

The Origins, Use, and Abuse of Omenology in Early China

고대 중국에서 점술학(Omenology)의 기원, 활용, 그리고 남용

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Abstract

A brief survey of attitudes toward omens and portent interpretation among the elite and the role such beliefs played in political theory and contestation in Warring States (403–221 BCE) through early imperial China.

□ Key words: China, omens, portents, Han dynasty, philosophy

초록

초기 중국 전국시대 징조와 전조 해석에 대한 엘리트들 사이의 태도와 정치이론과 정치논쟁에서 이러한 믿음의 역할에 대한 간략한 조사연구

□ 주제어: 중국, 징조, 전조, 한나라, 철학

The ancient Chinese, like other early civilizations of Eurasia and the Americas, were overawed by the skyscape and the seemingly immutable patterns of the heavens. We moderns are insulated from that experience by urban environments and ubiquitous outdoor lighting. But for those early peoples the cycles of the Sun and Moon and the seasonally changing patterns of the stars, in addition to providing an infallible measure of the passage of time, also provided reassurance that the key to permanence and regularity might ultimately be found amidst the seemingly inscrutable vagaries of human existence. Since all phenomena were believed to be

linked together in an imperceptible, seamless web of connections, the ancients saw deviation from regularity and the norm to be meaningful. Against a backdrop of archaic animistic religion such as prevailed among ancient peoples, in which it was assumed that mishaps and setbacks were instigated by invisible agents, it was reasonable to conclude that anomalies in the heavens emanated from whatever extraordinary invisible power animated the cosmos, the cycles of nature, and all life. Once writing was invented, in Mesopotamia, China, and among the Maya, distinctly human analogical thinking assured that signs in the heavens would be thought to be imbued with meaning in the same way written symbols were. This was the beginning of astrology.

In much the same analogical fashion, the tendency naturally arose in China to conceive of the supernal power residing in the center of the sky in human terms, often as a fundamentally beneficent giver and sustainer of life, giving rise to anthropomorphic conceptions reminiscent of notions like “Father Sky” and “Mother Earth”. In the canonical texts, the phrase “Heaven overspreads and protects, and Earth bears up and fosters” *tian fu di zai* 天覆地載 is so ubiquitous as to become a cliché. So, for example, in the *Analects* Confucius says: 'Heaven overspreads all without partiality; Earth sustains and contains all without partiality; the Sun and Moon shine on all without partiality'.¹⁾ In the course of time, the tendency to ascribe significance to irregularities led to anomalies such as comets and eclipses being seen as admonitions, while others were interpreted as positive endorsement of a chosen course of action or state of affairs. Having an explanation, any explanation, for a total eclipse of the Sun offered a modicum of reassurance that the profoundly unsettling event was at least comprehensible in some way.

At the state level this led to the development of elaborate schemes of interpretation and prediction, in China based on the correlation of constellations with terrestrial politics or categories of actors, such as the ruler and his ministers, or the masses of the people. So it was that the second to first millennia BCE witnessed the gradual development of concepts like the Mandate of Heaven, according to which the ruler's legitimacy depended on his appointment by Heaven, signaled by extraordinary signs. At the same time, in the earliest text dealing with political

1) 孔子曰, “天無私覆, 地無私載, 日月無私照”; see the *Analects* (論語), “Confucius at leisure at home,” 孔子閑居.

philosophy, the canonical *Shangshu* 尚書, one also finds such formulations as, “Heaven sees and hears as the people see and hear”, which, coupled with the idea of Heaven’s Mandate, implies that legitimacy depends on the quality of the ruler’s governance, whether benevolent or oppressive.

Among the lower classes, daily life was suffused with superstition and strongly held beliefs in omens, ghosts and spirits, the latter, usually maleficent, were everywhere. In the Warring States period (403–221 BCE) a representative portrayal of beliefs current among the commoners, merchants, and craftspeople is found in the *Mozi* 墨子, where Heaven and the spirits were thought to “punish people in a very direct and concrete way”.²⁾ Followers of Confucius, in contrast, were admonished by the Sage to “keep ghosts and spirits at a distance”. Confucius did not deny the existence of spirits, particularly in the context of ritual observances directed toward the ancestors, but preferred instead to advocate pro-active self-cultivation and self-restraint rather than habitually seeking to placate ghosts or influence the spirit world by apotropaic means. As Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–86 BCE) would later say of that period of incessant conflict and social upheaval: “Ministers and rulers were all beset with anxiety and misery, growing ever more anxious in their scrutiny of baleful and auspicious [signs] and in watching for astral phenomena and the *materia vitalis*”.³⁾

