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Astrological Origins of Chinese Dynastic Ideology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese preoccupation with astronomical phenomena has a history as ancient as Chinese civilization itself. In the words of Sima Qian, Grand Historiographer and Astrologer Royal in 100 BCE, “For as long as the people have existed, when have successive rulers not studied the Sun, Moon, and stars?” With those words Sima Qian summed up his discussion of the *tianguan* “heavenly minions,” as the constellations were called, and the movements of celestial bodies among them, in the treatise on astrology in his comprehensive history *Records of the Grand Historian of China*. In his day astrology and calendrical astronomy were the exclusive preserve of the court historiographer. Specialists like Sima Qian had served Chinese rulers since the very beginning of the institution of kingship. So vital was it by Sima Qian’s time for the imperial court to maintain absolute control over the calendar and the interpretation of celestial phenomena, that unauthorized dabbling in the secret “heavenly calculations” became a capital crime, for this was the age when Heaven’s bestowal of the “mandate” to rule was still a factor in validating the dynasty’s legitimacy.

Comprehensive as they are, not even Sima Qian’s treatises on astrology and the calendar provide a complete account of the origins of the concept of Heaven’s Mandate and the role of celestial portents in Chinese dynastic history a millennium and more before the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). This has only lately become possible as a result of significant breakthroughs in interpreting the textual sources for the earliest period, aided and abetted by modern astronomical research tools. Out of the study of these sources have emerged discoveries and insights about the political, religious, and cosmological beliefs of those ancient Chinese that would no doubt have surprised even Sima Qian, though they would certainly have confirmed him in his conviction that his was a most venerable profession.

Here I propose to describe the earliest discoveries and indicate how they enlarge our understanding of Chinese dynastic ideology. Then I will discuss how they relate to theories of the Chinese dynastic cycle and later portent astrology as these evolved over time, focusing finally on the domestication of astrology as an applied political science in the later empire.

2. THE EARLIEST CHINESE OBSERVATIONS

By the early second millennium BCE there was already firmly established in China a mindset characterized by the self-conscious dependence on regularly scrutinizing the patterns of heaven for guidance (Pankenier, 1995). Not only the calendar, but the correct orientation of any consecrated space, the scheduling of religious ceremonial, and the proper conduct of seasonal

occupations all depended on the Chinese theocrat's competent performance of the cosmological role of calendar priest. The ability to comprehend the celestial motions and to maintain conformity between their variations and human activity, that is, the discernment necessary to "pattern oneself on Heaven" *xiangtian*, was a fundamental qualification of Chinese kingship and an omnipresent preoccupation of the earliest transmitted texts. This fact, together with the fortuitous coincidence of remarkably dense clusters of all five naked-eye planets with the first dynastic transitions, explains why, as early as the 2nd millennium BCE, impressive massings of the planets were thought to signify the conferral of legitimacy on new dynasties. Such ideas are consistent with the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy (e.g. event B occurs after event A, therefore A is the cause of B) underpinning portentological theory in much of the ancient world. What is remarkable in the earliest Chinese cases is the degree to which extraordinary celestial portents influenced political and military behavior.

The three celestial events to which I have drawn attention, in 1953 BCE in Aqr/Psc, in 1576 in Sco/Sgr, and in 1059 in Cancer, are the earliest verifiable events of this kind which the Chinese demonstrably witnessed, remembered, and interpreted as signs of Heaven's intentions (Pankenier, 1981–1982, 1983–1985). Indeed, the two densest massings in the past 5000 years, which persisted for several days in February, 1953 BCE (Fig. 1) and May, 1059 BCE (Fig. 2), would surely have impressed observers throughout the world, though ancient records of their sighting have yet to be found from either Egypt or Mesopotamia.

