese astronomy Venus traditionally is associated with military strength, weapons and the administering of justice. Venus battles what ever it

comes into contact with and governs the setting forth or withdrawal of campaigns.

In an individual this can perhaps embody the elemental metal quality of 'cutting through wrongs', of 'refining and correcting matters'. When Venus is in harmony we have the ability to make all things equitable in the world, when it is in disharmony we suffer injustice.

On another note, again contrary to Western myth, Venus is here considered the male aspect of the five planets, and the husband of Jupiter.

The water planet is 辰星 *Chén xīng* the 'Chronograph Star' or Mercury.

It correlates to the north, winter and the heavenly stems 壬 *Rén* and 癸 *Guǐ*. The mineral associated with Mercury is Magnetite and when the planet descends to earth in human form it manifests as 'a woman'. Its' virtue is 智 *zhì* 'wisdom'.

Mercury was traditionally associated with regulating the four seasons, dealing with foreign powers and residing over all manner of other important judgements on both natural and man made laws. Its disappearance could be indicative of coming misfortune in the form of droughts, storms or torrents.

Simply put, in human existence, Mercury may grant the wise and sage-like abilities needed to gain deep understanding of ourselves and others. Without it we would all drown, lost in our own foolishness.

Having the smallest orbit Mercury also governs the smallest unit of time in Chinese Astrology, the classical 'double-hours' or 时辰 *Shí chén*.

When the characteristics of five planets are understood, portents can then be read in a number of ways. It is interesting at this point to note that traditionally comets were often read similarly.

Classically the colour the planet appears in the sky, any coloured rings or rays apparent around it at specific times can point to various auspices, benevolent and otherwise. White indicates mourning and drought, red the military, green indicates grief and flood, black illness and death, while yellow means good fortune. Coloured rings are read similarly, while some colour rays differ - in this instance yellow indicates a territory dispute, white cries of woe, green is trouble and black foretells inundations.

The location of a planet (or its absence) within the sky was also taken into account. Directions were associated with each of the major provinces in China and countries/continents surrounding China based on the 9 square grid. The sky was also divided similarly enabling one to see which region is under influence of what planet. In addition the 宿 *Xiù* 'lunar lodge' (see below) the planet falls in would provide further information about which aspect of life or province of the known world would be most affected.

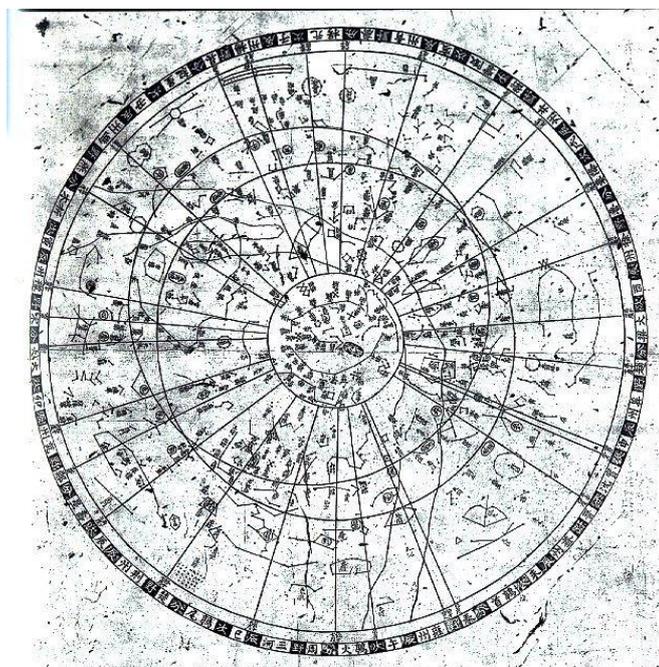
Formulas to calculate the relative strength of the influence abound in the literature. All agree on a few key points - The closer the planet appears to earth (based upon size and how bright it appears in the sky)

the stronger the influence, good or bad. The 'apparent' movement in the sky is also important - moving quickly forward is usually beneficial especially for 'guests' to the region/aspect affected; while retrograde movement, appearing to go backward, or slowly, is commonly considered poor for the 'host' of the region or aspect concerned. Conjunctions are mostly harmonious when planets appear in the same region of the sky, as opposed to 'strife' when they are in relative opposition.