Later, however, a spirit of rationalism increasingly made itself felt as rapid social change caused old belief systems and archaic social mores to be called into question, including the belief in a Supernal Lord 上帝 (or Heaven 天) above, which actively intervened in human affairs. By the late Warring States period, level-headed Confucian thinkers like Xunzi 荀子 (3rd century BCE) argued against the kind of superstition that still maintained a powerful grip on many minds:

When stars shoot down and trees groan, the people are all terrified. They say, “What is this?” I say, “It is nothing.” These are the shifts in Heaven and Earth, transformations of *yin* and *yang*, material anomalies. It is acceptable to wonder

2) Joachim Gentz, “Language of Heaven, Exegetical Skepticism and the Re-insertion of Religious Concepts in the Gongyang Tradition,” *Early Chinese Religion, Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC-220 AD)*, vol.2 (2008), 815.

3) Sima Qian (司馬遷), “*Tian guan shu* (天官書),” *Shiji* (史記) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 27.1345.

at them, but it is not acceptable to fear them. No generation has been without eclipses of the Sun and Moon, untimely winds and rains, or the appearance of wondrous stars. If the ruler is enlightened and the government peaceful, even if such things arise all together, they cannot cause any harm. If the ruler is benighted and the government precarious, even if none of these things should happen, [their absence] will confer no benefit.⁴⁾

Not long afterward, Xunzi's erstwhile disciple, Han Fei 韓非, among the most influential proponents of the rule of Law 法 and statism, was extremely harsh in his denunciation of superstitious beliefs and practices in any context:

Initially, for several years Wei turned eastward to attack and finish off Wey and Tao. For several years later it then turned westward [to attack Qin] and lost territory. This does not show that the Five Thunder Spirits, Supreme One, the six Sheti spirits, and Five Chariots, the Sky River, Spear of Yin, and Jupiter [all auspicious] were in the west for several years. Nor does it indicate that Heavenly Gap, Hu'ni, Punishing Star, Mars, and Stride Terrace [all inauspicious] were in the east during subsequent years. Therefore, I say that turtle and milfoil, ghosts and spirits are not able to assure victory, and that [positioning oneself] to the left, to the right, in front, or behind does not suffice to determine [the outcome of] a battle. There is no greater stupidity than to put one's faith in this.⁵⁾

Notwithstanding such pointed criticism from influential Warring States thinkers, the *Rites of Zhou* 周禮 (ca. 3rd century BCE) is unequivocal about the central role of astral omenology in political governance:

[The *Bao zhang shi*] concerns himself with the stars in the heavens, keeping a record of the changes and movements of the stars and planets, Sun and Moon, in order to discern [corresponding] trends in the terrestrial world, with the object

4) “Tianlun (天論),” *Xunzi jijie* (荀子集解), *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* (新編諸子集成), 11.17.313. Trans. Paul R. Goldin, “Xunzi and Early Han Philosophy,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 67.1 (2007), 147(tr. modified).

5) *Hanfeizi* (韓非子), “Shixie 釋邪” chapter. *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng*, Vol.5, 88-89. Cf. Loewe *Divination, mythology and monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 168.

of distinguishing (prognosticating) good and bad fortune. He divides the territories of the nine regions of the empire in accordance with their dependence on particular celestial bodies; all the fiefs and territories are connected with distinct stars, based on which their prosperity or misfortune can be ascertained. He makes prognostications, according to the twelve years [of the Jupiter cycle], of good and evil in the terrestrial world.⁶⁾

Pre-imperial Taoist philosophers are largely silent on the subject, but by the Former Han dynasty, if the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (mid-2nd c. BCE) is to be taken at face value, a wholehearted embrace of astral omenology also characterized the Yin-Yang and Huang-Lao 黃老 Naturalist schools of thought, at least as far as military applications were concerned.

Clearly understanding the motions of the planets, stars, Sun, and Moon; the knack of expedient [application] of punishment and moral suasion; the advantage of facing to the front or rear, or going left or right; these are helpful in battle.⁷⁾

I. Constancy of basic conceptions

All the while fundamental aspects of traditional belief were being called into question, others came into vogue and were gradually systematized and regularized. During the pre-imperial period astral omenology initially became codified in the

6) Trans. Joseph Needham and Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China: vol.3, Mathematics and the Sciences of Heaven and Earth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 190(trans. modified).

