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The Planetary Portent of 1524 in China and Europe

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IN late February and early March of 1524 there occurred in Aquarius-Pisces an impressively close grouping (10.5° , or the width of a hand span) of all five planets ordinarily visible to the naked eye. This was the densest such gathering in five centuries. In both China and the West such planetary phenomena had long loomed large because of their presumed association with world-changing events on the grandest scale—the rise and fall of empires, changes of dynasties, the appearance of great prophets or sages—although reliance on reason gradually challenged those systems like astrology which claimed esoteric knowledge. But in early sixteenth-century Europe the Scientific Revolution still lay a few decades in the future, even though this was also the age of Copernicus (1473–1543), the first to formulate a heliocentric theory of the solar system and the father of modern Western astronomy. In China, astronomer Guo Shoujing (1231–1316) had long since devised high-precision instruments for use in positional astronomy and the *Shoushi* calendar (1281), whose calculation of the length of the year of 365.2425 days anticipated the Gregorian calendar by some three centuries. But despite the growing intelligibility of the cosmos and the predictability of celestial phenomena, belief in astrology was still pervasive. This was especially true of the popular imagination in Europe, where age-old religiously and astrologically inspired millenarian ideas held powerful sway.¹

¹ C. Scott Dixon describes the spirit of the times this way: “The sixteenth century was an anxious age. Knowledge creates anxiety, as does uncertainty or a sense of dissociation, and the century of Reformation gave rise to its share of novel and divisive ideas. Yet whereas

Events of 1524 in China and Europe in response to the planetary phenomenon offer insights into the divergent Chinese and Western responses to such “millennial” events. To explore the topic fully would require a lengthy monograph, not least because sixteenth-century China and Europe were such vastly different places. In what follows I propose simply to portray, with a broad brush, the conceptual background and contemporary impact of the planetary grouping of 1524 in Reformation Europe and late Ming China. I will sketch some of the comparisons and contrasts, which are brought into especially clear focus by reactions to the planetary phenomenon. In Europe the event had long been predicted and, consequently, widely and anxiously anticipated. In China, to all appearances, it was not; knowledge of the event was confined to the imperial court, and its implications closely identified with court politics.

PLANETS, PERIODS, AND PORTENTS

The five planets have attracted attention for millennia. Some are brighter than the brightest stars, and this trait together with their unique ability to move independently in a direction contrary to the diurnal revolution of the normally placid stellar background place them in a category of their own. Freedom of movement led to their being individually invested with supernatural power and the ability to influence temporal affairs, more so when they cluster together in a joint display of numinous influence. Several physical factors determine how impressive such a grouping will be, including proximity to the Sun and how closely the five planets crowd together. Unlike eclipses, during which weather conditions are a crucial factor, in the case of planet groupings weather plays a comparatively minor role as they may persist for days or weeks as the different planets converge and then disperse again. Depending on how one defines a “grouping” in terms of angular separation, close approaches of all five planets are either comparatively rare or relatively frequent.²

medieval cosmology offered the anxious thinker ‘a fully articulated system of boundaries’ for understanding the world, the onset of the early modern age saw the disintegration of this order. What replaced it, in the first instance, was not an alternative cosmology, but an anxious scramble to reassociate the culture’s disparate parts . . .” See “Popular Astrology and Lutheran Propaganda in Reformation History,” *History* 84 (1999): 406–407.

² A recent study by Salvo De Meis and Jean Meeus found 102 cases between 3000 B.C.E. and 2750 C.E. in which the five planets could be circumscribed by a circle less than 25° in

Detailed study of individual circumstances is the only way to gauge the impact of these events on contemporary observers at different times and places. Judging from the historical record, circumstances on the ground play a major role in determining whether the event is deemed astrologically significant. There are times when such events may be eagerly anticipated (or, if not forthcoming, invented) for ideological or religious reasons, there are times when occurrences may be overlooked because of social disorder or careless observation, and there are times when the implications of phenomena may be suppressed as politically inconvenient. Examples of these different motives occurred at the beginning of the Han dynasty, when in May 205 B.C.E. a so-called “linked pearls” alignment of planets spanning over 30° was pressed into service as a sign of heavenly approbation of Han founder Liu Bang’s (r. 206–195 B.C.E.) imperial aspirations.³ In contrast, only twenty years later, in March 185 B.C.E., one of only four truly spectacular planetary groupings of less than 7° in the past four thousand years was overlooked (or ignored) when it occurred during the reign of Empress Dowager Lü (187–180 B.C.E.), the first woman to rule the empire—evidently not a precedent deemed worthy of commemoration in imperial China.⁴

PLANETS, PERIODICITY, AND DIVINATION

Probably the most ancient form of legitimation is the conception of the institutional order as directly reflecting or manifesting the divine structure of the cosmos, that is, the conception of the relationship

diameter. Of those, in only twenty-six cases was the circle less than 10.5° in diameter, and eighteen of those occurring between 2000 B.C.E. and c.E. 1700 might have had enough of an impact to leave a lasting impression. Finally, three out of only four 5° – 7° groupings, which could easily be covered by a fist held at arm’s length, manifestly influenced political events on the ground. See Salvo De Meis and Jean Meeus, “Quintuple Planetary Groupings—Rarity, Historical Events and Popular Beliefs,” *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 104, no. 6 (1994): 293–297. For ancient China, see Xu Zhentao and Jiang Yaotiao, *Wuxing juhe yu Xia shang Zhou niandai yanjiu* (Beijing: Shijie tushu chubanshe, 2006); David W. Pankenier, “The Cosmo-political Background of Heaven’s Mandate,” *Early China* 20 (1995): 121–176; and Wei Shaosheng, *Zhongguo gudai zhanbu shu* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1992), pp. 110–118. The term “conjunction,” strictly speaking, refers to when two planets are located at the same degree of longitude and so should not be applied to groupings of multiple planets.

³ See n. 11 below.

⁴ For further examples, see Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: T’ang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 211–219.

between society and cosmos as one between microcosm and macrocosm. Everything “here below” has its analogue “up above.”⁵

What separates us most deeply from the ancients is that they believed in the possibility of foreknowing the future, either by rational inference or by the popular means of questioning oracles and of practicing divination, while we do not . . .

[T]he conjunctionist thesis leads imperceptibly and unconsciously to the idea of variability and pluralism in religious and political regimes. If changes depend on the movements and conjunctions of the upper planets with certain signs of the zodiac, then major historical events can only be considered “providential” in the metaphorical sense.⁶

In the above quotations Peter Berger and Karl Löwith identify the fundamental ideas that lent cogency to planetary astrology as traditionally understood in the West and, to a lesser extent, in China. The belief in antiquity that future events “here below” could be foretold by special means implies a presupposition that the future is in some sense preordained. Divination and portent astrology were methods of “reading” the dispositions of supernatural forces as if they were accomplished facts or knowledge, hence the revealed nature of omens from an early date.⁷ However, Löwith also points to the inherently periodic nature of planetary motions, a fact whose recognition over time led to the removal of astral omens from the realm of the abnormal and terrifying, gradually leading to their being seen as in principle predictable and ultimately harmless.

As we shall see, in China and Europe the gradual recognition of the regularity of planetary phenomena did not proceed apace. How the periodicity of planetary cycles was exploited in astrological prognostication diverged even more. Classical and medieval astrological theory in the West long indulged in grand speculations about the future of

⁵ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 34. The maxim Berger is paraphrasing was popularized by Ptolemy (90–168). It derives from the hermetic tradition of *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*: “That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above, corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracles of the One Thing.”

⁶ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 10, 20.

⁷ For a survey of the various theoretical underpinnings of Chinese astrology, see Xu Fengxian, “Zhongguo gudai yichang tianxiang guan,” *Ziran kexueshi yanjiu* (1994): 201–208. For a historical survey of Chinese cosmology in the imperial period more generally, including changing attitudes toward general astrology, see John B. Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

humanity being either mechanistically “determined” or merely “influenced” by the movements of the celestial bodies. The role of the divine varied, correspondingly, from merely otiose or indifferent to interventionist, disposed to regularly alter the course of history. When properly understood, from one perspective astrology could provide insight into the inevitable course of events, and from the other it could indicate trends and directions that may still be influenced by divine or human will. The Chinese astrologers, in contrast, never evinced much interest in speculation about future trends or in planetary conjunction cycles, even after persistent exposure to Indian and Persian astrology’s vast cycles of time and their associated conjunctionist theories. Yabuuchi Kiyoshi, the renowned twentieth-century Japanese historian of Chinese science, characterized the Chinese approach to things celestial in the imperial period this way:

There are two sorts of celestial phenomena. One was cyclical in a simple way, and its regularity or periodicity could be discovered with relative ease; the other could not be predicted by human effort, but only observed. The former was systematized within the framework of calendrical science, while the latter became the object of astrological interpretation. Since they were complementary, they were equally important to Chinese administrators . . . The breadth of the Chinese ephemerides reflected the grave concern of Chinese rulers constantly to expand the demonstrable order of the sky, while reducing the irregular and ominous. The parallel with the ruler’s responsibility in the political realm is obvious.⁸

Chinese portent astrology, with its view that heaven’s intentions are made manifest by the stars (among other things), held fast to a motivation similar to that of the ancient Mesopotamian astrologers who compiled collections of celestial omens with a view to keeping the king informed of potential disasters or successes in the near term. After the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), Chinese astral divination at the official level remained conservative and resistant to change, despite a persistent undercurrent of rational skepticism. Throughout the history of imperial China, celestial omen reading (*tianwen*, lit. “celestial patterns/writing”) was practiced according to the same ancient principles

⁸ Yabuuchi Kiyoshi, “Chinese Astronomy: Development and Limiting Factors,” in *Chinese Science: Explorations of an Ancient Tradition*, ed. Shigeru Nakayama and Nathan Sivin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), pp. 93–94. See also Shigeru Nakayama, “Characteristics of Chinese Astrology,” *ISIS* 57 (1966): 442–454.

and astral-terrestrial correspondences that assigned virtually the entire sky to the Chinese empire.⁹ For the Chinese imperial court it remained an article of faith that ominous forebodings could, at least in theory, be deflected or rendered harmless if appropriate ritual actions were taken or policies changed to mitigate the misrule that prognostication suggested had called forth the ominous signs.

