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978-1-107-00672-0 - Astrology and Cosmology in Early China: Conforming Earth to Heaven

David W. Pankenier

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## Astrology and Cosmology in Early China

The ancient Chinese were profoundly influenced by the Sun, Moon, and stars, making persistent efforts to mirror astral phenomena in shaping their civilization. In this pioneering text, David W. Pankenier introduces readers to a seriously understudied field, illustrating how astronomy shaped the culture of China from the very beginning and how it influenced areas as disparate as art, architecture, calendrical science, myth, technology, and political and military decision-making. As elsewhere in the ancient world, there was no positive distinction between astronomy and astrology in ancient China, and so astrology, or more precisely, astral omenology, is a principal focus of the book. Drawing on a broad range of sources, including archaeological discoveries, classical texts, inscriptions and paleography, this thought-provoking book documents the role of astronomical phenomena in the development of the “Celestial Empire” from the late Neolithic through the late imperial period.

DAVID W. PANKENIER is Professor of Chinese at Lehigh University, Pennsylvania. His current research interests range from the history of ideas in early China, to archaeoastronomy and cultural astronomy. He is particularly interested in the connection between rare astronomical phenomena and epoch-making political and military events in ancient China.

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# Astrology and Cosmology in Early China

*Conforming Earth to Heaven*

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David W. Pankenier

*Lehigh University*



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落其實者思其樹, 飲其流者懷其源  
Plucking the fruit, one thinks of the tree;  
drinking from the stream, one is mindful of the source.  
Yu Xin 庾信 (fl. c.544)

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## Foreword

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The sky itself as a religious intuition, before even gods are spoken of as inhabiting the sky, reveals transcendence. In this sense it is a symbol of orientation. Its height and its vault place the human within a proper realm – the situation of finitude in the face of the exaltation of the transcendent starry and shining vault of heaven. Consciousness itself is the most specific correlate of this grandeur of the sky; we are situated as humans in this manner.

Charles Long, referring to Mircea Eliade's  
*Patterns in Comparative Religions*, 1958

In *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China* David Pankenier has given us a particularly potent way to understand the genius of the ancient Chinese religio-political vision of the universe. I refer to the acute Chinese concern for the interaction of the human and celestial worlds as seen in rare astral omens (what Pankenier felicitously refers to as “astal omenology”). Known to all students of China as the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tian ming*), this theory of portentous heavenly and earthly correlations echoes through all of Chinese history down to the present day, and in the ancient period had interesting parallels with Hebrew theories of a Sky-God’s covenantal relationship with his chosen people. These correlations are central to the ancient Chinese worldview or mythic cosmology and are detailed in some of the earliest Chinese texts – as well as being encoded in early architectural structures and other symbolic forms.

What was not fully appreciated until now with Pankenier’s work was the astronomical specificity and broad cultural impact of these celestial correlations. Beginning with his breakthrough analysis of unusual planetary massings related to the political foundations of ancient China, Pankenier shows us how the early cosmology was truly formative for almost all significant aspects of Chinese civilization. What he accomplishes here has been hinted at by other scholars, but no one has put it all together in such a technically sophisticated, interpretively imaginative, and brilliantly convincing way. Indeed, this is a work that has broad significance for understanding ancient Chinese tradition. Moreover, as he teasingly suggests in the epilogue, such celestial and cosmological anomalies continue to provoke, mark, and haunt significant contemporary political events in China. Pankenier’s findings in this work also

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have ample implications for many other ancient and contemporary civilizational traditions seen, for example, in the many world-cultural variations on the macro-/microcosmic theme of “as above, so below” (as encoded in the ancient Western hermetic text of the *Emerald Tablet*).

I write not as a sinologist but as a comparative religionist or scholar of the world history of religions. However, I have had much familiarity with aspects of Chinese tradition (especially early Daoism), as well as with the whole history of Western scholarship concerning China (e.g. the pivotal work of the great nineteenth-century scholar of the Chinese classics, James Legge). I know enough, in other words, to recognize real sinological expertise – something that is clearly and abundantly in evidence in this work. My self-appointed task in these brief comments is not, therefore, to rehearse Pankenier’s proficiency as a Chinese textual scholar. Rather I want to emphasize his ability to creatively and productively stretch the boundaries of the often philologically and culturally circumscribed modes of traditional Chinese scholarship.