7) Liu An (劉安), "Treatise on Military Affairs (*Bing lue* 兵略)," *Huainanzi*, *Sibu beiyao* ed. (Taipei: Taiwan Chung-hua, 1966), 15.5a. Note how the *Huainanzi* embraces all applicable strategies, explicitly contradicting Han Fei's condemnation cited above. See also D.C. Lau and Roger T. Ames (trans.), *Sun Bin: The Art of Warfare* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), 153, 155, where it is asserted that astrological calculations can assure victory in six battles out of ten, and that he who has mastered the way of warfare "understands the course of the heavens above and the topography of earth below." For the persistence of such thinking in military contexts until the late imperial period, see Robin D.S. Yates, "The History of Military Divination in China," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 24 (2005), 15-43.

scheme known as “field-allocation astrology” 分野星占 in which the various warring kingdoms were assigned astral “fields” for the purpose of prognostication based on celestial phenomena occurring within them. First, the Nine Provinces of antiquity were assigned celestial locations by virtue of their location in relation to the Yellow River, whose celestial analog, the Milky Way, determined which of the twenty-eight lunar lodges should be assigned to each. Later this scheme was amended to recognize all twelve of the largest rival states. The binary cosmic forces of *yin* and *yang* and the cycle of the Five Phases (Wood, Fire, Metal, Water, Earth) assumed a prominent role in explaining the operations of the cosmos and provided a theoretical basis for understanding the “Revolutions of Heaven 天運” and for interpreting the omens.

Through it all, however, certain fundamental assumptions about the world remained basically unchanged, even if new terminology (e.g., *yin yang* 陰陽 and *qi* 氣 “*materia vitalis*”) came into common use to permit thinkers to speculate about the cosmic realm. Various new characterizations were adopted to express the “givenness” of fundamental aspects of the cosmos – *dao* (Tao) 道 the “Way”, *ziran* 自然 “so of itself” – along with a new interpretation of the ancient concept of Tian 天 “Heaven” as an impersonal animating force guiding the phenomena. “Conformity between Heaven and mankind” *tian ren he yi* 天人合一 presupposed an imperative to adhere to a pre-existing model, in much the same way as communication through language implicitly assumes prefiguring patterns and conventions, which we now call grammar and syntax.

Since *materia vitalis* is all-pervasive and the medium through which cosmic animating forces operate, the human and natural realms were inseparable; indeed, there was no word for “Nature” as a separate entity as moderns tend to think of it. This meant that any attempt to understand and identify observable patterns or models to be followed in the natural order – *cheng li* 成理 – logically implied that the same operational patterns must also prevail in the socio-political realm. As society evolved and political and economic complexity increased, reliance on the mystical endowment of sageliness, *sheng* 聖 (such as was thought to have prevailed among rulers in the idealized past), on “feudal” or religiously sanctioned ties of loyalty, or on clan organization, all had proved hopelessly impractical. It had become imperative to devise new modes of governance to cope with the current situation.

Theorizing about “Laws” *fa* 法 and “Rites” *li* 禮 as mainstays of society on which to model governance became the ideal to aspire to and a timeless principle in political philosophy. The ideal was to pattern human social organization on the natural order, that is, to “adhere to established patterns” *shou cheng li* 守成理 and “rely on what is so of itself” *yin zi ran* 因自然”. It was in this intellectual environment that political philosophers like Shen Dao 慎到 (350–270 BCE) could speak in the following terms: “[The relationship] between the ruler and his ministers is like a balance beam: if the left side of the beam is light, then the right is heavy, if the right is heavy then the left is light. Light and heavy alternate in rising, this is a principle of Heaven and Earth.” Here we are very close to an analogical appeal to what might be deemed “laws of nature” such as cause and effect or the revolutions of heaven.

However much influential late Warring States thinkers like Xunzi and Han Fei, or early Han Confucian philosophers like Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–169 BCE) might criticize or belittle belief in the supernatural, omens, portents, and divination,⁸⁾ no prudent ruler could afford to summarily dismiss out of hand court-level astral omenology (*xing zhan* 星占). Indeed, otherwise pragmatic and astute rulers such as the First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇 (r. 246–210 BCE) and Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) showed themselves to be highly susceptible to the counsel of masters of the occult, *fang shi* 方士. In this respect Emperor Wu’s proclivities set the tone for the prevailing ethos at court. During the early part of his reign, elaborate new state sacrifices were initiated to supra-visible powers, including Supreme One *Taiyi* 泰一 and the deities of the Five Phases.⁹⁾

During the first half of Emperor Wu’s reign, the most influential ‘Confucian’ philosopher of the time, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE), in stark contrast to Xunzi a century or more earlier, strongly endorsed the theory that omens and

8) See Joachim Gentz, “Language of Heaven, Exegetical Skepticism and the Re-insertion of Religious Concepts in the Gongyang Tradition.” In J. Lagerwey and M. Kalinowski eds. *Early Chinese Religion, Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC-220 AD)*, vol.2 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 832.