The 史记 *Shǐ jì* gives an excellent summary of importance of these various phenomena -

'The progress of a planet is a much more reliable indication than its colour; colour is a better guide than its position; actual position takes precedence over absence from its position; colour is more important than absence of colour. But above all these, the most reliable indication is its process.'

The process of reading a planet's influence on global or regional affairs in this manner is complex and for most of us pointless. There are though many possibilities for interpreting these aspects within our existing systems of *Feng shui* and astrology. For example, the heavenly stems. When a stem appears in a chart or space it brings with it the influence of the associated planet and another layer of interpretation. Alternatively, a glance at any number of western astrology sites will give reliable information on retrograde and other movements of the planets which could be then read from the Chinese perspective. More detail can be gained from knowing any correlations with conventional constellations, and the 宿 *Xiù* 'lunar lodges'.



Song Dynasty Star Chart, Confucian Temple (Suzhou)

The Four Macro-Constellations & the Twenty-eight Lunar Lodges

The 四灵兽 *Sì líng shòu* 'Four Celestial Animals' used as directional markers in *Feng shui* were originally the names of four giant constellation groups in the heavens, each associated with a different direction in the sky. The 青龙 *Qīnglóng* 'Blue-Green dragon' of the eastern sky, the 白虎 *Báihǔ* 'White tiger' to the west, the 朱雀 *Zhūquè* 'Vermillion bird' in the south and the 玄武 *Xuánwǔ* 'Dark warrior' at the north. These were then divided up into seven lesser asterisms each, making up the twenty-eight 宿 *Xiù* 'lunar lodges'.

The 宿 *Xiù* 'lunar lodges' show the progression of the moon through the sky. They were chiefly used to give location to the sun, moon and planets but were not considered as influential to the earthly realm. Many of the lodges are small by comparison with conventional constellations, some consisting of only a few stars. Any correlations given can only be approximate and may include only parts of the conventional constellations given. They are as follows-

青龙 *Qīnglóng* 'Blue-Green dragon'

Lodge Name	# of Stars	Correlate	Portent/s	EB
角 <i>Jiǎo</i> Horn	2	♍ Virgo	Rulership & military leader	辰
亢 <i>Kàng</i> Neck	4	♍ Virgo	Judge & punish illnesses	辰
氏 <i>Dī</i> Root	4	♎ Libra	Foundation, fertility	卯
房 <i>Fáng</i> Chamber	4	♏ Scorpio	<i>Mingtang</i> , road opening closed	卯
心 <i>Xīn</i> Heart	3	♏ Scorpio	Emperor, authority	卯
尾 <i>Wěi</i> Tail	9	♏ Scorpio	Succession, descendants	寅
箕 <i>Jī</i> Basket	4	♐ Sagittarius	Gossip/slander, Sex	寅

玄武 *Xuánwǔ* 'Dark warrior'

Lodge Name	# of Stars	Correlate	Portent/s	EB
斗 <i>Dǒu</i> S. Ladle	6	♐ Sagittarius	Grant reward, promotion	丑
牛 <i>Niú</i> Cowherd	6	♑ Capricorn	Winter sacrifice, accessibility	丑
女 <i>Nǚ</i> Maiden	4	♒ Aquarius	Marriage, Crafts & textiles	子
虚 <i>Xū</i> Barrens	2	♒ Aquarius	Death/funerals lamentation	子
危 <i>Wēi</i> Rooftop	3	♒ Aquarius	Build/property Markets	子
室 <i>Shì</i> Encampment	2	♓ Pegasus	Wealth/offering arsenal	亥
壁 <i>Bì</i> E. Wall	2	♓ Andromeda	Library/archive literature	亥

白虎 *Báihǔ* 'White tiger'