For the Latin West, Krzysztof Pomian summarized the essential principles of astrological practice as follows:

Different celestial bodies have different qualities, exert different influences and are connected with different individuals, peoples, institutions, etc. Each celestial event is therefore a peculiar combination of qualities and influences and as such it makes intelligible the peculiar character of a terrestrial event it is considered to be the cause of. Hence, an astrologer who knows what celestial events will happen in the future and when, is able to forecast the terrestrial events which will necessarily follow them, in other words, to make a horoscope of an individual, a dynasty, a city, etc. Likewise the knowledge of dates of past terrestrial events opens up the possibility of identifying their celestial causes and thus of setting up of a historical horoscope. The description of qualities of celestial bodies, of the range of influence of each one of them, of the peculiarities of different events which happen in the sky and of their supposed terrestrial effects furnishes the greatest part of the content of astrological books, as one can easily ascertain turning over the pages of the *Tetrabiblos* of Ptolemy or of the *De magnis coniunctionibus* of Albumasar [Abū-Ma'shar], two specimens of astrological literature referred to with the greatest frequency during the Middle Ages.¹⁰

From the outset, astrology in the West was no less Eurocentric than the Chinese version was Sinocentric, at least in the sense that it was exclusively Judeo-Christian and centered on the European experience, just like the philosophy of history. Astrologers strove in their own way to identify the principle of intelligibility in history, so that astrology

⁹ Indeed, the encyclopedic *Gujin tushu jicheng* (1725) routinely assigns essentially the same astral-terrestrial correspondences for the Chinese territory as were current in the pre-imperial "field-allocation" (*fenyue*) astrology. By then the scheme was already being strongly criticized, however, not least for its Sinocentrism; see Henderson, *Development and Decline*, pp. 214–215.

¹⁰ Krzysztof Pomian, "Astrology as a Naturalistic Theology of History," in *Astrologi halucinati: Stars and the End of the World in Luther's Time*, ed. Paola Zambelli (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1986), p. 33.

could be characterized as a “naturalistic theology of history.” In China, by contrast, one searches in vain for evidence of similarly grandiose theoretical ambitions or formulations. Instead, like other forms of divination, Chinese astrology was deployed opportunistically.

CHINA

Elsewhere I have shown how in early China long-established tradition held that rare groupings of all five visible planets within the space of a single lunar lodge carried dynastic implications. The astrological significance of the predynastic precedents, as well as the one pertaining to the Han dynasty founder Gaozu, are spelled out very clearly in China’s earliest comprehensive history, *The Grand Scribe’s Records*, as well as in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* by Ban Gu (32–92 C.E.).¹¹ Both served as models for all subsequent historiography in China. By the time Sima Tan (d. ca. 110 B.C.E.) and his son Sima Qian (ca. 145–90 B.C.E.) were compiling the compendium of astronomical-astrological knowledge contained in the “Treatise on the Heavenly Offices” in their *Grand Scribe’s Records*, the imperial system was firmly entrenched. A growing recognition of the “national security” implications of unpredictable celestial phenomena contributed to a subtle reformulation of the astrological prognostications associated with the planets. If the mandate-conferring omens could not be predicted, at the very least they would have to be managed.

In this new scheme, astrology’s former preoccupation with a multivalent world was adapted to the circumstances of the unified empire with its binary “us vs. them” view of contemporary power relations. One indication of this is that alongside the traditional “field alloca-

¹¹ *Shiji*, 27.1348 and 89.2581; *Hanshu*, 26.1301 and 36.1964 (these and subsequent references to the standard histories are to the modern editions published by Zhonghua shuju in Beijing). For discussion of these and other passages from Huan Tan’s (d. 28 C.E.) *Xin-lun*, *Chunqiu yuanming bao*, and *Sanguozhi* which cite second millennium B.C.E. planetary groupings as precedent setting, see Pankenier, “Cosmo-political Background of Heaven’s Mandate,” pp. 134, especially nn. 20 and 144. By the founding of the Han dynasty in the late third century B.C.E. such spectacular signs of heavenly approbation had become astrologically de rigueur. The Han dynasty established many of the institutional and intellectual precedents for the long imperial period to follow, and was no less important to China’s renaissance in the Song dynasty (960–1127) than were classical Greece and Rome to Renaissance Europe.

tion” scheme of astral-terrestrial correspondences,¹² one also finds in the “Treatise” a new corollary doctrine according to which, “When the five planets are disposed in mid-heaven and gather in the east, China (*zhongguo*) benefits, when they gather in the west, foreign kingdoms (*waiguo*) which use weapons gain.”¹³ This new astrological paradigm, consistent with the pervasive correlative cosmology of the time, for the first time actually took account of non-Chinese by allocating to them the winter or yin half of the sky and to the Chinese empire, the summer or yang half of the sky. Thus a strung out display of the five planets in the yang sky in 61 B.C.E. bestowed only strategic advantage on imperial China, rather than heralding something so drastic as a dynastic transition. At the same time, by comparison with the situation in the preimperial period, astrological prognostication had also moved decidedly downscale, so that what began as a hermetic science of astral divination enjoyed such widespread popularity by the second and third centuries C.E. that the maxim “When the five planets appear in the east, it is beneficial for China” could even figure as an epigram in silk brocades that found their way even to the remotest outpost on the northwest frontier.¹⁴ This is a rare confirmation of the popular view of the significance of planetary alignments.

Although reasonable approximations for the synodic periods of the planets¹⁵ were known by the early imperial period (i.e., twelve years for Jupiter and twenty years for Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions), with the exception of the astronomical computations typical of comprehensive calendrical systems like the famous Han astronomer Lin Xin’s (46 B.C.E.–23 C.E.) “Triple Concordance,”¹⁶ little attention seems to have

¹² Chinese field allocation astrology, like that of the ancient Near East, is premised on a scheme of astral-terrestrial correlations in which astrological prognostications about regions and polities are based on celestial phenomena occurring within the stellar fields identified with those terrestrial locations. Based on ancient astrological assumptions, the system reached its final form in the sixth to third centuries B.C.E. For details, see David W. Pankenier, “Characteristics of Field Allocation (*fenye*) Astrology in Early China,” in *Current Studies in Archaeoastronomy: Conversations across Time and Space*, ed. J. W. Fountain and R. M. Sinclair (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2005): pp. 499–513, and David W. Pankenier, “Applied Field Allocation Astrology in Zhou China: Duke Wen of Jin and the Battle of Chengpu (632 BC),” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 2 (1998): 261–279.

¹³ *Shiji*, 27.1328.

¹⁴ David W. Pankenier, “Popular Astrology and Border Affairs in Early China: An Archaeological Confirmation,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 104 (July 2000): 1–19.

¹⁵ The synodic period is the time it takes for a planet to return to the same point in the sky, relative to the Sun, as observed from Earth.

¹⁶ Xi Zelong, “Mawangdui Han mu boshu ‘*Wu xing zhan*,’” in Shehui kexue yuan kaogu yanjiusuo ed., *Zhongguo gudai tianwen wenwu lunji* (Beijing: Wenwu, 1989), pp. 46–58; and

been paid to resonance periods in Chinese planetary astrology. Indeed, at the popular level astrological divination too had become “mathematized”—that is, largely reduced to numerology and the manipulation of mechanical devices such as the cosmograph or “diviner’s board.” Although the ancient names of the twenty-eight lunar lodges and Jupiter stations continued to be used,¹⁷ their arithmetic combination with the recursive sequence of sixty day-dates, binary yin-yang influences, and five elemental phases (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) in ever more intricate numerological schemes meant that any meaningful connection with the movements of the actual heavenly bodies had long since been abandoned.¹⁸

Astronomical observations were regularly carried out largely in order to account for political developments after the fact, based on the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* notion of cause and effect. In this process, the compilation of precedents played an important role, leading to the creation of an entire genre of prognostication texts. Astrological prognostics deriving from such works were frequently adduced, based on familiar analogical principles:

During the Shiyuan reign period of Emperor Xiao Zhao [of Han; 1. 86–74 B.C.E.], the Han eunuch Liang Chenghui and the King of Yan’s stargazer Wu Moru saw a fuzzy star [tailless comet] emerge in the west at the east gate of Tianshi “Celestial Marketplace” [in Oph; March, 84 B.C.E.]; it traveled past Hegu [Aql] and entered Yingshi [Aqr-Psc]. [Liang Cheng-]hui said “when a fuzzy star appears for sixty days, before three years have passed there will be rebellious officials executed in the marketplace below.”¹⁹

The significance of otherwise unremarkable movements of Venus through Taiwei, the “Celestial Court” (Leo), became clear only once the plot to assassinate imperial regent Huo Guang (d. 68 B.C.E.) was

Nathan Sivin, *Cosmos and Computation in Early Chinese Mathematical Astronomy* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

¹⁷ The lunar lodges are the series of twenty-eight asterisms ideally thought to represent the space occupied by the Moon each day during its month-long circuit of the sky. The twelve Jupiter stations resemble the 30° zodiac spaces familiar from Western astrology, though in the Chinese case they derive ultimately from the distance traversed by the planet Jupiter in the space of a year, rather than representing one-twelfth of a circle of 360°. Both series are commonly used to designate the location of celestial bodies and phenomena in the sky.

¹⁸ See Marc Kalinowski, “The Use of the Twenty-eight *Xiu* as a Day-Count in Early China,” *Chinese Science* 13 (1996): 55–81.

¹⁹ *Han shu*, 26.1306.

uncovered in 80 B.C.E., leading to the public execution of a king, two generals, and the senior princess. Consequently, the following prognostic was pronounced: "Taiwei is the Celestial Court. When Venus moves inside it, the gates of the palace are closed, great generals don armor and weapons, and evil officials submit to punishment."²⁰

From Han times on, planetary resonance periods were not a preoccupation of the officials charged with observing the skies, who continued the retrospective interpretive approach historically applied to astral omens. This is true even though it is apparent that Jupiter's nominal twelve-year period had been used since the time of compilation of China's earliest annalistic narrative, the *Zuozhuan*, in the fourth century B.C.E., in an effort to retrospectively compute the astrological circumstances of historical events centuries earlier. From Liu Xin's discussion of the Zhou conquest of the Shang dynasty (1046 B.C.E.) in his "Canon of the Generations" in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, it is clear that he also sought unsuccessfully to derive the date of that epoch-making event by this means. That astrology in the early period did not make greater use of longer planetary resonance periods is perhaps surprising, since the principle of least common multiples was exploited in the construction of ambitious calendrical schemes, such as Liu Xin's "Triple Concordance system."

In the third century B.C.E. the philosopher Zou Yan proposed a phenomenological interpretation of historical change based on the idea that the five elemental phases (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) make their influence felt in a predetermined sequence. Although many absorbed the momentous implications of Zou Yan's revolutionary idea—that is, the recognition that such periodicity "leads unconsciously to the idea of variability in political regimes," as Löwith said—astrologers evinced little if any interest in the predictive potential of grander cycles. Seeking to discover the astrological principles underlying past or current events, they turned their backs on the far future. This is more surprising because remarks by Confucian philosophers such as Mencius (fourth century B.C.E.), second only to Confucius himself in the pantheon, point to the currency of early speculation about a five-hundred-year cycle of "sagely rule," whose inspiration may be traceable to the memorable planetary groupings associated in Chinese historical memory with the founding of the first Three Dynasties in the second millennium B.C.E.: Xia (ca. 1953–1555 B.C.E.), Shang (1554–1046 B.C.E.),

²⁰ *Han shu*, 26.1306.

and Zhou (1046–256 B.C.E.).²¹ It was also Mencius, significantly, who commented on the predictive potential of astronomical cycles:

All who speak about the natures [of things] have only cause and effect to reason from, and nothing else. The value of phenomena lies in their naturalness. What I hate in your learned men is the way they bore out their conclusions. If they would act as did Yü the Great when he conveyed away the waters, there would be nothing to dislike in their learning. He did it in such a way as to give himself no trouble [i.e., by realising that that water will flow downhill and not trying to make it do the opposite]. If your learned men would act thus, their knowledge would be great. Consider the heavens so high and the stars so distant. If we have investigated their phenomena we may, while yet sitting in the same place, go back to the solstice of a thousand years ago.²²

Scholars disagree on the interpretation of *gu*, “underlying principle; cause and effect,” in the above passage and hence on whether Mencius’s claim is prospective or retrospective (more likely, perhaps), but either way the potential for extrapolation is explicit. It is curious that the astrologers seem never to have followed up on the implications of Mencius’s assertion for forecasting the future.