9) These initiatives are well documented in the “Monograph on the *Feng* and *Shan* Sacrifices (封禪);” in Shiji. Also documented there, in implicit criticism of the emperor’s gullibility, are accounts of the succession of charlatans who counseled him on methods of communicating with the spirit world, in particular those residing in the Isles of the Blessed in the Eastern Sea to which expeditions were repeatedly dispatched.

disasters were signs from Heaven. In this Dong followed the view propounded by Lu Jia 陸賈 (ca. 228–ca. 140 BCE) before him.

Thus when societies fail and the Way is lost, it is not the work of Heaven. The lord of the state has done something to cause it. Bad government breeds bad *qi*; bad *qi* breeds disasters and abnormalities. Locusts are born in accordance with the *qi*; rainbows appear in accordance with the government. When the Way of Order is lost below, the patterns of Heaven change above. When bad government flows among the people, locusts are born in the wilderness.¹⁰⁾

According to Dong Zhongshu, such signs could be correctly interpreted only by scholar-officials schooled in the canonical texts, especially the Gongyang 公羊 tradition of interpretation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋.¹¹⁾ According to this school of thought, that revered text was held to encode Confucius' historical judgments (praise and blame) on past political events by means of selectively chosen, carefully worded records of auspicious and inauspicious happenings. The *Gongyang Commentary* 公羊傳 and the oral teachings in the keeping of the experts in the line of transmission of the tradition were the key to understanding Confucius' judgments. Coming a century after the consolidation of the imperial system, Dong advocated the theory, which relied explicitly on the authority of the newly canonized classics, presumably as a means for scholar-officials to criticize imperial policies and impose limits on the absolute power of the emperor. By injecting such a theory into court debate, however, Dong paved the way for the politicization of a metaphysical idea that had previously only been a concern of a few political philosophers.

As Lu Jia makes plain, the most important celestial signs of all were those that had a bearing on the performance of the current possessor of Heaven's Mandate. Dong Zhongshu said,

10) "Mingjie (明諷)," *Xinyu jiaozhu* B.11.155, Trans. Goldin, "Xunzi," (2007), 143. For a discussion of omenology in connection with Xunzi, Lu Jia, and Dong Zhongshu, see *ibid.* 147ff.

11) See Martin Kern, "Religious Anxiety and Political Interest in Western Han Omen Interpretation: the Case of the Han Wudi (漢武帝) Period (141 - 87 B.C.)," *Chūgoku shigaku* (中國史學) 10 (2000), 29ff. See also Gentz, "Language of Heaven," 818-823, 830-836.

Your servant has heard that in Heaven's great conferring of responsibilities on the king there is something that human powers of themselves could not achieve, but that comes of itself. This is the sign that the Mandate has been granted. The people of the empire with one heart all turn to him as they would turn to their fathers and mothers. Thus it is that Heaven's auspicious signs *respond to* [the people's] *sincerity and come forth*.¹²⁾

Here Dong grapples with the problem of finding the language to express his quasi-mystical notion of causality underlying the theory of omens, ultimately resorting to the prevailing concept of mutual resonance (*gan ying* 感應), or stimulus and response. In this same vein but better expressed, consider the following explanation of dynastic prosperity and decline by the Later Han scholar and noted skeptic Wang Chong 王充 (27–97 CE), a century and a half later: “When the Mandate of Heaven is about to be issued, and a Sage-King is on the point of emerging, before and after the event the *materia vitalis* (*qi*) gives proofs which will be radiantly manifest.”¹³⁾ Even in Wang's time, the tendency was to understand the phenomenon simplistically, in terms of cause and effect, the principle of causality invoked in relation to auspicious portents by “mere prognosticators.” According to Wang Chong, “the errors of the School of Prognosticators are not in acknowledging the occurrences of calamities and auspicious happenings, but lie in their erroneous belief that the successes and failings of government bear a cause-and-effect relationship to those.”¹⁴⁾

According to Wang Chong,

The accession of a worthy ruler happens to occur in an age that is going to be well governed; his virtues are self-evident above, and the people are automatically good below. The world is at peace and the people are secure. The auspicious signs all display themselves and the age speaks of those as induced by the worthy ruler. The immoral ruler happens to be born at a time when chaos is to exist; the empire is thrown into troubles and the people's ways become disorderly, with

12) Ban Gu (班固), “Dong Zhongshu zhuan (董仲舒傳),” *Han shu* (漢書) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 56.2500.