The real grace and power of this book, then, is not just Pankenier’s competence as a scholar of early China. Equally remarkable is his careful and critical application of comparative and interdisciplinary methods of interpretive analysis. Most noteworthy in this regard is his use of techniques and insights coming from the highly specialized field of archaeoastronomy, which combines aspects of archaeology, astronomy, philology, history, paleography, and cross-cultural hermeneutics. These disciplinary methods especially draw upon perspectives coming from the comparative history of religions as related to general cultural development. Pankenier in this sense notes that the “ancient Chinese preoccupation with the heavens was hardly unique.” This in turn leads him to pay attention to non-sinological scholars (e.g. Raffaele Pettazoni, Giorgio de Santillana, Hertha von Dechand, and Alexander Marshak) who have recognized the symbolic language of the sky and astronomical phenomena written into the myths, rituals, and cultural creations of many different early civilizations.

The comparative scholar Mircea Eliade noted in his study of the myth-ritual “patterns” or “structures” of religious belief that the human symbolic awareness of and imaginative reaction to the natural world – most primordially, profoundly, and transcendently the radiant sky – is always embedded within, and shapes, a culture’s fundamental worldview and vision of life. The basic human encounter with, or experience of, the sky and its related phenomena – an experience witnessed in all ancient cultures in relation to various ideas of divinity (such as the ancient Chinese Supernal Lord or Shangdi) – immediately implies feelings of height, flight, transcendence, power, and universal order. This is because the vault of the day and night sky, filled with luminous and constantly changing celestial bodies, is “just there” as something “above” and “beyond” ordinary human existence on the earthly plane. All of these patterns witnessed on high are truly and generally inspirational and potentially

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symbolic of patterns in earthly existence. This awareness hinges on the archaic and fundamental human ability to see the sky as a sign with a message of existential meaning that calls for a cultural response. The general perception of the astronomical “above” only becomes culturally and humanely *productive* and *significant* therefore in relation to how those experiences are imaginatively (i.e. artistically and technically) embraced, envisioned, communicated, and made real “below” in the stories/myths, actions/rituals, architectural structures/visual forms, and social institutions/political practices that allow men and women to live their lives with meaning.

David Pankenier persuasively shows us the all-pervasive religio-political relationship of the Above and Below in ancient China, but his work is even more broadly and importantly suggestive. As seen by his interdisciplinary methods and sensitivity to comparative cross-cultural perspectives, Pankenier helps us imagine and understand how our response to astronomical phenomena is at the very core of our cultural development as human beings. In many ways for the Chinese as well as for other ancient traditions it was the awesome vision of the sky that inspired our ancestors to create the human world we still inhabit. Contemplation of the sky was originally, as Eliade reminds us, a revelation of the human participation in celestial patterns that define the entire cosmos. Reading Pankenier is likewise a revelation in that we come to see that knowing early China is simultaneously to know the wellsprings of human nature. This is a work that embraces the starry sky and by so doing inspires us to know the whole world more fully. As above, so below.

Norman Girardot  
University Distinguished Professor  
of Comparative Religions, Lehigh  
University

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## Preface

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This book has been long aborning. In the early 1980s I discovered in ancient Chinese historical sources observational records of astronomical phenomena, which if scientifically verified had the potential to establish reliable benchmarks essential in dating China's earliest dynasties. The challenge of reconstructing China's chronology prior to the earliest secure date of 841 BCE has motivated historians since at least the fourth century BCE. At first the historical records I was studying seemed scarcely credible, appearing as they did in sources like the *Bamboo Annals* (*Zhushu jinian*) and *Lost Books of Zhou* (*Yi Zhou shu*) long exposed to the vagaries of textual transmission. Subsequent research demonstrated, however, that similar accounts could be found in too many other reliable early sources to be the result of interpolation, and that at the time of their earliest appearance the Chinese did not possess the ability to retrospectively compute such ancient and complex astronomical phenomena. I concluded that the reports must have survived for a millennium and more and been transmitted in ways that are still poorly understood.