GENERAL ASTROLOGY IN THE LATER EMPIRE

The tension between the regular and the anomalous, already making itself felt in preimperial and Han-period Five Phases metaphysical speculation (witness the early skepticism of the influential Confucian rationalist, Xunzi [310–237 B.C.E.], with regard to the supernatural), came increasingly to the fore in relation to astral omens, leading by the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) to a significant shift in thinking

²¹ Pankenier, “Cosmo-political Background of Heaven’s Mandate,” pp. 121–176.

²² Mencius, IV. B (26), trans. Joseph Needham et al., *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 3, *Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 196. Cf. D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 133: “Mencius said: ‘in talking about human nature people in the world merely follow former theories. They do so because these theories can be explained with ease. What they dislike in clever men is that they bore their way through. If clever men could act as Yü did in guiding the flood-waters, then there would be nothing to dislike in them. Yü guided the water by imposing nothing on it that was against its natural tendency. If clever men can also do this, then great indeed will their cleverness be. In spite of the height of the heavens and the distance of the heavenly bodies, if one seeks out former instances, one can calculate the solstices of a thousand years hence without stirring from one’s seat.’”

about the implications of such phenomena for imperial policy. Astrology gradually became “domesticated,” the emperor and scholar-officials at court eventually adopting a posture that has been described as “pragmatic agnosticism.”²³

This process and the jockeying for power and influence between scholar-officials and bureaucrats for which the eleventh-century astrological debates served as proxies have been analyzed by Wu Yiyi, who focused a study on precisely the half-century when some of the most impressive astral anomalies occurred: the sudden appearance of two spectacular “guest stars” (supernovas) in 1006 and 1054 (as well as comets, meteors, and an impressive planetary grouping in 1007). The supernovas each took many months to fade away, occasioning great disquiet and considerable debate at court, not least since the loss of the northwest and northeast of the country to the Xi Xia (1032–1227) and Liao (907–1125) dynasties and an uneasy peace along the frontier bought with heavy payments of tribute meant that the future of the Northern Song dynasty was far from secure. The ominous external situation provided ample fodder for the manipulation of astral omens by one court faction or another in an effort to advance their political fortunes, so it is noteworthy that it was at precisely this juncture that a pragmatic agnosticism was able to assert itself.

How perturbed the popular imagination was by these eleventh-century omens is impossible to say because the sources are largely silent on popular sentiment. Dabbling in astronomy and the calendar had often been proscribed activity (though this was seldom strictly enforced), and in this period prognostication texts were closely held within the Imperial Directorate of Astronomy, so that popular speculation on these matters may well have been subdued, certainly by comparison with the situation in Europe in the sixteenth century, as we shall see. Ordinary people had plenty of other insecurities to worry

²³ The term “pragmatic agnosticism” was coined by Wu Yiyi in his “Auspicious Omens and Their Consequences: Zhen-Ren (1006–1066) Literati’s Perception of Astral Anomalies” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1990), p. 252. A representative example of this posture is that of Sima Guang (1019–1086): “From ancient dynasties on, historians kept records of meteors as weird and anomalous events . . . but meteors appear every night and are uncountable in number, [coming] without regard to the blameworthiness or prosperity of the Empire. Even regular observations cannot provide a complete record; it is a meaningless waste of effort.” The guidance regarding anomalies which Sima Guang offered his collaborators in compiling the *Zizhi tongjian* was, “If the anomalies were nothing more than weird prodigies, please feel free to omit them”; for these and other examples, see Wu Yiyi, “Auspicious Omens,” 256ff.; cf. also Xu Fengxian, “Zhongguo gudai yichang tianxiang guan,” p. 13.

about; in any case, there were no chiliastic *fin de dynastie* mass movements in China reminiscent of the notorious Yellow Turbans rebellion of 184 C.E., a widespread, coordinated uprising based on a potent combination of astrology, numerology, faith healing, and Taoist mysticism that precipitated the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 C.E.

1524 IN MING CHINA

Following the cataclysm of the Mongol conquest, it is not surprising that the previous Song agnosticism with regard to astrology was less in evidence. The Mongol or Yuan court (1271–1368) had been much more receptive to unorthodox and esoteric teachings, astrology among them, and in the Ming dynasty portent astrology still found favor at court.²⁴ Indeed, even in the late sixteenth century Zhu Guozhen (1558–1632; *jinshi* 1579²⁵) matter-of-factly asserted that “the court placed great stress on heavenly pattern reading (*tianwen*).”²⁶

This is no doubt true of Emperor Shizong, Zhu Houcong (1521–1567), eleventh (Jiajing) emperor of the Ming dynasty, a tyrant who besides his notorious cruelty also came to be noted for persistent devotion to Taoist rites, the search for immortality through magic and alchemy, and an interest in omens. Zhu Houcong was still a minor of fourteen when he ascended the throne, and his adamant refusal to accede to protocol and allow himself to be adopted into the direct line of succession precipitated what is known to history as the Great Rites Controversy, which culminated in 1524.²⁷ This struggle for autocratic

²⁴ Evidenced by the fact that there was a report of a “simultaneous appearance” of the five planets during the Hongwu reign period (1368–1398) of the Ming founder Taizu; see below.

²⁵ The *jinshi* “presented scholar” degree was the most prestigious qualification to which one could aspire as an outcome of a grueling years-long series of district, provincial, and metropolitan civil service examinations. It was a requirement for appointment to the highest echelons of officialdom.

²⁶ See Zhu Guozhen, *Yong chuang xiao pin* (1622) in *Biji mingjia daodu biji congshu*, 2nd ser. (Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1998), 15.329. According to John B. Henderson, “Cosmological skepticism did not flourish in early and mid-Ming China. On the contrary, the various divinatory and magical arts, based ultimately on correlative cosmology, enjoyed almost unprecedented support from both state and literati during this era”; see Henderson, *Development and Decline*, p. 132. On astral and other omens, see also F. W. Mote and D. Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7, *The Ming Dynasty 1368–1644, Part 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 136, 326, 479.

²⁷ For the succession controversy, see Carney T. Fisher, *The Chosen One: Succession and Adoption in the Court of Ming Shizong* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990).

power in the face of strenuous opposition by officialdom, led by the imperious grand secretary Yang Tinghe (1459–1529; *jinshi* 1478), consumed the court for the first few years of his reign, but Zhu Houcong refused to budge in his insistence on posthumously elevating his father to the status of emperor, with attendant rites. In August 1524 a protest demonstration by two hundred officials kneeling and wailing outside the court gates brought down the emperor's wrath on more than one hundred of them, who were flogged and imprisoned; many died from the beatings and lengthy imprisonment. In the end, following the retirement of Grand Secretary Yang, the emperor's rigid refusal to give ground gradually carried the day.²⁸ An account of Zhu Houcong's reign characterizes the period this way: "In his time the rich grew richer and the poor became impoverished, particularly in the lower Yangtze area. Wealth bred leisure, which demanded luxuries and entertainment: it also encouraged the development of theatre, art, literature, and printing."²⁹

Outside the court the empire was in turmoil. Before the climax of the Rites Controversy that summer ground tremors were felt across a wide area: "In a period of ten months, from July 1523 to May 1524, as many as thirty-eight were recorded. Nanking, which has not been known in recent years to have earthquakes, reported fifteen in one month in 1524, and six in a single day."³⁰ The external affairs of the Jiajing period were no less fraught, with Mongol raiders pillaging and killing virtually at will all along the northern frontier from the northwest to the northeast, especially during the later years. The Datong border garrison on the northern frontier staged two revolts in 1524. If ever there was a time to attach significance to celestial signs of Heaven's intentions, 1524 ought to have been it.

A memorial to the emperor by the official Wu Yipeng (*jinshi* 1493) enumerated the disasters and anomalies that occurred between the late summer of 1523 and mid spring of 1524 and entreated the emperor to act. At the time, Wu was a high-ranking attendant gentle-

²⁸ Mote and Twitchett, *The Cambridge History of China*, 7:440–450, 479. *The Cambridge History* sums up his reign this way: "The Chia-ching [Jiajing] emperor continued to rule in the brutal and despotic style of his cousin. He overrode all counsel and precedent to get what he wanted; he tolerated no interference, no criticism of his person or his policies. His officials retained their positions so long as they carried out his will without question and quickly lost them when they did not or could not" (p. 450).

²⁹ Lincoln C. Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, 1364–1644 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 315.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

man in the Bureau of Rites who had previously remonstrated with the emperor concerning the latter's ritual excess. In late spring of 1524, Wu memorialized:

Yipeng earnestly reports there are disasters and anomalies in all quarters. "It is said that since the sixth month of last year through the second month of this year, in that space of time the sky has rung three times, the earth has quaked thirty-eight times, in autumn and winter there was thunder, lightning, and hail eighteen times, one each of windstorms, fog, fissures in the ground, landslides, and monstrous births, and on two occasions the starving turned to cannibalism: there are twice as many extraordinary incidents as in former times. I wish that your Majesty would be first to lead your masses of workers in rescuing the sick and suffering, cease construction projects, place your trust in your officials, accept loyal remonstrance, and in this way return to Heaven's intention." The Emperor was concerned and responded with a decree.³¹

This was before the confrontation between the emperor and his high officials in the summer of 1524. As an old and experienced official, Wu still enjoyed Emperor Shizong's respect, and his memorial was duly circumspect. As we shall see, a memorial along essentially the same lines submitted later by a much less experienced official met with harsh retribution.³²

THE REACTION TO THE PLANETARY OMEN

The 1524 planetary portent is recorded in typically minimalist fashion in the official *History of the Ming Dynasty*, though the date of closest approach is accurately reported: "In the 1st month of the 3rd year of the Jiajing reign period, on day *renwu* [20 February], the five planets gath-

³¹ Wu Yipeng's biography and several of his memorials are in *Ming shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), pp. 191, 5,061–5,063. Because of the political sensitivity of astrological prognostication, the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, banned the private study of astrology and strictly prohibited the transfer of officials from the Astronomical Bureau to other positions in the bureaucracy. As will become quite evident here, however, although the ban in the *Great Ming Code* remained in force throughout the dynasty, it was not strictly enforced after Zhu Yuanzhang's reign and did little to inhibit speculation during the Jiajing reign of Emperor Shizong. For a recent study of the ban and reaction to it by officialdom, see Shin Min Cheol, "The Ban on the Private Study of Astrology and Publication of Books on Astrology in Ming Dynasty: Ideas and Reality" [in Korean], *Korean History of Science Society* 27, no. 2 (2007): 231–260.