Table 1. Conjunctions Marking the Founding of Xia, Shang, and Zhou

	Sun	Me	Ve	Ma	Ju	Sa	Sign
1953 Feb 26	321°	295°	295°	295°	292°	296°	Aqr/Psc
1576 Dec 20	255°	234°	279°	236°	234°	238°	Sco/Sgr
1059 May 28	56°	79°	82°	75°	77°	82°	Cancer

The latest, best documented, and perhaps most illustrative of the three is the massing of planets (minimum separation < 7°) in late May 1059 BCE which occurred in the vast constellation known as the "Vermilion Bird," a configuration which extends from δ Hya (head) to β Crv (tail) and includes most of Hydra and Crater (Fig. 3). The account of the event in the chronicle known as the *Bamboo Annals*, recorded under the reign of Di Xin of Shang and his rival King Wen of Zhou some years before the Zhou overthrow of the Shang dynasty, currently reads "the five planets gathered in Room (Scorpio); a great scarlet bird clasping a jade sceptre in its beak alighted on the Zhou altar to the soil."

Fortunately, an independent record in *Yi Zhou shu* of a total lunar eclipse on March 12–13, 1065 BCE dates that eclipse to the 35th year of the same King Wen of Zhou, thus confirming the relative dating in the *Bamboo Annals* of the planetary massing to King Wen's 41st year, or 1059 BCE (Pankenier, 1981–1982; Li, 1981). The location lunar mansion "Room" (i.e. Scorpio) assigned to the planetary massing in the *Bamboo Annals* is a demonstrably late interpolation into the text, after the damaged bamboo slips on which the chronicle was written were recovered from a looted tomb in 281 CE and painstakingly reconstructed by scholars at the court. The planetary massing of 1059 BCE actually occurred in Cancer just west of the Vermilion Bird asterism (Fig. 2). The cluster of five planets was clearly visible for several days after full darkness had fallen, as the "great scarlet bird" set in the northwest "clasping in its beak" the planetary formation. From the *Bamboo Annals* account we know that King Wen immediately undertook political and military actions which clearly revealed his intent to challenge the Shang king, but he did not live to see the oppressive Shang regime overthrown, instead dying in 1050, the 9th year of the new Mandate calendar which he inaugurated in

