

CLASSICAL CORNER

“Wisdom from the mouths of ancient sages to the ears of the modern practitioner”



Etymology is not the study of insects! It is in fact the study of the origins of words (or characters) and their changes over time.

Hello and welcome to the Classical Corner, in this issue we will be looking at the characters of the new year - the heavenly stem *Jia* and the earthly branch *Wu*. What do they really mean? For the answer, as always, we turn to the classics.

The 天干 *Tiān gān* ‘Heavenly stems’ and 地支 *Dì zhī* ‘Earthly branches’ are some of the oldest characters in the Chinese language, their first recorded use being sometime in the 商 *Shāng* dynasty, around 1500 B.C.E. It is unfortunate that in modern times a convention has developed to replace the stems and branches with numbers, roman numerals or letters, in service of making the Chinese calendar more accessible to westerners. In doing so, limiting our exposure to the full spectrum of possible interpretations, and taking away some of the poetry of it all. At the very least they are reduced to ‘animals’ and ‘elements’. These practices are also more recent contrivances that can be equally misleading.

In order not to neglect their true meanings we need to first look at what the stems and branches are (and aren’t) -



The early stems were in fact days of a 10 day week known as a 旬 *xún*. Much like our modern names for days coming from Roman and Norse mythology, (ie. Thursday - ‘Thor’s day, Saturday - ‘Saturn day’) it is likely the stem names were taken from long forgotten celestial deities and the planets. It is interesting to note that the stems are in the elemental order of the orbits of the five major planets with Saturn displaced for Earth - Jupiter (wood), Mars (fire), Earth/Saturn (earth), Venus (metal) and Mercury (water).

The branches came later and are not the names of animals as we have come to believe. 龙 *Lóng* is the Chinese for ‘dragon’ not 辰 *Chén* the branch we call ‘Dragon’, as 虎 *Hǔ* is the word for ‘tiger’ not 寅 *Yín*. In fact the only branch that does have a possible animal origin is 巳 *Sì* the 6th branch who’s pictogram may have been a primate drawing of a snake. The branches were originally used to demarcate the 12 months in the year as determined by the direction the handle of the 北斗 *Běi dòu* ‘Northern dipper’ constellation pointed to at different times of the year.

In 2014 the heavenly stem is 甲 *Jiǎ* (pronounced ‘Gee-ya’), usually referred to as ‘Yang Wood’. The character can also mean a shell or armour and the early pictogram represents a sprout breaking through cracks in a seed. In classical literature it has also been linked with an early prognostication method that observed cracks produced in a tortoise shell. In the five elemental phases it correlates with the *yang* aspect of wood. It is the beginning of the cycle and as such, represents new growth and beginnings.



午 *Wǔ* (pronounced ‘Woo’) is the earthly branch of 2014, commonly called the Horse. The character can also be used to indicate midday and the early pictogram is of a vertical arrow or pointer, most likely indicating the direction of the sun, south in China. This matches the classical *Fengshui* convention of south being at the top of a map, and the philosophical orientation of south being the forward direction. In classical literature the graph has also been indicated ‘to oppose’ by virtue of the polarity created when a single direction, or point in time, is defined. It has nothing to do with a physical horse, and as such its characteristics are not governed by supposed virtues of the animal. Instead its’ auspiciousness is calculated from the foundation of the original symbol, the elemental correspondence - fire, *yinyang* polarity - *yang*, direction - south, and time - noon. It can be viewed as representing a midpoint or peak of development.

Whilst it is not the scope of this brief article to do so, the art of Chinese astrological interpretation is in understanding the combination of the stem and branch. It would be oversimplifying to suggest that all interpretations could be solely reduced to understanding the meaning behind the characters, but they certainly do underlie the key messages. In the coming year expect to see many themes of 'new generation' as well as 'peak development' scattered throughout the literature. There will likely be much discussion also of the generating sequence of the wood and fire elements and the strong polarization with other elements that results.

There are only 60 possible combinations, so only 60 possible yearly predictions before the cycle repeats, but opinions vary greatly on what they are. Whilst there are some fundamental laws, most forecasts are greatly influenced by individual beliefs and personal opinions. It is vital to remember this when reading on the newyear, understanding that not everyone can be right all the time and recognising (and discarding?) the deliberately vague. Finally, it is an interesting exercise to critically look back on the year that's been and see how accurate predictions have been, without the need for too much 'interpretation'.

References

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