Lodge Name	# of Stars	Correlate	Portent/s	EB
奎 <i>Kuí</i> Stride	16	♋ Pisces	Military forces canal waterway	戌
娄 <i>Lóu</i> Bond	3	♈ Aries	Gatherings animal, sacrifice	戌
胃 <i>Wèi</i> Stomach	3	♈ Aries	Storehouse granary	酉
昴 <i>Mǎo</i> Mane	7	♉ Taurus	Soldiers death Imprisonment	酉
毕 <i>Bì</i> Net	8	♉ Taurus	Hunting prowess, rains	酉
觜 <i>Zuǐ</i> Beak	3	♈ Orion	Food, gathering supplies	申
参 <i>Shēn</i> Investigate	10	♈ Orion	Execute, loyalty frontiers	申

朱雀 *Zhūquè* 'Vermillion bird'

Lodge Name	# of Stars	Correlate	Portent/s	EB
井 <i>Jǐng</i> E.Well	8	♊ Gemini	Morality of the ruler	未
鬼 <i>Guǐ</i> Ghost	5	♋ Cancer	Death, the afterlife	未
柳 <i>Liǔ</i> Willow	8	♉ Hydra	Kitchen and fine cuisine	午
星 <i>Xīng</i> 7 Stars	7	♌ Leo	Beauty, fine cloth	午
张 <i>Zhāng</i> Extend	6	♉ Hydra	Treasure, gems wine	午
翼 <i>Yì</i> Wings	22	♈ Crater	Music, theatre, guests	巳
轸 <i>Zhěn</i> Chariot	4	♏ Corvus	Travel, horses and wind	巳

As mentioned previously one possible application of the lunar lodges could be to consult western astrological calculations of planets positions within the twelve zodiacal constellations and then interpret the information from the Chinese perspective. Perhaps another interesting study could be to investigate the correlations between the lodges, western zodiac and earthly branches, but this is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article [and myself!].

Other Constellations

A few other influential constellations warrant mention at this point. These were visible all year round but as they were not on or near the ecliptic or equator, they had no interaction with the moon and planets so provided little data for interpretation. Firstly, the 三垣 *Sān yuán* 'three enclosures', which surround the northern polar region.

The 紫微垣 *Zǐwēi yuán* 'purple forbidden enclosure' surrounds the pole star and symbolises the mythical rulers of ancient China as well as the physical emperor. The nearby 太微垣 *Tàiwēi yuán* 'supreme subtlety enclosure' represents the imperial family, their attendants and several senior military and civil posts - noblemen. The 天市垣 *Tiānshì yuán* 'heavenly market

enclosure' represented various aspects of the economy, commodity and trade..

Perhaps the single most important asterism in Chinese Astronomy was of course 北斗 *Běi dòu* 'The Northern Dipper' and celestial chariot of the emperor. The early recognition of its significance as a seasonal and directional marker was most likely responsible for this - the handle rotates 1 度 *dù* 'graduation' (slightly smaller than a conventional degree) anticlockwise daily and points to the cardinals according to the associated time of year. The constellation is made up of seven visible stars and two 'invisible stars' which likely have now moved out of the immediate region over thousands of years of celestial precession. At some point the nine stars were matched with the nine numbers in the 九宫 *Jiǔgōng* 'nine palace' magic square and from here many associations were made in *Feng shui* including 飞星 *Fēixīng* 'flying star' numbers and mountain forms amongst others. The nine stars are :

- 1 - Ravenous Wolf 贪狼 *Tānláng*
- 2 - Gate Guard 巨门 *Jùmén*
- 3 - The Mandarin 禄存 *Lùcún*
- 4 - The Scholars 文曲 *Wénqū*
- 5 - Virtue 廉贞 *Liánzhēn*
- 6 - The Military 武曲 *Wǔqū*
- 7 - Conquered Army 破军 *Pòjūn*
- 8 - Left Assistant 左辅 *Zuǒfǔ*
- 9 - Right Assistant 右弼 *Yòubì*.