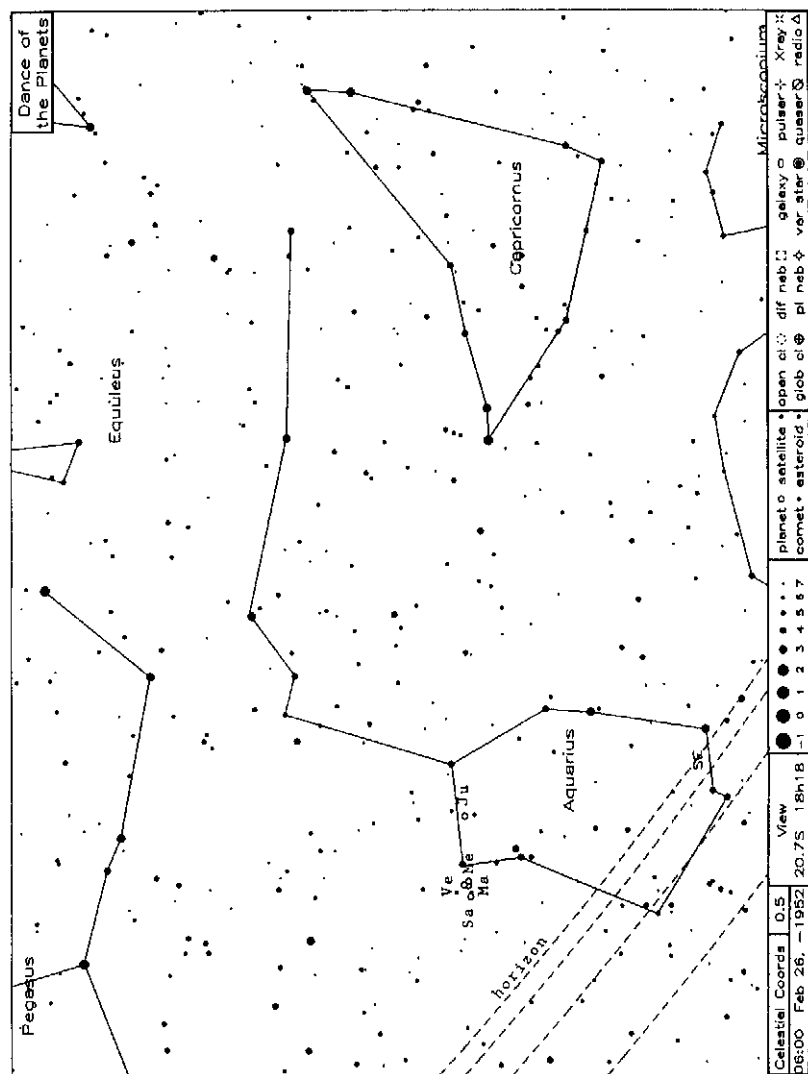


Fig. 1. Massing of Five Planets of 26 Feb 1953 BC in Aqr (Dance of the Planets ©ARC Software).

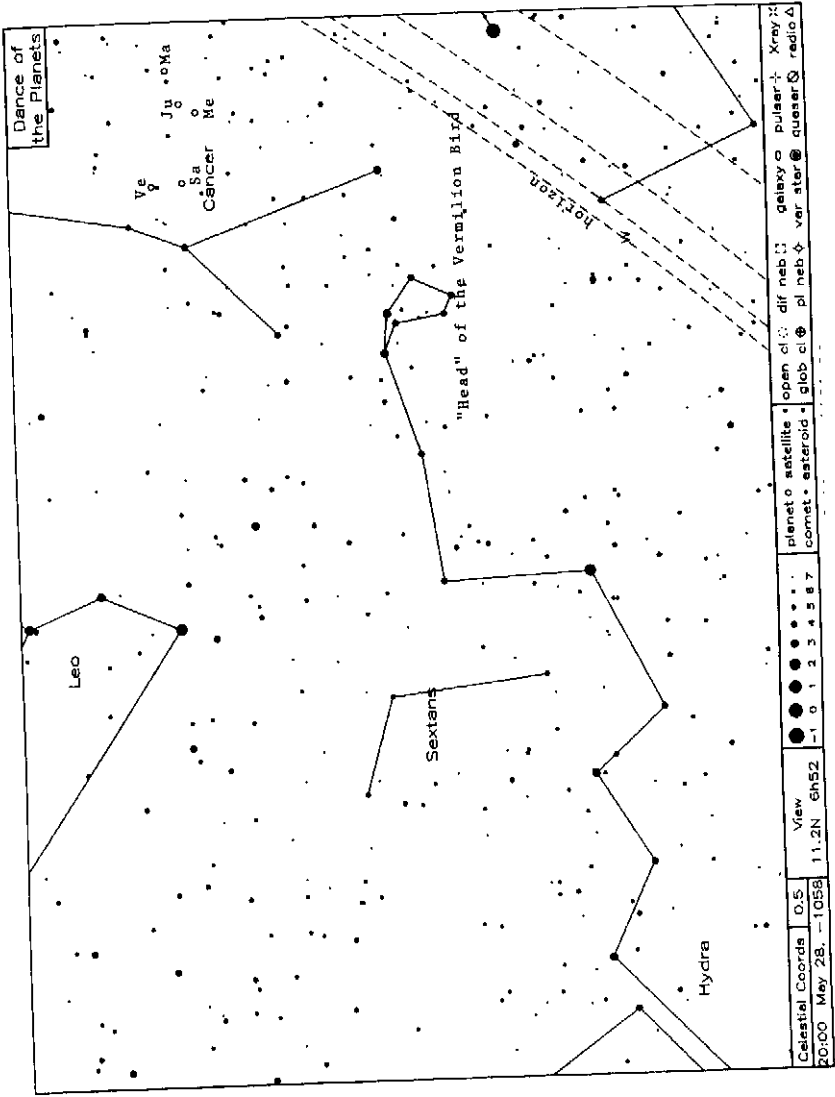


Fig. 2. "Mandate of Heaven" planetary massings of 28 May 1059 BC (Dance of the planets ©ARC Software).