³² For Shizong's decree in response, see below and n. 56.

ered in (lunar lodge) Yingshi.”³³ That there is a good deal more to this episode than meets the eye may be gleaned from the private musings of literati observers of court affairs such as Lang Ying (1487–ca. 1566),³⁴ who held no official position, and the aforementioned Zhu Guozhen (1558–1632). Lang Ying lived through the entire Jiajing reign period and witnessed the events of 1524. He was a bibliophile and connoisseur who devoted his whole life to scholarship. He was a perceptive observer of state affairs and the author of a famous miscellany, *Qixiu leigao*, containing observations on diverse subjects ranging from the history of the early Ming dynasty to contemporary affairs. In contrast, Zhu Guozhen, writing nearly a century later, was a very high-ranking official who served concurrently from 1623 as minister in the Ministry of Rites and grand secretary in the Hall of Literary Profundity, as well as sometime tutor to the heir apparent. In addition, Zhu was a noted historian and author of a substantial history of the Ming dynasty.

A BENIGN PROGNOSTICATION

The first and most extensive account of the 1524 planetary portent, Lang Ying’s, reads as follows:

When the Zhou were about to attack Yin [i.e., the Shang Dynasty], the five planets gathered in Fang [Sco]. When Duke Huan of [the state of] Qi was about to become Hegemon, the five planets gathered in Ji [Sgr]. In the 1st year of Emperor Gao[-zu of the Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.E.], the five planets gathered in Dongjing [Gem]. The retainer Zhang Er [King of Zhao] said, Dongjing is the allocated field of [the state of] Qin. The King of Han should enter Qin and take all under Heaven; and so it turned out before long [in 202 B.C.E.]. In the 8th month of the 3rd year of the *Kaiyuan* reign period [715 C.E.] of Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty, the five planets gathered in Ji [Sgr] and Wei [Sco]. The prognostication said: “the virtuous will celebrate, while the one lacking virtue will suffer.”³⁵ As expected, the *Kaiyuan* reign period was well ordered, but

³³ *Ming shi*, 26.377.

³⁴ His biography is found in Goodrich et al., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, p. 791.

³⁵ This grouping also figures in Zhu Guozhen’s discussion below. The record is in *Xin Tang shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 33.865; cf. Zhentao Xu, David W. Pankenier, Jiang Yaotiao, *East Asian Archaeoastronomy: Historical Records of Astronomical Observations of China, Japan and Korea* (Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach, 2000), p. 247. More impressive groupings on 15 April 730 and 30 September 748 apparently went completely unnoticed, as neither is recorded in *Tang shu*; see De Meis and Meeus, “Quintuple Planetary Groupings,” p. 295.

the *Tianbao* reign period [742–755] was chaotic. In the 11th month of the 3rd year of the *Jianlong* reign period [962] of Taizu of the Song dynasty, the five planets gathered in Kui [Psc]. The prognosticator said: “a virtuous one will receive the Mandate, possess the four quarters, and his posterity will flourish.”³⁶ Afterward, [Taizu’s] reign endured many years, as expected. To my mind the start of the Lian, Luo, Guan, and Min teachings all spring from this.³⁷ During the *Hongwu* reign period [1368–1398], the five planets also gathered in Kui. I believe the prognostication must come to pass as in the Song. In the 2nd year of the *Jiajing* reign period [*sic*; 1523], the five planets gathered in [Ying-]shi. I said to someone: “Shi [lit. ‘Hall’] is Yingshi ‘Lay out the Hall.’ Gan De and Shi Shen [fourth-century B.C.E. astrologers] both indicated that ‘Hall’ stands for the Great Ancestral Temple. I know from this that the country is bound to have occasion to celebrate some event in the Great Ancestral Temple and in this way bring glory and greatness to the state.” By the 15th year of the *Jiajing* reign period [1536], great construction projects were set in motion and the Nine Temples were renovated [in response to the omen]. When all under Heaven is cultured, the Way of Heaven is manifest. Alas! From the Zhou dynasty to the present is more than 2,800 years, and yet the five planets have only gathered as rarely as this, while cases of a single planet trespassing on a lunar mansion are numerous indeed! Alas! Alas! From this it is evident that peace and good order are the exception, while unrest and disorder are the rule!³⁸

Several things are worthy of note in this passage. First, Lang Ying cites eight occasions when gatherings of the five planets carried dynastic implications. The next to last of these, which was supposed to have occurred during the reign of the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang, provides a good illustration of how a comparatively inconspicuous phenomenon could be pressed into service if circumstances demanded.³⁹ Lang Ying’s account of the 1524 prognostication predicting a replication of the glorious Song Dynasty precedent—“I believe the prognostication must come to pass as in the Song”—is a good illustration of the kind of philological “spin” designed to divert attention in a less

³⁶ Paraphrasing *Shiji*, 27.1321. However, the prognostication in *Shiji* continues, “but the one lacking in virtue suffers calamities to the point of destruction.”

³⁷ These are the four major schools of Song dynasty Neo-Confucian philosophy.

³⁸ *Qixiu leigao*, *Ming Qing biji congkan* ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1961), vol. 1, 25.

³⁹ The record is dated *Hongwu* eighteenth year, second month (24 March 1385) and states only that “the five planets appeared simultaneously”; in fact, they were separated by some 54°. At the time of a subsequent report of their “all appearing” two years later (19 February 1387), they were spread across the entire sky (over 150°); see *Ming shi*, 26, 376.

ominous direction. Oddly enough, the date given for the Jiajing planetary event is a year off, since the text places it in 1523, though this is probably the result of a copyist's error. Space does not permit thorough study of the other precedents, but it will be instructive to describe briefly the circumstances.

I have already alluded to the spectacular planetary groupings in the Three Dynasties period and the much less impressive alignment of 205 B.C.E. that inaugurated the Han dynasty.⁴⁰ The account of the grouping presaging the ascendancy of Duke Huan of Qi in the seventh century B.C.E., unlike the earlier precedents, which are amply documented already by the Han dynasty, makes its first appearance more than one thousand years after the fact in the Songshu "Treatise on Astrology" in the late fifth century, hence it is somewhat suspect.⁴¹ Lang Ying is confused about the Tang precedent. There was no grouping in 715, nor is there any such record in *The History of the Tang Dynasty*. There was, however, an alignment observed in Wei (Sco) near the end of Xuan-

⁴⁰ For discussion of the parallel between the Han portent and earlier precedents, see David W. Pankenier, "Applied Field-Allocation Astrology in Zhou China: Duke Wen of Jin and the Battle of Chengpu (632 B.C.)," 274ff.

⁴¹ *Song shu*, 25.735. Recently, Salvo De Meis ("L'astronomia dello Shi-King e di altri classici cinesi: Il parte," *Giornale di Astronomia: Revista di informazione, cultura e didattica della Società Astronomica Italiana* 32, no. 2 [2006]: 18) has focused on an impressive grouping on 11 January 661 B.C.E. as a possible candidate, at which time the five planets were located in Sagittarius-Capricorn with a maximum separation of just over 17°. It is worth mentioning in this context a comment attributed to Emperor Taizong (r. 627–649), cofounder of the Tang Dynasty. Though considered a no-nonsense rationalist, the following exchange recorded by a high Tang official gives an impression of contemporary views on planetary portents:

Taizong asked a retainer, "For an emperor to rise he needs must have Heaven's Mandate, [his position] is not achieved by luck." Fang Xuanling replied, "One who would rule as King must have Heaven's Mandate." Taizong said, "What you say is right. When I observe the Kings of old who possessed Heaven's Mandate, their compelling influence was as if divinely inspired, as if they arrived at their objective without acting; those who lacked Heaven's Mandate in the end only met with destruction. Anciently, King Wen of Zhou and Emperor Gaozu of Han initiated grand sacrifices, and first received the Mandate, thereupon the Red Sparrow [augury] came; they first made their reputation, and then the Five Planets gathered. Thus when combined with what Heaven displays above, the verification is never empty. If not preordained by Heaven, the true course is never inappropriately achieved. If I had served the Sui Dynasty, I would not have risen beyond [the rank of] Capital Guard; indeed, as I am lazy and slow to act, I would not have acted as time required." The Duke (Fang Xuanling) said: "In the *Changes* it says, 'Concealed dragon, do not act.' Which is to say that at a time when sagely virtue is in concealment, one does not act in a manner known to one and all, and so, when Gaozu of Han served the Qin, he did not rise above the post of headman of a township."

See Wang Fangqing (fl. ca. 680), *Wei Zheng Gong jian lu*, 4.13b (Wen ge yuan *Siku quanshu* digital edition).

zong's reign (712–756; see below).⁴² On the date given by Lang Ying in the year 715, only Jupiter was located in lunar lodge Ji “Winnowing Basket” in Sagittarius. Lang Ying also misdates the Song precedent. This is a reference to a fortuitous early Song planetary cluster in mid April of 967, the fifth year of the Qiande reign period (963–967) of Taizu, the first emperor of the Northern Song dynasty. The five planets massed in Pisces within about 20° of each other.⁴³

Lang Ying was not the only literatus to put a positive spin on the celestial phenomenon of 1524. The *History of the Ming Dynasty* also records celebratory and commemorative hymns and music composed for performance at formal banquets. Two of these congratulatory hymns on the theme “Heaven Mandates the Virtuous,” which were composed specifically for performance at court during the Jiajing period, are contemporaneous with the events in question since they refer explicitly to the auspicious implications of the 1524 planetary massing in Yingshi. They offer an example of the kind of predictably diversionary court entertainment one might expect. The first of these, *Wan sui yue* (lit. “10,000 Year’s Longevity Music”),⁴⁴ suffices to give a taste of the extravagantly allusive and flattering language employed:

A Son of Heaven arises in an Age of Great Peace—the days are
flourishing;
At the start of [Book of Changes hexagram] Lü, “accretion of yang
force”—[signifying] a return to Primal Auspiciousness;
The sweet wine springs and the Spirit Fungus—don’t collect
from them!
Of the Five Planets it’s been said—they gathered in [lunar lodge] Shi.