13) Trans. Hsiao (1979), 594; cf. Kalinowski (2011), 194.

14) Hsiao (1979), 594.

incessant disasters and calamities, leading to the fall of the state, the death of the ruler, and the displacement of his successors. The world all refers to that as having been induced by his evils. Such observations are clear about the external appearance of good and evil, but fail to perceive the internal reality of good and bad fortune.¹⁵⁾

In this view, all the actions of an individual or an undertaking which is about to flourish will spontaneously accord with the precise configuration of time and place. In the case of an emergent Sage King: “Followers will come to him un-summoned, and auspicious objects will come to him un-signaled. Invisibly moved, they will all arrive in concert *as if they had been sent.*”¹⁶⁾

Dong Zhongshu was hardly unique in his belief in the significance of astral omens. In 135 BCE, “a long star” (comet) had stretched across the sky throughout the month of September, prompting Emperor Wu retrospectively to inaugurate a new reign period in the tenth month (the first month of the new year), dubbed *Yuan guang* 元光 “Primal Brilliance.” This sudden, spectacular appearance of a comet had an equally powerful, but opposite, effect at the court of the restive king of Huainan 淮南, Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE):

In the sixth year of the *Jian yuan* 建元 reign period (135 BCE) a broom star was seen. In the mind of the King of Huainan it was an anomaly. Someone said to the King: ‘Earlier, when the army of Wu rose up, a broom star several *chi* long appeared, hence for a long time blood flowed for over 1,000 *li*. At present there is a broom star so long it spans the sky, so the armies of the empire ought all to rise in force.’ In his mind, the King, considering there was no imperial heir above and [seeing that] anomalies were occurring in the empire, increasingly desired to fabricate weapons, [siege] engines, and instruments of offensive warfare. He accumulated money with which to bribe the lords of commanderies and kingdoms, wandering knights, and those with unique talents. The various sophists who devised schemes and strategies indiscriminately fabricated rumors and flattered

15) Hsiao Kung-chuan, *History of Chinese Political Thought* (trans. F.W. Mote) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 594 (italics mine). Cf. Kalinowski, Marc, *Wang Chong, Lun Heng/Balance de Discours* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2011), 50.

16) Hsiao, *Chinese Political Thought* (1979), 595.

the King. The King was delighted, handed out even more money, and his plotting to rebel grew in earnest.¹⁷⁾

In fact, September 135 BCE was only the first of two appearances during Emperor Wu's reign of the ominous comet with a curved tail known as *Chi You's* 蚩尤 banner, a harbinger of imminent warfare. According to the "Treatise on the Celestial Offices" *Tian guan shu* 天官書 in *Shiji* 史記:

The Banner of *Chi You* is like a broom star, but its tail is curved at the end, like a banner. When it appears, the one who rules will go forth and attack the four corners of the earth.¹⁸⁾

During the *Yuan guang* (134–129 B.C.) and *Yuan shou* 元狩 (122–117 B.C.) reign periods, *Chi You's* Banner appeared twice, as long as half the sky. After those [appearances], the armies of the capital marched out four times, punishing the *Yi-Di* 夷狄 [barbarians] for several decades, with attacks on the *Hu* 胡 [Xiongnu 匈奴] being especially severe.¹⁹⁾

Another cometary portent from 60 CE is worth citing as an example of the standard form of recording astral omens in which a verification of the prognostication immediately follows the record of the event:

On the day *dingmao*, in the sixth month of the third year [of *Yongping* reign period, i.e., 9 August 60 CE] a comet [*hui xing* 彗星] two feet long emerged north of *Tianchuan*. Moving gradually in a northerly direction to the south of [lunar lodge] *Kang*, after being observed for thirty-five days it departed. *Tianchuan* signifies water, and that the comet emerged therefrom indicated a great flood. In that year the rivers *Yi* and *Luo* overflowed, reaching the *Jincheng* gate, destroying the bridge over the *Yi* River and inundating thirty-two prefectures in seven commanderies.²⁰⁾

17) Sima Qian, "Tian guan shu," *Shiji*, 27.1335.

18) *Ibid.*

19) "Tian guan shu," *Shiji*, 27.1349. See Loewe, "The Han view of comets," *Divination* (1994), 61-84.