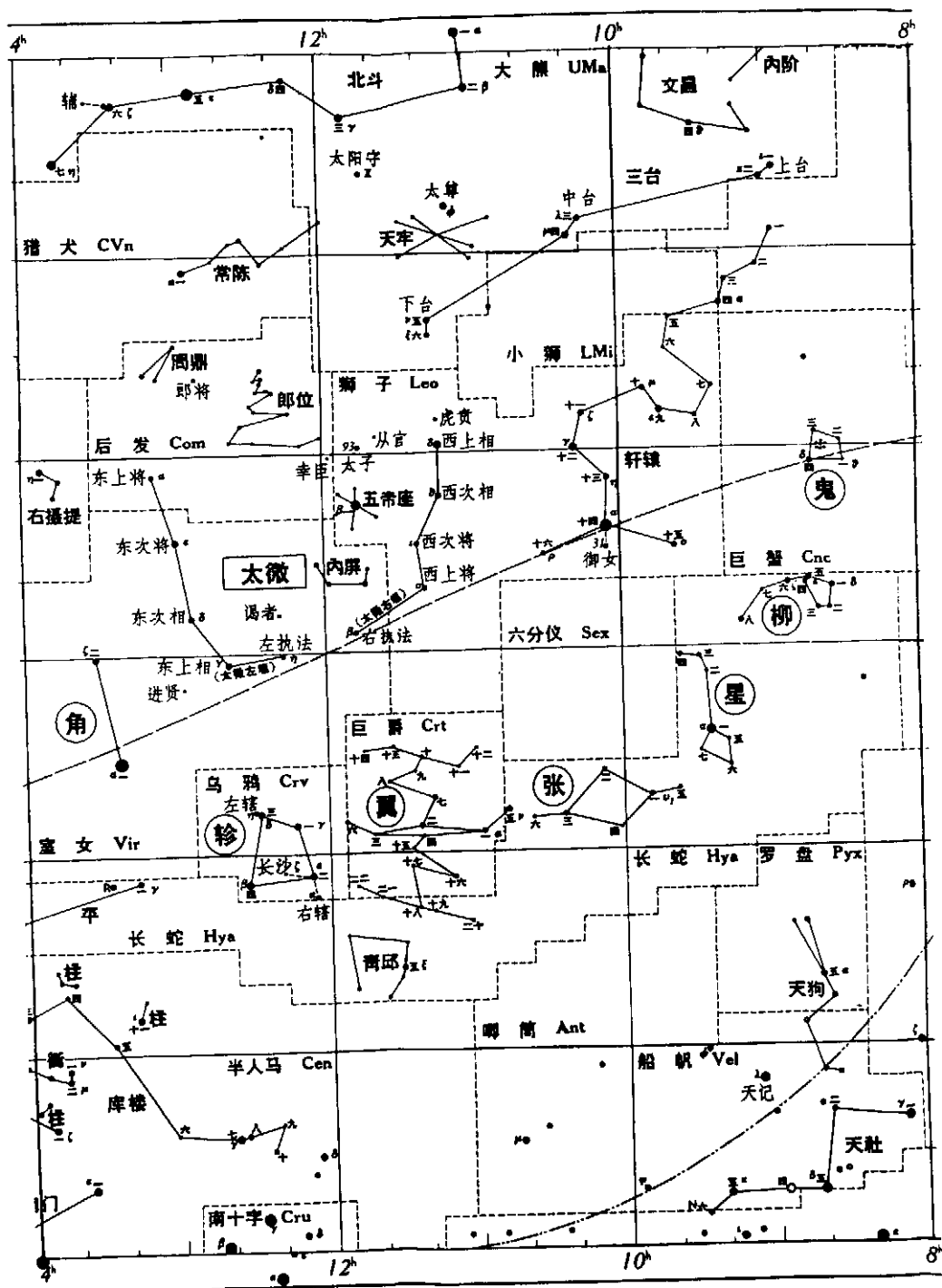


Fig. 3. The Vermilion Bird Constellation.