⁴² It is noteworthy that there was a spectacular 6° grouping in Cancer-Leo slightly before the beginning of Xuanzong’s reign in late June of the year 710, the planets reaching minimum separation on June 25. This occurred just weeks before the death of Emperor Zhongzong and the accession of Ruizong and may have been overlooked for that reason. It is not recorded in *Tang shu*. This particular grouping of planets was, however, a focus of intense interest by the Maya, who conducted a major ritual on that day in Naranjo, and used the motions of Jupiter and Saturn to time a military attack on Yaxha; see Donald W. Olson and Brian D. White, “A Planetary Grouping in Maya Times,” *Sky and Telescope* 97, no. 2 (August 1997): 63–64. For military associations of Jupiter and Saturn in Mayan astrology, see Linda Schele and David Freidel, *Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: Wm. Morrow, 1990). Lang Ying overlooked a 34° alignment of all five planets in Cancer-Leo in the third year of Xuanzong’s successor, Daizong (766–779), carrying the prognostication, “beneficial for China”; see *Xin Tang shu*, 33, 866.

⁴³ This grouping is amply documented in Song sources; see *Song shi* “Tianwen zhi,” chap. 26; Wen Ying, *Yuhu qinghua* (1078), chap. 2; also Xu et al., *East Asian Archaeoastronomy*, p. 249. For a recent study of its political and cultural impact, see Wei Bing, “Wuxing ju Kui tianxiang yu Song dai wen zhi zhi yun,” *Wen shi zhe* 4 (November 4, 2005): 27–34.

⁴⁴ *Ming shi*, 63, 1577.

Perhaps more interesting was the somewhat later positive interpretation, popular among some devotees of the philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529), a proponent of a radical interpretation of neo-Confucianism, that the planetary portent signaled the ascendancy of Wang's intuitive school of mind over the orthodox rationalism of the Song Dynasty Cheng-Zhu school of principle to which Lang Ying already alluded. None other than the eminent Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) made this assertion more than once in his "Case Studies of Ming Confucians," China's first intellectual history.⁴⁵ Like other seemingly prescient prognostications, this one has a definite hagiographical feel, and it is doubtful that it represents a view current in the 1520s, since Wang Yangming's thought became influential only after his death in 1529. Even though court astrology typically concerned itself with affairs of state, Huang Zongxi's report of such an opinion—ending with a rhetorical "How could it not be Heaven's doing?"—is in keeping with the venerable tradition that Confucius's (551–479 B.C.E.) own symbolic elevation to the status of "uncrowned king" was likewise heralded by a highly auspicious sign: the capture of a *qilin* ("unicorn").

How perturbed the popular imagination was in China in 1524 is difficult to say. That knowledge of the celestial phenomenon was widespread among the literate elite is undeniable, however, since period obituaries inscribed on tomb stele specifically mention it, in one case actually dating the birth of the individual to the very day of the planetary massing: "born in the 3rd year *jiashen* of the *Jiajing* reign period, first month, on the seventeenth day; on this day the five planets gathered in Jupiter station Zouzi [Aqr-Psc]."⁴⁶ Clearly, in the mind of the author of that memorial, Guo Fei (1529–1605), this must have been a propitious sign or he could never have alluded to it in such a context.

AN OMINOUS PROGNOSTICATION

Now, let us have a look at what Zhu Guozhen has to say about these same events nearly a century later. In his miscellany *Yong chuang xiao pin* (1622) titled "Gatherings of the Five Planets," Zhu reports a prognostication rather different from Lang Ying's. According to Zhu:

⁴⁵ See *Ming Ru xue an* (Taipei: Heluo tushu gongsi, 1974), 14.28 and 62.36. Huang asserts that the planetary portent of 1133 signaled the rise of the Cheng-Zhu school and that "those who know" say that the planetary massing of 1524 presaged the flourishing of Wang Yangming's thought.

⁴⁶ See *Ming wen hai*, Wen yuan ge *Siku quanshu* digital edition, 450.38b.

In the 3rd year of the *Jiaging* reign period [1524], the five planets gathered in Yingshi. The Director of Astronomy, Le Huo, submitted an opinion: “When the planets gather, either there is great good fortune or there is great calamity. When they gathered in Fang [Sco] Zhou flourished; when they gathered in Ji [Sgr] Qi became Hegemon; when the Han arose they gathered in Dongjing [Gem]; Song prospered when they gathered in Kui [Psc]. In the *Tianbao* reign period [of Tang, 742–756] they gathered in Wei [Sco-Sgr], and the An Lushan rebellion erupted.⁴⁷ The relevant prognostication is: ‘when armies throughout the realm are plotting, the planets gather in Yingshi.’”⁴⁸

Zhu Guozhen leaves it at that, evidently confident that knowledgeable readers will be able to draw their own conclusions. However, an entry in the *Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*, based on court diaries and daily administrative records, quotes at length from Le Huo’s admonition to the emperor that immediately followed his prognostication. Le Huo first recited a litany of difficulties confronting the empire: unrest along the inland frontiers, banditry in the Central Plain, piracy along the southeast coast, economic and social decline, exploitation of the peasantry, and neglect of infrastructure and husbandry. From their juxtaposition with the planetary portent, the linkage in his mind between cause and effect is patently clear. Le Huo then says: “I hope that His Majesty will promote the worthy, accept remonstrance, cultivate himself, settle the populace, desist from construction projects, and screen himself off from pleasures and indulgences, in order externally to cut off the marauders at the gates, and to put an end to strife within.”⁴⁹ But, the *Veritable Records* elides a crucial part of the memorial. A quotation in *Jiangxi tongzhi* (gazetteer) records that Le Huo also said this:

⁴⁷ The five planets drew to within about 30° of each other, actually no more impressive a grouping than Gaozu’s in 205 B.C.E. The An Lushan rebellion, which nearly toppled the dynasty, lasted from 755–763. The planetary alignment occurred in the 8th month (early October) of the 9th year of the *Tianbao* reign period, or 750. It is reported in *Xin Tang shu*, 33, 865; see Xu et al., *East Asian Archaeoastronomy*, p. 247.

⁴⁸ See Zhu Guozhen, *Yong chuang xiao pin*, chap. 15. The other source that quotes the precise wording of Le Huo’s memorial with its five historical precedents and ominous portent is the great Qing Dynasty scholar Yan Ruoqu’s (1635–1704) *Qian qiu zha ji* (Wen yuan ge *Siku quanshu* digital edition, 1.24b). Also worth mentioning is the opinion of Zhang Xuan (1558–1641; *juren* “selected scholar,” 1582), who also cites the five historical precedents while expressing his bafflement that such figures as the Spring and Autumn period hegemon Duke Huan of Qi and the Tang rebel An Lushan were deemed worthy of celestial omens. This implies that he too saw the signs as portending a reassignment of Heaven’s Mandate to rule; see his *Yi yue* (Wen yuan ge *Siku quanshu* digital edition, 3.9b). Zhang Xuan’s biography is in Goodrich et al., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, p. 78.

⁴⁹ See *Ming shilu* (Beijing: Beijing Ai Rusheng shu zi hua jishu yanjiu zhongxin, n.d.), pp. 36, 319, for 19 March 1524 (third year *Jiaging* reign period, second month, day *jiyou*).

*The prognostication texts say that when the Five Planets gather, this means a change of kingship: the virtuous one has occasion to celebrate and the one lacking in virtue is destroyed. [The Five Planets] gathered in Fang and the Zhou sacrifices flourished, when they gathered in Ji, Duke Huan of Qi became Hegemon; when Han arose they gathered in Jing; and when Song flourished they gathered in Kui. These four cases, all occurred at times of radical change, the one prospering and the other meeting with disaster—there is clearly no mistaking it. Only when they gathered in Wei and Ji in the Tianbao reign period was the virtue of Tang misguided, and in the end there was the [An] Lushan rebellion. Your Imperial Majesty has arisen in mid-dynasty, and the Five Planets have fittingly gathered. How could one not all the more burnish sagely virtue in order to be granted this great beneficence?*⁵⁰

Recalling the highly charged atmosphere at court in 1524, one must admire Le Huo's nerve in proffering the above opinion to the emperor. Having only recently been promoted in 1521 to the post of vice director in the Directorate of Astronomy, Le Huo had already earned a reputation as a competent astronomer.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, however, the *Jiangxi Gazetteer* goes on to report that once the memorial was submitted Le Huo was immediately thrown into prison and was spared only through the intercession of high officials, after which he was banished to a lowly post far from court.

Le Huo is otherwise seldom mentioned in the standard histories of the period, but he does figure prominently in a memorial preserved in the brief biography of another freshman court official, Wei Shangchen,⁵² a newly minted *jinshi* (1522) serving in his first posting as a case reviewer in the court of judicial review. It was Wei's unhappy lot to be assigned to review the cases of the officials who were condemned as the notorious Great Rites Controversy reached its climax in late summer 1524. According to Wei, since he took up his post, not a day had passed without new cases of official misconduct being referred to him. In his memorial, Wei wrote in defense of forty-five accused and imprisoned high officials, mentioning many by name, including

⁵⁰ *Jiangxi tongzhi*, Wen yuan ge *Siku quanshu* digital edition, 81.47b; the emphasis is, of course, mine.

⁵¹ For a critical evaluation of the performance of the Directorate of Astronomy during the Ming Dynasty, see Thatcher E. Deane, "Instruments and Observation at the Imperial Astronomical Bureau during the Ming Dynasty," *Osiris*, 2nd ser., Instruments, (1994): 126–140.

⁵² His biography, which quotes the memorial, is in *Ming shi*, 208, 5500.

Le Huo. Wei considered all of them wrongly indicted and deserving of pardon. In closing his plea to the emperor, Wei cited the numerous natural calamities causing great distress throughout the empire, as well as heavenly signs, all of which “chill the heart” of any who are aware of what is happening. The reference to signs in the heavens is another clear indication that, as an apparent response to current affairs, the ominous planetary grouping provoked more official consternation than the official record would otherwise seem to suggest. Wei concluded his memorial by proposing that pardons or exoneration of the accused and compensation for the families of the dead were the means to relieve the suffering caused by the many disasters. In making policy suggestions, Wei too was imprudent. The emperor’s response to Wei Shangchen’s “seeking to make his reputation peddling frankness” was to have him banished to a remote prefecture in Qingjiang, Jiangxi, to serve as a lowly jailer.