In this and similar accounts, especially in the *History of the Former Han, Han shu*, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the interpretive judgment was added by a “substantially later interpreting mind and editing hand”.²¹⁾ Obviously, unlike prodigies and spectral apparitions, celestial anomalies visible to everyone, such as comets and eclipses, could hardly be faked, but often dispute did arise over the implications. A notorious incident involving Dong Zhongshu’s interpretation of an omen also occurred in 135 BCE, a particularly eventful year.

In the sixth year (135 BCE), “Sparkling Deluder” [planet Mars] guarded lunar lodge Ghost Conveyance [Cancer]. The prognostication said: ‘This is a [manifestation of] change [involving the Phase] Fire, and there will be obsequies.’ That year there was a fire in the Emperor Gaozu’s memorial park, and Empress Dowager Dou died.²²⁾

The connection between funerals, mortuary shrines, and lunar lodge *Ghost Conveyance* needs no explanation. That lunar lodge belongs to the summer (southern) palace of the heavens, whose associated elemental phase is Fire, and Mars is the Fire Star owing to its ruddy color, and often inauspicious. Citing precedents from the *Annals* and the regulations laid down in the canonical *Rites Li* 禮 too involved to discuss here, Dong had the temerity to offer an opinion interpreting the omen as a warning from Heaven regarding the pernicious influence of officials and imperial relatives whose behavior departed from the ritual guidelines of the *Rites*. He recommended that the emperor more rigorously oversee and punish the

20) *Ibid.*

21) See Kern, “Religious Anxiety,” (2000), 10. Indeed, this is a major reason why Kern (page 4, 9, 31) invalidates as ahistorical the earlier studies of Eberhard and Bielenstein: “when considering the individual omens that are recorded in our historical sources, we need to take into account the historical moment at which a particular omen definition was actually determined as being calamitous . . . interpretations often postdate by decades the reign during which the omen originally appeared; therefore, they cannot have been intended as admonishing the earlier ruler whom they might have concerned directly.”

22) Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 6:159, cf. Kern, “Religious Anxiety,” (2000), 11 and Loewe, *Divination* (1994), 287. For discussion of the series of almost exclusively auspicious omens during Emperor Wu’s reign, including the famous episode of the white unicorn’s capture in 123–22 BCE, see Kern *ibid.* 14ff.

transgressors. Dong's criticism would have gotten him executed but for the emperor's personal intervention and grant of a pardon.

II. Political use of omens and the occult

Ultimately, by advocating portentology at the highest levels of intellectual discourse, Dong's efforts and the ascendancy of the Gongyang school had the effect of normalizing the resort to omens as a political tool, with unfortunate results, as this practice became widespread within the bureaucracy.²³⁾ At the end of Emperor Wu's reign and for a century afterward, rivalries and intrigues instigated by the clans of empresses and concubines, and the consequent factionalism resulting from the frequent succession struggles, provided fertile ground for the "weaponizing" of omens and the occult.²⁴⁾ One notorious incident was the witchcraft episode of 91 BCE at the end of Emperor Wu's reign, which cost the lives of the Empress and Heir Apparent. Michael Loewe comments:

the incidents demonstrate that whatever lip-service was paid in edict or official pronouncement to the superior virtues of 'Confucian' values, decisions of state were frequently dictated by ambition, jealousy or fear . . . the incidents show how the formal provisions of Han institutions could be invoked as a means of carrying through decisions of a personal nature".²⁵⁾

One of those 'Confucian' values was, of course, reflected in the Sage's stern admonition against partisanship: "The Master said, 'the superior man is dignified, and does not wrangle. He is sociable, but not partisan'" 子曰：君子矜而不爭，群而不黨".²⁶⁾

The resort to omens in political power struggles intensified toward the end of

23) See Loewe, *Divination* (1994), 139 and Kern, "Religious Anxiety," (2000), 31.

24) Hans Bielenstein remarked that "the political history of this period is in large measure a history of its factions"; cited in Dennis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 1, the Ch'in and Han Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 277.

25) See Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict* (1974), 38.