1058. Not until Jupiter returned again to the Vermilion Bird in early 1046 BCE (after a false alarm in late 1048 when Jupiter unexpectedly retrograded, forcing the advancing Zhou army to withdraw), did King Wen's son and heir King Wu actually launch the successful campaign which culminated in the conquest of Shang on 20 March 1046 BCE (Pankenier, 1981–1982, 1992).

Further study of the events surrounding the Zhou conquest of Shang and reconstruction of the chronology of the Zhou conquest period has confirmed ancient astrological traditions and revealed new facts about the Zhou founders' claim to have acted at the instigation of Heaven and to have received Heaven's Mandate. The epoch-making events surrounding this singularly impressive celestial portent confirm the early Chinese preoccupation with revealed wisdom in the form of "bright manifestations" displayed by Heaven, the appearance of an auspicious "phoenix" in conjunction with the rise of Zhou, the association of the Vermilion Bird constellation with the fate of Zhou in the *fenye* "field allocation" astrological scheme which correlated asterisms with temporal regimes, the practice in late Zhou of predicting the outcome of military campaigns based on Jupiter's location, and last but not least, the obligatory association of five-planet massings with dynastic transitions in the portentology of the early imperial period.¹

3. FROM ONE TO THREE

Using the 1059 BCE date of the Zhou Mandate conjunction as a benchmark, it became possible to interpret similar accounts in pre-Han sources such as *Mozi*, where the precedent-setting portents associated with all three dynastic foundings in the second millennium BCE are cited in chronological order. With the help of the *Bamboo Annals* relative date for the Shang founding 517 years before the Zhou event, the curious behavior of the planets noted at that time — "the five planets moved in criss-cross fashion" — became comprehensible as a description of their behavior in the fall of 1576 as they reversed horizons and hours of visibility. Moreover, the description in *Mozi* of a still earlier bestowal of a jade sceptre of authority on the founder of the Xia dynasty in a "Dark Palace" (identifiable in Zhou astrology as lunar mansion *Yingshi*, or Aqr/Psc) matched that of the Zhou portent. This led to the confirmation of Chinese observation of the densest massing of planets in over 5000 years (Pankenier, 1983–1985; Weitzel, 1945). With that the three planetary clusters associated with the founding of the so-called "Three Dynasties" emerged from the obscurity of millennia. From the perspective of the Zhou dynasty founders in mid-11th century BCE, the *third* historical appearance of such a sign in the heavens would have provided more than sufficient grounds for the kind of conclusive formulation of the doctrine of Heaven's Mandate which is found in their earliest pronouncements (Pankenier, 1995).

Once again, the accuracy of the identification was confirmed by well-documented late-Zhou millenarian traditions that a true sage-king would arise to re-establish peace and prosperity every 500 years, and that just over 500 years separated the Shang founding (1576) from King Wen of Zhou (1059), and King Wen from Confucius (b. 551 BCE). Small wonder then, that from Confucius' time on Heaven was expected to intervene at any moment to raise up a new dynastic founder to bring an end to political chaos and incessant warfare. In the words of Astrologer Royal Sima Qian, who succinctly restated the astrological implications nearly a

¹ Critics of this use of singular planetary phenomena to date ancient historical events (e.g. Huang, 1990) typically treat the astronomical phenomena in isolation, ignoring the wide array of supporting historical, chronological, and literary evidence which I have adduced.

millennium after the Zhou founders first articulated the doctrine of Heaven's Mandate: "When the five planets consort, this is a change of phase: the possessor of virtue receives felicitations, a new Great Man is set up to possess the four quarters, his descendants flourish and multiply; but the one lacking in virtue suffers calamities to the point of destruction." Not surprisingly, in Han period calendrical astronomy too it became axiomatic that the five planets, Sun, and Moon were in conjunction at a time zero before the cycles of Heaven, Earth, and Man were set in motion (Sivin, 1969).¹