This contrast between divergent interpretations offers a good illustration of the practice of court astrology in late imperial China. The laudatory prognostications are mainly of interest as an illustration of the kind of “spin” that could be placed on astronomical events if one were sufficiently creative in massaging the standard pronostics.⁵³ With regard to the 1524 planetary massing, after the fact the officially sanctioned position became: “Shi [‘Hall’] stands for the Great Ancestral Temple . . . the country is bound to have occasion to celebrate some event in the Great Temple and in this way bring glory and greatness to the state.” But it was not until twelve years later, after the appearance of Halley’s Comet in 1533, that the Nine Temples were belatedly renovated to fulfill the prognostication. The professional astronomer Le Huo, on the other hand, was true to his calling in reporting the precedents. Looking carefully at the five officially recognized portents, the implications, “when the planets gather, either there is great good fortune or there is great calamity,” and “when armies throughout the realm are plotting, the planets gather in Yingshi,” are unmistakable. When the five planets gathered at the beginning of a regime they heralded the rise of three prestigious dynasties Zhou, Han, and Song, and a hegemon, Duke Huan of Qi. When they gathered in mid dynasty, by

⁵³ For another interpretation of the planetary portent along much the same lines as Lang Ying’s, see Wang Yingdian’s, *Tong wen bei kao* (1557), in the Qing dynasty collection *Liu yi zhi yi lu*, Wen yuan ge *Siku quanshu* digital edition, 269.29a.

contrast, as in the case of the Tang emperor Xuanzong, they foretold imminent disaster in the form of armed rebellion.⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, Emperor Shizong was taking no chances. A senior imperial censor, Jin Xianmin (*jinsi* 1484), learning of the military implications of the planetary portent, recommended to the emperor that inspectors of the various defense commands make preparations for battle. This recommendation Emperor Shizong acceded to.⁵⁵ Despite the auspicious prognostication and congratulatory hymns that reflected the court view, the emperor was still attentive enough to ritual form to follow traditionally prescribed protocol. For a ruler in the late imperial period this meant issuing a decree assuming personal responsibility for the disequilibrium of the cosmic forces arising from misgovernment and for the resulting natural disasters and calamities visited on the empire. While one might assume this was a mere formality by this late date, a mere ceremonial nod in the direction of tradition, in the case of an individual as superstitious as Emperor Shizong, no matter how tyrannical and vindictive he was, he may not have been wholly immune to disquiet. The imperial decree that circulated throughout the government read: "Heaven displays warnings and disasters, and anomalies are frequent. With regard to our person, vigilantly and fearfully we will reform our behavior and, together with the senior and junior officials and workers of the inner and outer courts, make extra efforts to mend our ways and examine ourselves critically, in order to return to what Heaven intends."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Le Huo's prognostication and admonition are cited approvingly by the classical scholar Zhang Huang (1527–1608), his near contemporary, in Zhang's encyclopedic *Tu shu bian* (1577), *Wen yuan ge Siku quanshu* digital edition, 25.45a. For Zhang Huang's biography, see Goodrich, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, p. 83.

⁵⁵ *Ming shi*, 194, 5141.

⁵⁶ The wording of Emperor Shizong's decree of the third year of Jiajing survives in *Nan gong zou gao* (ca. 1535), a collection of memorials authored by Xia Yan (Xia Wanchun; 1631–1647, *jinsi* 1517). Comparison with other similar imperial decrees preserved in the same section in chapter 5 on "Memorials on Disasters and Anomalies" shows that their form and substance varied only minimally. After quoting the emperor's order, Xia Yan helpfully continues in his own words: "checking this against earlier historical records, only the [Tang Dynasty] Tianbao reign period [planetary massing] was inauspicious, for Emperor Xuanzong's rule was dissipated." This confirms that this 1524 decree was Emperor Shizong's official response to this particular celestial omen. It also suggests why, since four of the five historical precedents were seen as auspicious, some were able to put forward sanguine opinions based merely on the percentages. In 1524, Xia Yan was a supervising secretary in the Ministry of War in Nanjing. His talent and ambition ultimately led to his elevation to the highest office of chief grand secretary in 1539, concentrating great power and authority in his hands. See *Nan gong zou gao*, *Wen yuan ge Siku quanshu* digital edition, 5.19b. Xia Yan's biography is in Goodrich et al., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, p. 527.

PLANETS, PERIODS, AND PROPHECY IN THE WEST

At about the same time that the great Confucian Mencius (372–289 B.C.E.) was talking about a five-hundred-year period for the emergence of sages in China, in the *Timaeus* (39D) Plato (427–348 B.C.E.) asserted that the “perfect year” began with a conjunction of all the planets. Soon after, the Babylonian Berosus (fl. ca. 300 B.C.E.) introduced the theory that the world, having begun with a conjunction of planets, would end with another.⁵⁷ In Qin and Han China it was axiomatic that the foundational Zhuanxu calendar began with a conjunction of the five planets, the Sun, and the Moon at a precise degree of longitude—indeed, it was mathematically necessary. The contrast, wherein the same astronomical phenomenon marks the beginning of the world on the one hand, and the introduction of a bureaucratic instrument for time management on the other, is instructive.

In China pretensions to universality provided a powerful ideological impetus for the foundation of empire, and after unification, with no serious challengers to China’s status as the supremely dominant civilization in East Asia, apart from the notion of a dynastic cycle, the idea of pluralism in religious and political regimes could emerge only with difficulty. This may be part of the explanation why the “conjunctionist thesis” failed to take root, in spite of preimperial speculation along those lines. Unlike the theory of historical change based on the alternation of five elemental phases, a theory that was soon diverted into more harmless pursuits than dynastic politics (such as the divining of lucky days and the interpretation of the natural world), the potential that planetary resonance periods offered for the formulation of an astrological history was simply ignored. Part of the explanation too may have been that as late as the Tang dynasty it was still believed that the regularity of planetary periods could not be counted on, being contingent and subject to manipulation by heaven.⁵⁸

In the eastern Mediterranean world the situation was rather different. Given the plurality of ancient civilizations competing for imperial supremacy there, and under the influence of Babylonian, Indian, and Persian astrology, theories of astrological history based on plan-

⁵⁷ See Nicholas Campion, *The Great Year: Astrology, Millenarianism and History in the Western Tradition* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

⁵⁸ See David W. Pankenier, “Astronomical Dates in Shang and Western Zhou,” *Early China* 7 (1981–1982): 17.

etary resonance periods did emerge. In Indian astrology the Kaliyuga epoch in which we find ourselves began with a conjunction in 3102 B.C.E., initiating a period of 432,000 years at the end of which the world would end and begin anew.⁵⁹ Expanding on this astronomically derived epoch, Greek and Persian traditions held that this was also the date of the Flood. With this the stage was set for the development of contending theories of astrological history, one theocentric and informed by Judeo-Christian mysticism and eschatology, the other naturalistic and concerned with the “natural science” of astrology and with discovering the principles of its functioning. The two are logically incompatible.

According to Krzysztof Pomian:

Until the sixteenth century the existence of a connexion between celestial and terrestrial bodies and between celestial and terrestrial events was admitted by everyone as self-evident. But on the nature of this connexion there was no agreement. The augustinian current considered celestial events as signs of terrestrial ones. The former announce the latter, because God conferred upon them such a meaning. And this meaning can be truly understood only by those who are looking on the skies guided by the divinely inspired scriptures. To such an attitude . . . the aristotelians opposed their conviction that celestial events are causes of terrestrial ones. In order to understand their action one has therefore to inquire into their powers in conformity with the principles of natural science. Between these two poles lay an entire spectrum of intermediate positions which tried to reconcile or synthesize Augustine with Aristotle, theology with physics and astronomy, significance with causality, prophecy with prediction.⁶⁰

Whatever one's position about causality in regard to celestial bodies, there was a fundamental distinction between the classical and Christian perspectives with regard to forecasting the future: “the fulfillment of prophecies as understood by the Old and New Testament writers is entirely different from the verification of prognostications concerning historico-natural events.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, as has long been observed, both are integral aspects of the Judeo-Christian and Europe-centered orientation characteristic of the tradition of philosophy of history in the West.

⁵⁹ E. S. Kennedy, “Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran,” *ISIS* 54, no. 2 (1963): 229–246.

⁶⁰ Pomian, “Astrology as a Naturalistic Theology of History,” p. 32.

⁶¹ Paola Zambelli, “Introduction,” in Zambelli, *Astrologi hallucinati*, p. 13 n. 35.

With regard to planetary conjunction periods in particular, the most influential contribution after Ptolemy⁶² was made by a ninth-century Persian Christian astrologer in Balkh, Abū Ma'shar (Ja'far ben Mohammed ben Omar El Balki Abū Ma'shar; 786–866), held to be the single most important transmitter of Aristotle's theories of nature to the Latin West.⁶³ Abū Ma'shar's ("Albumasar") astrological history was largely derivative, being inspired by Indian astrology transmitted via third century Sāsānian intermediaries. The formulation of the theory of astrological history (the writing of past and future history on the basis of planetary conjunction periods, Hellenistic horoscopy, and Zoroastrian millennialism) was a characteristically Sāsānian innovation. Having made in his *Kitāb al-qirānāt* (On the Great Conjunctions and on Revolutions of the World) and *Kitāb al-ulūf* (The [Book of the] Thousands) studies of the planetary conjunction periods, especially Jupiter-Saturn and their sublunar influences, Abū Ma'shar set forth a cycle of historical events, adapting Berossus and based on an Indian *yuga* of 180,000 years, according to which the world was created when the Sun, the Moon, and the five planets gathered in the sign of Aries (in 183,102 B.C.E.) and would end when another such conjunction occurred in the sign of Pisces (in 176,899 C.E.).⁶⁴

Another crucial contribution was that of the eighth-century Jewish astrologer Māshā'allāh, who likewise transmitted the Sāsānian theory that history represents the playing out of the consequences of the twenty-year Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions.⁶⁵ Māshā'allāh's astrological

⁶² According to John D. North, "Ptolemy falls comfortably into the Aristotelian-Stoic meteorological tradition. A certain power (*δύναμις*) emanates from the aether, causing changes in the sublunar elements and in plants and animals. Effluence from the Sun and Moon—especially the Moon, *by virtue of her proximity*—affects things animate and inanimate, while the planets and stars also have their effects. If a man knows accurately the *movements* of the celestial bodies, and their *natures* (perhaps not their essential but at least their potentially effective qualities), and if he can deduce scientifically the qualities resulting from a *combination* of these factors, why should he not judge both weather and human character?" See North, "Celestial Influence—the major premise of astrology," in Zambelli, *Astrologi hallucinati*, p. 50.

⁶³ In the Latin West, "without any doubt, the most influential Islamic writer was Abū Ma'shar (786–866). Fashions came and went in astrology, but he seems to have been read and quoted constantly from the time of the translations of John of Seville and Hermann of Carinthia in the twelfth century to the decline (or at least turning native) of the subject in the seventeenth"; see North, "Celestial Influence," p. 52.

⁶⁴ See David Pingree, *The Thousands of Abu Ma'shar* (London: Warburg Institute, 1968); De Meis and Meeus, "Quintuple Planetary Groupings," pp. 293–294.