26) *Analects* (論語), "Wei Ling gong" (衛靈公), 15:22.

the first century before the Common Era as the Former Han dynasty shakily drew to a close, to be succeeded by the brief Xin 新 Dynasty founded by the scheming regent Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23 CE), a member of the empress dowager's clan.²⁷⁾ Another celestial omen in 35 CE cited by Loewe(83) involved a thundering meteor (bolide) and had particularly murderous consequences. Omens and occult prognostications were rampant during Wang Mang's reign, especially during the years just before the restoration of the Later Han dynasty in 25 CE. All manner of occult practices proliferated, often deriving from the so-called "weft" *wei* 緯 commentaries on the Classics (denoted "warp" *jing* 經) and oracular writings *chen* 讖 of obscure provenance. These influential texts were based on underground, unorthodox occult lore and speculation, some of which must actually have had a basis in ancient popular traditions.²⁸⁾

The most influential interpreters of the omens in this period were learned scholars and experts on the Classics, whether the *Annals*, the *Documents* 尚書, or the *Changes* 周易. First now we are explicitly told by the sources that the most influential scholar and omenologist, Liu Xiang 流向 (77–6 BCE), compiled an extensive catalog of omens "in direct response to, and as a warning against, the rising power of the Wang clan at court."²⁹⁾ At the same time, as part of the historical revisionism of the time, scholars were not averse to reinterpreting formerly auspicious historical omens as inauspicious portents, particularly those that occurred during Emperor Wu's epochal reign a century earlier, in order to exploit them as admonitory examples in contemporary political debates.³⁰⁾ Predictably, the occult apocryphal liter-

27) See Gentz "Language of Heaven," (2008), 833. For the controversy provoked by Halley's Comet in 12 BCE, see Loewe, *Divination* (1994), 81–83. As Yi Hyunhwee reminded me, Max Weber underscored the pernicious influence in the later empire of what he termed this "sultanism" and the harem system; see Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. H.H. Gerth (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 138–39. What Weber terms the court's "rationalist interests in an expert officialdom" is a legacy of the pragmatic statist and bureaucratic approach first institutionalized in Qin.

28) See Jack L. Dull, "A historical introduction to the apocryphical (*ch'an-wei*) texts of the Han dynasty," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington (1966).

29) See Kern, "Religious Anxiety," (2000), 30.

30) *Ibid.* 31. This kind of revisionism was repeated often in the history of the imperial period, since it was invariably the succeeding dynasty that compiled the history of the one it had replaced.

ature and omen lore continued to play a central role in political factionalism and succession struggles for centuries thereafter.



<Figure 1> A page from the imperially commissioned late Ming (ca. 1644) astral omen manual *Yuzhi tianyuan yuli xiangyi fu* 御製天元玉曆祥異賦, with illustrations and interpretations of celestial portents, including Zhu Xi's (Zhu Wengong). Here, "when the moon is big and bright" the prognostications involve the empress, officials, wives, concubines, and water, all correlates of yin. A prognostication from the Former Han omen expert Jing Fang's *京房* (1st c. BCE) *Yi zhuan* 易傳, Tradition of the Changes, is appended.

III. Portents, belief, and scientific attitude

Attitudes regarding the functioning of the cosmos and the natural order need to be distinguished into categories. Certain physical processes, such as the law of cause and effect, the cycles of nature, even the binary nature of the cosmos expressed as *yin* and *yang*, were unquestioned as ultimately discoverable inviolate principles, *tian li* 天理. This remained true even as new discoveries continued to be made, ranging from the structure of the cosmos to the celestial mechanics of eclipses. In contrast, other beliefs, such as religious faith in the Supernal Lord, Shangdi (or Heaven), ghosts *gui* 鬼 and spirits *shen* 神, as well as belief in the efficacy of omens and divination, underwent change as a spirit of rationalism or secularism became more or less influential. This was much less true within certain aspects of traditional learning (e.g., Chinese medicine) and among the common people, where in many respects popular religious attitudes about the nature of the world and folkways changed very slowly if at all.

As in the modern world, individual predilections played an important role, with even the most rationally minded individuals simultaneously subscribing to seemingly contradictory ideas. Isaac Newton (1642–1726) is a famous case in point in the history of science and mathematics in the West. While he was achieving epoch-making discoveries in mathematics and the physical sciences he was busily conducting alchemical experiments on the side. We saw above how, in the first century of the Common Era in China when skepticism had become more pronounced, the scholar Wang Chong raised doubts about omens: “So we find that good or bad fortune exists constantly in the world of heaven and earth, and the advent of objects bearing signs of good or bad fortune will of itself fall in with human beings of good or bad fortune”.³¹⁾ Similarly, Wang “rejects outright a dogmatic belief that particular objects such as turtle shells or yarrow stalks are imbued with numinous powers or holy qualities”.³²⁾ And yet, at the same time, Wang’s near contemporary, the brilliant scientist and polymath Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139) valued the two chief methods of divination (*zhan bu* 占卜) by turtle shell and yarrow stalks. This was the same Zhang who harshly criticized trusting in the apocryphal and occult literature.

31) Trans. Loewe, *Divination* (1994), 173.