4. ZOU YAN'S CYCLICAL THEORY OF DYNASTIC HISTORY

4.1. *The Five Elements Theory*

Inevitably, as the proto-feudal order established by the Zhou founders led to the usurpation of the central authority by erstwhile Zhou vassals, the prestige of royal Zhou, and with it that of the Mandate conferred by the Zhou high god Heaven also declined. In the intellectual ferment of the late Zhou, when diplomatic intrigue and military stratagems were the order of the day, a pseudo-scientific theory articulated by Zou Yan (fl. c. 240 BCE) to explain the dynastic succession became much more influential than the by then discredited ideology of royal Zhou. According to Zou Yan, there was a meaningful pattern in the omens associated with the archaic precedent-setting dynastic transitions. By this time the precise nature of the linkage between the planetary phenomena and the metaphorical language describing the earliest portents had long since been obscured, leaving only correlations analyzable in terms of the elemental processes which were held to have determined the character of rulership during each of the Three Dynasties. According to Zou Yan:

The Five Elements dominate alternately. . . . Each of the Five Virtues (Elements) is followed by the one it cannot conquer. The dynasty of Shun ruled by virtue of Earth, the Hsia (i.e. Xia) dynasty ruled by the virtue of Wood, the Shang dynasty ruled by the virtue of Metal, and the Chou (i.e. Zhou) dynasty ruled by the virtue of Fire. . . . When some new dynasty is going to arise, Heaven exhibits auspicious signs to the people. During the rise of Huang Ti (the Yellow Emperor) large earth-worms and large ants appeared. He said, "This indicates that the element Earth is in the ascendant, so our colour must be yellow, and our affairs must be placed under the sign of Earth." During the rise of Yu the Great (the Xia founder),

¹ Kevin D. Pang has claimed to have discovered that ancient Chinese observers chose as the beginning of their calendar the March 5th new Moon following the massing of planets in Aqr/Psc which reached a maximum on 26 February 1953 BCE. Basing his claim on a quotation from Liu Xiang's (fl. mid-1st c. BCE) commentary on the "Great Plan" chapter of the "Book of Documents" ("The ancient *Zhuan Xu* calendar began at dawn, in the beginning of spring, when the Sun, Moon, and five planets gathered in the constellation *Yingshi*"), Pang implies that he was the first to discover this link. Here as elsewhere he avoids mentioning my prior research (Pankenier, 1983–1985, 1989) on the connection between the 1953 BCE conjunction and the founding of Xia and the rationale for the tradition that the Xia began the year with the second lunation after winter solstice when the sun was in lunar mansion *Yingshi*. Moreover, Pang's specific claim about the beginning of the Chinese calendar is grossly anachronistic. While it is certain that a tradition concerning the massing of planets at the founding of Xia did survive until the Han dynasty to coalesce in Liu Xiang's thinking with contemporary calendrical theory, the notion that the interlocking cycles of the calendar began with Sun, Moon, and five planets in conjunction at a single location (not merely massed in one lunar mansion, but literally stacked at a precise degree of longitude) is an indispensable premise of Han dynasty mathematical astronomy. The historical development of Chinese astronomy during the intervening 19 centuries shows clearly that such a sophisticated conception could not possibly have been operative in the 20th century BCE (Pankenier, 1990).

Heaven produced plants and trees which did not wither in autumn and winter. He said, "This indicates that the element Wood is in the ascendant, so our colour must be green, and our affairs must be placed under the sign of Wood." During the rise of Tang the Victorious (the Shang founder), a metal sword appeared out of the water. He said, "This indicates that our colour must be white, and our affairs must be placed under the sign of metal." During the rise of King Wen of the Chou (i.e. Zhou), Heaven exhibited fire, and a red bird holding a document written in red alighted on the altar of the dynasty. He said, "This indicates that the element Fire is in the ascendant, so our colour must be red, and our affairs must be placed under the sign of Fire." Following Fire there will come Water. Heaven will show when the time comes for the *chhi* of Water to dominate. Then the colour will have to be black, and affairs will have to be placed under the sign of Water. And that dispensation will in turn come to an end, and at the appointed time, all will return once again to Earth. But when that time will be we do not know.¹