⁶⁵ Roy A. Rosenberg ("The 'Star of the Messiah' reconsidered," *Biblica* 53 [1972]: 108), shows how in the ancient world "conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter signified the transfer of power from one planetary *daemon* to another," as from Kronos (Saturn) to Zeus (Jupiter).

world history, *On Conjunctions, Religions, and Peoples*, survives only in fragments. According to Māshā'allāh, political and religious developments are signaled by the planets' periodic meetings in particular signs of the zodiac. A horoscope cast for the day of the vernal equinox will predict the ordinary course of events during a year when a twenty-year conjunction occurs. Twelve successive such conjunctions tend to recur within the same "triplicity" (or "trigon," the triangular configuration of three zodiacal signs belonging to the same classical element, each sign being separated by 120°)⁶⁶ before moving on to the next after about 240 years. A shift from one triplicity to the next indicates a higher order change is in the offing, like the rise of a new nation or dynasty. The most portentous of all shifts, occurring every 960 years after cycling through all four triplicities, heralds truly epoch-making events like the coming of a major prophet.⁶⁷ In Māshā'allāh's astrological history, one date no doubt stood out as especially relevant in the sixteenth century—the 19 March 571 shift indicating the rise of Islam. If one adds to this figure another 960 years marking the next "millennial" shift, the result is 1531, and the concomitant revolutionary development should be the coming of another major prophet.

The third and last astrological history we need to consider is that of Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437–1508), statesman, philosopher, theologian, and scriptural commentator, scion of one of the most prominent and venerable Ibero-Jewish families. Abrabanel served Ferdinand and Isabella for eight years as finance minister until 1492 when the Jews were banished from Spain at the instigation of the Inquisition. He moved with his family to Italy, eventually settling in Venice, where he held office as a minister of state until his death in 1508. Abrabanel is famous as a prolific biblical commentator, and his commentary on the prophetic passages in the book of Daniel were highly influential

⁶⁶ The four triplicities are Fire (Aries, Leo, Sagittarius), Earth (Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn), Air (Gemini, Libra, Aquarius), Water (Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces). Cf. Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), p. 34.

⁶⁷ E. S. Kennedy, *The Astrological History of Masha-Alla* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); see also Kennedy, "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," p. 245: "A Saturn/Jupiter conjunction takes place every 20 years; a series will occur in the signs of one triplicity for about 240 years, that is 12 conjunctions; and they will have passed through the four triplicities and begin the cycle again after about 960 years. When they shift from one triplicity to another, they indicate events on the order of dynastic changes. The completion of a cycle of 960 years, which is mixed up with various millennial theories, causes revolutionary events such as the appearance of a major prophet. The ordinary course of politics is dependent on the horoscopes of the vernal equinoxes of the years in which the minor conjunctions within a triplicity take place."

in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, including among Christian theologians.⁶⁸ In his commentary on the book of Daniel, found in his *Ma'ayneḡ hayyešū'ah* (The Wells of Salvation; 1497), Abrabanel explains in detail the significance in Jewish astrology of the Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions as portents of earthly events. In his scheme, the “watery” sign of Pisces figures importantly as the location of “mighty conjunctions” at intervals of 2,860 years, and on the basis of his astrological chronology he assigns to the conjunction of 1465 unique significance as a portent of the Messiah.⁶⁹

In the first chapter (or “Gate”) of *The Wells of Salvation*, Abrabanel shows that six of the prophetic passages in Daniel have Messianic forecasting interpretations and that the dates forecast in these prophecies for the appearance of the Messiah converge on the decade of the 1530s, more specifically 1531 (a date already encountered above). Immediately following this in the second chapter, Abrabanel sets forth his refinement of Māshā'allāh's astrological history with an explication of how Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions, minor shifts (240 years), and major shifts (2,860 years), combined with the influence of the four elements of nature, profoundly influence historical events on the grandest scale. Israel's destiny is especially closely linked with the sign of Pisces: “if we begin with the First Redemption of Israel, from Egypt, we are led to conclude that the next and decisive redemption of Israel and the transformation of the world will begin around 1534.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ The second chapter of Daniel recounts how Daniel was able to establish his bona fides as a true prophet by offering a convincing interpretation of a recurring dream of King Nebuchadnezzar II (ca. 605–562 B.C.E.) about a giant statue fashioned from head to foot from five layers of gold, silver, brass, iron, and clay. With the benefit of divine prompting, Daniel succeeds where all the king's seers and advisors failed, even though he was not told the subject of the king's dream beforehand. In his prophetic interpretation, Daniel explained that the dream symbolized five successive world empires, extending far into the future. These prophecies, together with the teachings of Augustine, make up the standard paradigm of what Krzysztof Pomian calls the “theocentric theology of history”; see Pomian, “Astrology as a Naturalistic Theology of History,” p. 30.

⁶⁹ Isaac Abrabanel, *Ma'ayneḡ hayyešū'ah* [The Wells of Salvation] [1497] 1960, *ma'yan* 12, *la'ar* 2; see Rosenberg, ““Star of the Messiah,”” pp. 105–107. Abrabanel's 2,860-year period for the mighty conjunctions represents a refinement of Māshā'allāh's (3 × 960 =) 2,880-year period. Abrabanel's 2,860 years represents almost exactly 144 Jupiter-Saturn cycles if one uses the modern figure for the conjunction period of 19.859 years (144 × 19.859 = 2,859.696).

⁷⁰ Prof. Steven L. Goldman, personal communication; I am grateful to Goldman for an English synopsis of the relevant Hebrew passages. Abrabanel's *The Wells of Salvation* contains the most authoritative exposition of Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions in Jewish sources and was consulted by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) in attempting to establish the date of Christ's birth. Kepler published several works on this subject beginning in 1606 and

A convergence of Eastern, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish astrological speculation thus pointed to a historical culmination on the grandest scale in the early decades of the sixteenth century, so it is hardly to be wondered at that the turn of that century brought with it a heightened sense of anticipation that epoch-making events were in the offing. But the development that turned these somewhat esoteric astrological facts into common knowledge and a matter of widespread popular concern was the publication in 1499 of ephemerides calculated by two German astrologers, Johannes Stöffler and Jacob Pflaum, showing that a great conjunction of all five planets would occur in the “watery” sign of Pisces in February 1524 (Pisces being for many the sign of the biblical Flood). In the years immediately following, as political tensions and dissension within the church escalated, predictions of a second deluge provoked widespread collective fear and heated debates among astrologers and theologians, both Catholic and Lutheran. In 1515, George Tanstätter, a Viennese astrologer, added the prediction that a schism between the people and the church would give evidence of the approach of the universal disaster.⁷¹ By 1519, two years after Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation by publicly denouncing abuses in the church in his *Ninety-five Theses*, these animated debates and profound apprehensions reached unprecedented scope and pitch in both Germany and Italy.⁷²

culminating in his *De anno natali Christi* (1614), which advances his mature theory that a triple conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in Pisces in 7 B.C.E. was the Star of Bethlehem. See Rosenberg, “Star of the Messiah,” p. 105, and Hughes, *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer’s Confirmation* (New York: Walker and Company, 1979), p. 96.

⁷¹ Eric W. Gritsch, *Reformer without a Church: The Life and Thought of Thomas Müntzer, 1488?–1525* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 123.

⁷² In C. Scott Dixon’s account: “In 1499 two German stargazers, Johannes Stöffler and Jacob Pflaum, warned that in February 1524 a planetary conjunction would occur in the sign of Pisces. Although the authors themselves made no mention of a flood, astrological speculation soon appropriated the notion of a second deluge, a washing away of sinful man (*Sintflut*). Before it was over, the debate had engaged fifty-six authors—Germans, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Netherlanders and Italians. In total, 133 works dealing with the 1524 prediction were published. Although some writers, such as the Spaniard Augustino Nifo, doubted the truth of the prognostication, most authors were willing to concede the possibility of a flood. Even Johann Carion, Philip Melancthon’s classmate at Tübingen and later Brandenburg’s court astrologer, granted this much. But, in a sense, the reception of the theory in the astrological community was strictly academic, for by the year 1517 the prediction had spread to all social levels. As witness to its popular profile, the episcopal secretary to Würzburg, Lorenz Freiss, blamed the run of horrifying title-page woodcuts for the scare. It had caused such disquiet that Martin Luther felt obliged to address the portent in his 1522 Advent sermon in Wittenburg”; see Dixon, “Popular Astrology and Lutheran Propaganda,” p. 405.

PAMPHLETS, PORTENTS, AND PROPHECY

It is now already ten years since I predicted each terrible war that has devastated Italy. Those who then ridiculed me now see what great things God has accomplished through the stars. The ruin of the Papacy, the change of legal authority, the captivity of Kaiser Franz, the Peasants' War, all have I foretold, and not merely approximately, but based on astrological principles.

—W. Pirckheimer (ca. 1525)⁷³

The literature on these “portentous” developments in the early years of the Reformation is vast, certainly vaster than my modest ambition or the space allotted will allow me to consider. Here I focus simply on the role of apocalyptic astrological prognostications in Germany leading up to the radicalization of the reform movement and the Peasants' War (Bauernkrieg) of 1525. There were many influential actors in the controversy over the doomsaying prognostications that so agitated the popular mind prior to the predicted deluge in 1524. On the one side were the astrologers whose predictions became increasingly comprehensive, as the quotation above by Pirckheimer about his 1515 prognostication shows, and this served to reinforce the conviction that events were building toward an imminent climax. Astrologers began to assume an increasingly public function, representing the “analytical” approach to the interpretation of events—“based on astrological principles” as Pirckheimer said—and “urging science against the Bible,”⁷⁴ as it were. In this they were aided and abetted by the rapid development of printing and publishing, which they lost no time in exploiting to expand their audience.

Even more influential, however, were the creators and publishers of the many pamphlets (*Flugschrift*) already alluded to, which were in great demand and widely circulated. For many, especially the illiterate peasantry, the garish woodcuts on the title pages of these pamphlets rather than the astrological prognostics in the text had the most unsettling impact. Notwithstanding the frightening images, however, the message of many of these pamphlets was a hopeful one, looking forward

⁷³ Zambelli, “Introduction,” in *Astrologi hallucinati*, p. 9 n. 24.

⁷⁴ Helga R. Hammerstein, “The Battle of the Booklets: Prognostic Tradition and Proclamation of the Word in Early Sixteenth-Century Germany,” in Zambelli, *Astrologi hallucinati*, p. 140.

with anticipation to the new beginning following the cataclysm. Figure 1 is an example of a pamphlet from 1525 depicting the grouping of the five planets inside Pisces the fish, from which a deluge is gushing forth and inundating the town below. Confronting each other across the impassable flood are the militant common folk on the left and representatives of secular and ecclesiastical authority on the right. Also shown is the comet of 1525. The genius of the artist speaks for itself.