32) *Ibid.*

The same seemingly paradoxical attitude no doubt also applies to famous Former Han dynasty practitioners of omenology such as Liu Xiang and his son Liu Xin 劉昕 (50 BCE–23 CE), Jing Fang 京房 (1st c. BCE), and Dong Zhongshu. Their learning in this regard ostensibly traced its pedigree back to Confucius himself, as the unquestioned author of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and so its validity was hardly open to question. And there is no doubt that they drew a sharp distinction between their canonically based hermeneutics and the prodigies and lesser omens of dubious provenance exploited in political disputes by officials unschooled in the “correct” tradition. Of course, as we saw, the role of ideology and partisanship based on self-interest always needs to be factored into political contexts. Liu Xin himself is a famous case in point of a scholar-official who personally harbored great political ambition and exploited omenology to advance his own prospects, and planetary portentology played a central role in the persuasions put forward by the Wei 魏 in forcing the abdication of the last Han emperor Xiandi 獻帝, in 220 CE.³³⁾

Centuries later, in the Southern Song Dynasty 宋朝 (1127–1279), it was often in the interest of officials to exploit actual occurrences for political purposes, such as in the case of the supernova of 1006, or for the court to “spin” an omen interpretation in a harmless direction so as to defuse a threat to the regime, as happened in 1524.³⁴⁾ No less an authority than the eminent Song Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) invoked the same millennial tradition concerning the linkage between planetary omens and the receipt of Heaven’s Mandate:

In general, after the decline of the Zhou and Mencius’ passing, the transmission of this Tao was not entrusted [to anyone], but skipped Qin to reach the Han Dynasty. [Then] bypassing Jin, Sui, and Tang [the transmission] arrived at the “Sage Ancestor” [*Tàizū* 太祖 (964–97)] of our Song Dynasty. The receipt of the Mandate [signaled by] the gathering of the Five Planets in [lodge] *Kui* 奎 [Psc-And], [confirmed that] the course of the enlightened [tradition of the Tao] had truly begun.³⁵⁾

33) For the 1006 supernova, see Wu Yi-yi, “Auspicious Omens and Their Consequences: Zhen-Ren (1006–1066) Literati’s Perception of Astral Anomalies,” Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1990. For the events of 1524, see David W. Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China: Conforming Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 204.

34) *Ibid.*, 426.

Zhu Xi is alluding to the Mandate tradition and to Mencius' remarks (IV.B.26) about the periodicity of sages being "slightly more than 500 years". From the Zhou founding in 1046 BCE to Confucius' birth in 551 BCE was 500 years, so by Mencius' day it was clear that the emergence of a sage was long overdue. The Han Dynasty legitimately received the Mandate because, as we saw, there was a Five Planet alignment for Han founder Liu Bang 劉邦 in lodge Eastern Well in 205 BCE. Bypassing the centuries of disunity and the intervening three dynasties of Jin 晉, Sui 隋, and Tang 唐, one arrives at the Song Dynasty founding in the mid-tenth century. In the almost offhand way Zhu Xi invokes the significance of planetary groupings it is apparent that by his time that tradition was held to be long established fact.

As is well known, Zhu Xi was no great admirer of the Song regime. In reflecting on Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073) in his essay, Zhu Xi pays lip service to Song founder Taizu's sagely status, ostensibly signaled by the 967 alignment of the Five Planets. But the real import of the astral omen, and its epochal significance for Neo-Confucianism, lay in Zhu Xi's identifying the astral omen conferring the Mandate of Heaven with the restoration of the "continuity of the Tao" (*Dao tong* 道通). In so doing he fundamentally redefines the meaning of the doctrine of the Mandate. Henceforth, the transmission of the tradition of the Tao came to be seen by Neo-Confucians as transcending in importance the continuity of dynastic rule (*zheng tong* 正統) itself. In other words, the supremely auspicious planetary omen was not a sign of the restoration of legitimate temporal rule, but of something of a different order entirely; namely, the renaissance of the long neglected tradition of the Tao.

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35) Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi quanshu* (朱子全書) (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 2002), 1434.2–1435.1. The record of the planetary event of 967 is found in the *History of the Song Dynasty* (Tuo Tuo 脫脫, *Song shi* 宋史, 9.56). For more on Zhu Xi's interpretation of the astral omen and its enduring legacy as the sign of the revivifying of the legacy of the Dao, see Wei Bing 韋兵, "Wuxing ju kui tianxiang yu Song dai wen zhi zhi yun 五星聚奎天象與宋代文治之運," *Wen shi zhe* (文史哲) 4 (2005), 27–34.

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