Astronomical instruments

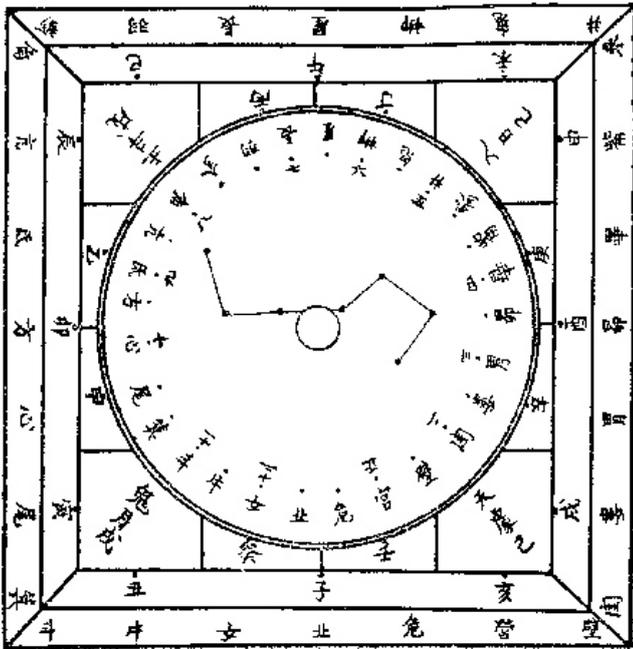
How then did the ancient Chinese observe and record so much detail of the 'Celestial Vault'? The final part of this work will introduce of selection of the ingenious apparatus invented and employed in these endeavours and how they effects our practice today.

The first tool employed by the Chinese Astrologers of antiquity was the 表 *Biǎo*. This was a type of 'Gnomon' - a straight stick or rod with one end buried in the ground, designed to cast a solar shadow. They were said to be able to 'measure the size [dimensions] of the cosmos'.

Vertical gnomons were used to measure direction (a true north-south line can be determined by bisecting the angle of shadows at sunset and sunrise) and distance, or track the seasons. Whereas gnomons used in sundials to calculate time, were angled to point toward the celestial north pole.

Perhaps the earliest instrument used to predict astronomical/astrological portents was the 式盘 *Shìpán* or 'cosmograph' (see below).

This tool consisted of a square 'earth plate' inscribed with directions, names of months, lunar lodges and other correlative categorical information in the form of trigrams, stems and branches. Upon which sat a moveable circular 'heaven plate' depicting 北斗 *Běi dòu* the 'Northern Dipper' (see above) which could be rotated according to the stars' movement through the heavens. Predictions were then made based on the direction the 'handle' of the dipper pointed on any given day.



Han Dynasty Cosmograph

The existence of the Cosmograph is of particular interest to the *Feng shui* practitioner, as it is considered to be the forerunner of the 罗盘 *Luó pán* compass and the origin of the early term for *Feng shui* practice – 堪輿 *Kān yú* 'Canopy & Chariot' (heaven plate and earth plate respectively).

This was later to be replaced as the key astronomical instrument by the invention of the complex 'Armillary Spheres' or 浑象 *Hùn xiàng* 'Celestial globes' (see below). These stunning feats of engineering measured all manner of celestial movements of heavenly bodies. The famous Chinese monk astronomer 一行 *Yī Xíng* (683-727 CE), credited with the invention of the 八宅 *Bā zhái* 'Eight Houses' system of *Feng shui*, was known to have built a hydraulic powered mechanised armillary sphere that ran 'like clockwork'.

Concluding Remarks

Traditional Chinese Astronomy has had a significant influence on the development of our astrological and geomantic systems. As these arts continue to grow and change with modern needs and expectations the early foundations outlined above certainly warrant a second look. Further study into this field could only serve to strengthen technical understanding and the profession as a whole.

It is my hope that perhaps some inspiration can be gleaned from this document that may lead to a reassessment of old modes of thought or even discovery of new applications in the future. This essay is unfortunately merely an 'introduction' to the world of Chinese astronomy and sadly limited by my inadequate familiarity with western astrology and scanty knowledge modern astronomy [maybe others can pick up where I have left of?]. Another substantial factor is the difficulty in separating 天文 *Tiān wén* 'Astronomical', from 历法 *Lì fǎ* 'Calendrical' studies, but that is a work for another time...



Armillary Sphere, ancient observatory (Beijing)

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- Tyler J Rowe is a Registered Practitioner of Chinese Medicine, Fengshui consultant and Wushu coach.*