Perhaps surprisingly, many of the “doomsayers and stargazers” were themselves clergymen.⁷⁵ There were many who delivered consoling messages in their sermons, fewer who railed against astrology as baseless nonsense that presents no credible challenge to scripture, and a very few who were moved enough by the spirit of the times and the rising tide of civil and religious discontent to seize the moment and offer themselves as instruments of God’s will in bringing the revolution to pass. One such radical cleric was Thomas Müntzer (ca. 1488–1525), Luther’s nemesis and the spiritual motivator of the Peasants’ War, a mass uprising of the peasantry in Saxony and Thuringia in the summer of 1525 that ultimately led to the massacre of five thousand peasants and the beheading of Müntzer himself. Müntzer, it has been said,

distinguished himself from other “revolutionary Spiritualists” by introducing into the Radical Reformation the idea . . . based upon the Danielic-Hieronimic concept of the four world periods or monarchies—that a fifth historical period, namely that of Christ’s direct rule in the saints, had begun . . . Such a concept, developing into an intense conviction of the imminent end of the world, encouraged numerous representatives of the three major movements (Anabaptism, Spiritualism, and Evangelical Rationalism) to attempt a Radical Reformation which, in its entirety, represented an “abortive constitutional revolution.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Regarding the role of astrology in Christianity, C. Scott Dixon remarks: “This was not such an odd pairing, for astrology had always been central to the Christian faith, especially in the middle ages. Granted, the two schools of thought, Aristotelian and Augustinian, could not agree on the relationship between celestial cause and terrestrial effect, but most religious thinkers yielded to the notion that God might reveal man’s destiny in the stars. Luther granted that certain heavenly signs might herald the judgments of God, but he gave the practice of astrology short shrift. In his eyes, it was not a predictable science; moreover, he rejected it on theological grounds: it placed limitations on the powers of God,” and, “Although Luther himself balked at the notion that astrology amounted to a science, he was willing enough to concede that certain astral signs might portend divine intelligence. ‘For it is incredible,’ he said, ‘that they [the planets] be observed to move without inquiring whether there isn’t somebody who moves them;” see Dixon, “Popular Astrology and Lutheran Propaganda,” pp. 408, 411.

⁷⁶ George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 858, 865. Müntzer’s final sermon persuading the secular authorities to support

**Practica vber die grossen vnd man-
nigfaltigen Coniuction der Planeten/die im
Jar. M. D. XXiiij. erscheinen/vñ vn-
gezweiffelt vil wunderbarlicher
ding geperen werden.**

Auf Rd. Kay. May. Gnaden vnd Freyhaiten/Hüt sich meniglich/dyße meine Pra-
ctica in zwoyen Facen nach zürucken/bey verlierung. 4. Marck lörtigs Golds.



FIGURE 1. Nürnberg *practica* of 1525. The upper caption reads: “A *practica* concerning the major and extensive interaction of the planets which will appear in the year 1524 and without a doubt will bring many wonderful things.” Source: After A. Laube, M. Steinmetz, and G. Vogler eds., *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen frühbürgerlich Revolution* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974), p. 205.

Although Müntzer is not known to have embraced astrology, indeed, he “disassociated ‘spiritual experience’ from all external media”;⁷⁷ nevertheless, as a noted Hebrew scholar he would have been well aware of Isaac Abrabanel’s astrological reading of the Danielic prophecy. Even if Müntzer did not publicly subscribe to this interpretation, it is doubtful whether he could have avoided being influenced by the feverish anticipation and growing militancy among the common folk as the February 1524 date of the predicted deluge approached. It could be purely coincidental that he chose March 1524 to set in motion the militant phase of his radical movement by leading his secret League of the Elect in attacking and putting to the torch a local symbol of Church authority. But that it was precisely in 1524–1525 that mass insurrection erupted in Germany is certainly in no small part due to the apocalyptic nature of the astrological predictions in anticipation of the planetary grouping. The spirit of those years is eloquently captured in a saying current in Germany in 1525:

He who does not die in 1523,
In 1524 does not drown,
And is not beaten to death in 1525,
Can truly claim miracles in his life.⁷⁸

In view of the responses to the 1524 planetary grouping in China and Europe, it is particularly interesting to note that the event was, in fact, invisible—it all transpired in daylight, within 11° from the Sun. The planetary grouping that occasioned such excitement was not physically observable anywhere!

Table 1. Planetary longitudes at their closest approach on 19 February 1524

Sun	Mercury	Venus	Mars	Jupiter	Saturn	Sign	Separation
339°	340°	351°	350°	343°	341°	Aqr-Psc	10.51°

his reform movement, known as the *Sermon to the Princes* (1524), takes the second chapter of Daniel as its central theme. In it Müntzer develops his scriptural foundation for a theory of revolution and offers himself as the new Daniel who, as he sees it, has been chosen to lead the vanguard in overturning the corrupt established order. See Michael Baylor, *Revelation and Revolution: Basic Writings of Thomas Müntzer* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1993), p. 30, and Gritsch, *Reformer without a Church*, p. 103.

⁷⁷ Gritsch, *Reformer without a Church*, p. 187.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

CONCLUSION

But how can the elemental rhythm of *yin* and *yang* and the cycle of growth and decay be adjusted to the belief in a meaningful goal and a “progressive revelation” of divine truth in history?⁷⁹

—Karl Löwith

Karl Löwith’s rhetorical question suggests that it was chiefly the non-teleological nature of Chinese concepts of time and temporality, Tennyson’s “cycles of Cathay,” that constituted the major obstacle to the development in China of a philosophy of history, or in the case of astrology, a naturalistic theology of history. But Löwith’s generalization does not entirely satisfy, since it is also true that there was always a strong tension between the circularity implicit in Chinese correlative cosmology and the linearity (as in “lineage”) at the heart of the Great Tradition, the well-developed historical sense, and the perpetual dynastic system. Which was the more dominant theme in any given context is perhaps a more pertinent question.⁸⁰ It is certainly true, however, as the above discussion has illustrated, that cultural responses to the “reading” of heavenly signs differed markedly in China and the West, not least because the Chinese always privileged the past over the present, and most certainly over the future. There was no Chinese Stöffler or Pflaum or Pirckheimer or Abrabanel to speculate decades in advance about the predicted celestial phenomenon and its ominous consequences.

Though there had been quasi-millennial movements that roused the masses of the Chinese peasantry to concerted action in hopes of expediting the dawning of an age of great peace, the potent combination of eschatology and astrological history witnessed in sixteenth-century Europe did not materialize in Ming China. The traditional inertia displayed by the conservatism of “heavenly pattern reading,” together with the imperial system’s ability to co-opt and domesticate potentially troublesome ideas (such as Zou Yan’s theory of the historical role of the alternation of Five Phases), conspired in China to marginalize

⁷⁹ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 16.

⁸⁰ For a brief introduction to the debate over linear versus cyclical time in China, see David W. Pankenier, “Temporality and the Fabric of Space-Time in Early Chinese Thought,” in *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World*, ed. Ralph M. Rosen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 2004), pp. 129–146.

portent astrology, albeit at times with difficulty. By the Ming dynasty Jiajing reign period, even with a superstitious emperor on the throne and the empire beset with natural calamities and worrisome anomalies, the potentially ominous planetary portent of 1524 met with a certain sangfroid. Alarming prognostications by the responsible officials were not received with indifference, however, since those responsible were severely punished, but the transformative dynastic implications of the portentous planetary massing seem to have been deflected in a harmless direction with comparative ease.

A FINAL REFLECTION

When it comes to planetary astrology in particular, this outcome in China is somewhat surprising in view of the crucial role played by Sāsānians as intermediaries in transmitting to the Mediterranean world the theory of world ages punctuated by Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions. China's direct contact and involvement with the Sāsānid Empire (224–651 C.E.) was, if anything, more extensive than that of the Latin West at all levels, from the later Han through the Tang dynasty. Besides centuries-long Chinese trade contacts with Persia via the Sogdians in Xinjiang, who were themselves Iranian, Persian seaborne trade with Southeast Asia was also extensive. Sāsānid merchants maintained settlements in Canton and other ports during the Tang dynasty. Sogdians assumed Chinese surnames (collectively denoted "the nine families"), filled important military posts, and held public office.⁸¹ The appearance

⁸¹ A famous case in point is that of Yu Hong (d. 592), "a high-ranking member of a community of Sogdians who had settled on the northern border of China at the beginning of the fourth century. While barely in his teens, Yu Hong began his career in the service of the most powerful nomadic tribe at the time, known as the Ruru, and was posted as an emissary to several countries, including Iran. During the Northern Qi (550–577), Northern Zhou (557–588), and subsequent Sui Dynasty (581–617), he served as a *sabao*, a leader of foreigners, particularly merchants, on Chinese soil. Yu Hong, his father, and his grandfather were all respected leaders of the Sogdian community. His wife (d. 597) was interred along with him in the same tomb six years later in 598. They lived their later years and were buried in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, the Northern Qi Dynasty's second capital city"; http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/china_dawn/tomb_yuhong.html. For a full description of Yu Hong's well-preserved tomb, see Shanxisheng kaogu yanjiusuo, *Taiyuan Sui Yu Hong mu* [The Sui Dynasty Tomb of Yu Hong of Taiyuan] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2005). DNA analysis has shown that Yu Hong belonged to one of the oldest western Eurasian lineages; his may be the easternmost ancient European remains thus far discovered in China; see Xie C. Z., Li C. X., Cui Y. Q., Zhang Q. C., Fu Y. Q., Zhu H., and Zhou H., "Evidence of ancient DNA reveals the first European lineage in Iron Age Central China," *Proceedings of the Biological Sciences* 274.1618 (7 July 2007): 1,597–1,601.

of the seven-day week in Chinese almanacs beginning in this period is attributable to the Sogdians, as is the introduction of the Western zodiac and several well-known compendia of planetary ephemerides and star lore.⁸² After the destruction of the Sāsānid Empire by the Arabs in 651, much of the nobility were exiled at the Tang court. Yet, Sāsānian astrological history, especially integral numbers of Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions, their migration through the triplicities of the zodiac, and the epoch-making political and religious implications of “mighty conjunctions,” had little discernible impact in China.

That being said, it is intriguing that it was the son of a prominent Sogdian military family and court favorite, General An Lushan (703–757), whose mutinous rebellion in 751–755 almost succeeded in bringing down the Tang dynasty.⁸³ An Lushan was a Zoroastrian, the religion whose astrologer-priests, the Magi (or Chaldeans), are well known in the history of astrology. His Turkish mother was reputedly a sorceress herself. What might An Lushan’s knowledge of Sāsānian astrology have led him to conclude about the impressive planetary grouping in Scorpius in October 750? We saw above how mid-dynasty planetary groupings were particularly ominous for the sitting regime, and that the verdict of history in this instance was that the planetary omen foretold the fall of the Tang dynasty. Doubtless, we’ll never know *wie das eigentlich war*, but this may have been one occasion when Sāsānian and Chinese planetary astrology actually did intersect, and at the highest level.

⁸² Edward H. Schafer discusses some of these cross-cultural contacts in *Pacing the Void*, pp. 10–11.

⁸³ See Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *The Background of the Rebellion of An Lu-shan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955). The tomb of a sixth-century Sogdian namesake of An Lushan was recently discovered in Xi’an; see Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiusuo, “Xi’an faxian de Bei Zhou An jia mu” [The An Family Tomb from the Bei Zhou (556–581) Dynasty discovered in Xi’an], *Wenwu* 1 (2001): 4–26. An Lushan’s original name was Aluoshan, his sinicized given name “Lushan” transcribes the Sogdian word *rokhsh* or “light,” which was also the name of Alexander the Great’s wife, Roxanne.