At the same time, it became clear that several of these rare events, dense clusters of the Five Planets in particular, were associated in ancient tradition with dynastic transitions resulting from overthrow or "change of the Mandate" (*ge ming*), as it came to be called, thus solidifying their status as astral omens. It was clear to me that they had the potential to open a new window on the world of thought in Bronze Age China by shedding light on the ancient doctrine of Heaven's Mandate (*tian ming*) and the unique relationship with Heaven (or the Supernal Lord, Shangdi) that the late Bronze Age Chinese believed themselves to enjoy. My ongoing research has focused on the recovery of ancient astronomical concepts and practices through the study of archaeological discoveries, inscriptional sources, language, history, astrology, and cosmology. The upshot is that a new perspective on the role of astronomy–astrology and cosmology in the formation of Chinese civilization has gradually taken shape. This new view, informed by the comparative methodology of archaeoastronomy and cultural astronomy, demonstrates that preoccupation with things celestial manifested itself in many aspects of ancient Chinese civilization in heretofore unappreciated ways.

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The initial breakthrough came when I was able to verify that a misdated record of the spectacular planetary massing of 1059 BCE in the transmitted text of the *Bamboo Annals* must be a genuine eyewitness account. Encouraged to probe further by this discovery, I then found that early Bronze Age people had witnessed and preserved in mythic language the even more spectacular planetary massing of 1953 BCE, the densest such cluster of planets in more than 5,000 years. The realization that the ancient Chinese were impressed enough to incorporate astronomical phenomena into accounts of the founding of the dynastic system opened up an entirely new perspective on the genesis of the concept of Heaven's Mandate – the idea that political legitimacy is directly conferred by Heaven on a worthy ruler. My reading of the classical canon had impressed me early on with the centrality of Heaven (lit. “sky,” *tian*) in both its cosmological and politico-religious roles as the source of all-pervasive cosmic and spiritual influence. Only after I delved into the ramifications of that early Chinese preoccupation with the sky did the depth and extent to which cosmology exerted a profound formative influence on the civilization become apparent.

Not being a formally trained astronomer, in order to better appreciate the cultural significance of my discoveries I had to immerse myself in an emerging new discipline. The study of the astronomical practices, celestial lore, astral religion, mythologies, and cosmologies of ancient cultures is called archaeoastronomy. It is, in essence, the historical anthropology of astronomy, as distinct from the history of astronomy. In 1983, I presented my early discoveries at the First International Conference on Ethnoastronomy at the Smithsonian Institution, and what I learned from other presentations there convinced me that the ancient Chinese preoccupation with the heavens was hardly unique; indeed, it is a human universal. I continue to be inspired by the burgeoning literature in cultural astronomy and archaeoastronomy which has yielded innumerable insights into how our forebears, at all times and places, have shown intense interest in what transpired in the sky, in the familiar, predictable cycles and in unpredictable, transient phenomena alike.

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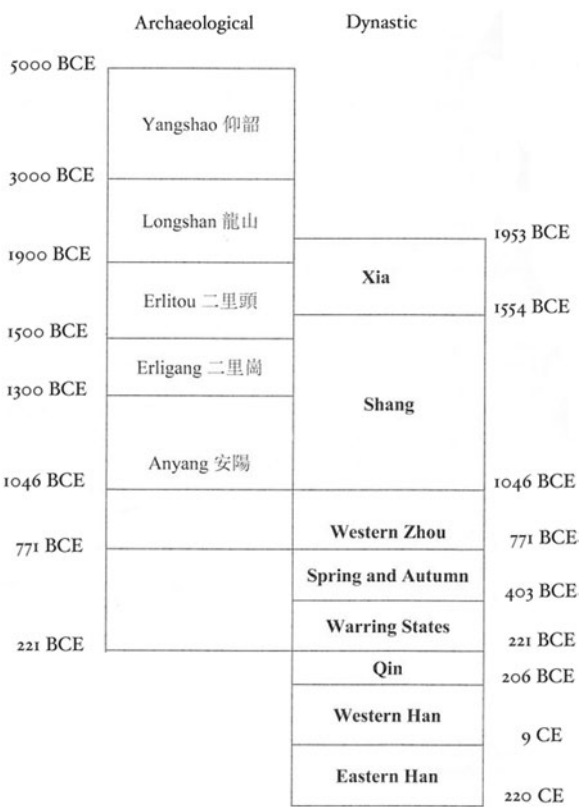


Figure 0.1 Chronology of early China.