Table 2. Significant Correlations in Five Elements Theory

	Xia	Shang	Zhou
Locus	Aqr/Psc	Sco/Sgr	Cancer
Quadrant	Winter	Fall	Summer
Color	Black	White	Red
Element	Water	Metal	Fire
Portent	Flood	Sword	Phoenix

Although the planetary portents figure only implicitly in the surviving fragments of Zou Yan's writings, as in the case of the auspicious scarlet bird which bestowed the sceptre on the Zhou king, the true locations of the planetary massings are still accurately preserved in the seasonal and color correlations which identify the associated quadrants of the sky. In the case of the Xia portents, significantly, Zou Yan overlooked the Xia dynastic founder Yu the Great's legendary cosmogonic feats of hydraulic engineering in taming the cataclysmic flood in favor of a naturalistic "woody" omen. This was no doubt because of Zou's commitment to the "mutual conquest" paradigm of regular succession by the five elemental forces (i.e. Earth < Wood < Metal < Fire < Water) in which each power in turn is thought to overcome the influence of the preceding. Zou's speculative theorizing illustrates the tendency toward a systematic reworking of the pre-classical cultural legacy which gained momentum during the intellectual ferment of late Zhou and culminated in the standardized correlative cosmology which prevailed from the late Han dynasty on:

In this Five Phases theory: everything, from the grand movements of history to the minute workings of the human body, was the outward expression of one of the five metaphysical powers These powers succeeded each other in fixed sequence, and it was important to know which was paramount at any given moment. If one did not take this into account, the chances were that one's actions might run counter to the power then in force, and thus end in failure. On a grand scale, history was understood as the sequence of these powers, each dynasty representing one of them, and each new dynasty signaling that the old power had disappeared, to be replaced by a new one. . . . [I]t was generally understood that no power remained in force forever, and where there were signs that a new power was coming to the fore,

¹ Needham, 1969, p. 235.

it would have to imply consequences for the dynasty. If the Five Phases theory provided legitimacy, on the one hand, it also served as an instrument for dynastic change. . . . Uncertainty, however, surrounded the question of when and how this replacement was to take place. . . . [W]as the new dynasty to be established through conquest, or was it to be established by peaceful means?¹

Though the precise link between the earliest planetary massings and the imagistic dynastic portents was long lost to Chinese portentology, it now seems clear that the two doctrines, that of Heaven's Mandate and Zou's mutual conquest theory of the Five Elements, share a common origin in 2nd millennium BCE astrology and cosmology.²

By the late Han, popularized Yin-yang and Five Elements correlative cosmology had filtered down and been absorbed by the population at large. Belief in the ancient anthropomorphic Heaven revived, and pseudosciences based on Five Elements cyclical theory, numerology, and astral portentology thrived. Political battles were fought using real and imagined omens in high stakes games of portentological one-upmanship, as exemplified by the machinations accompanying the usurpation of the throne in 9 CE by Wang Mang, who actually ordered the fabrication of portents favorable to himself (Eberhard, 1957). So ideologically *de rigueur* were planetary portents by this time that an account of a less than impressive gathering of planets in Gemini in May of 205 BCE was pressed into service and misdated in the standard *History of the Han Dynasty* (compiled c. 80 CE) to coincide with the nominal founding of the dynasty in 206 BCE. Subsequently, religiously inspired millenarian rebellions such as that of the Yellow Turbans in 184 CE contributed to the ultimate collapse of the Han dynasty, which fell in part, "because there had grown up a metaphysical system that called for its fall, and which waited only for the right man to implement the theory."³

After the fall of the Han dynasty, which straddled the watershed dividing the archaic traditional world from the more rational imperial age, similar convergences of metaphysical theory, political circumstances, and planetary portents did not wreak the havoc they had in the Han, largely as a result of successful government efforts to suppress the literature. Five Elements cyclical theory faded in political significance, but remained pervasive in alchemy and medicine, while judicial astrology survived as the applied political science; though, on the whole, practitioners were more interested in the political implications of observations than in precision or refinements in theory.⁴

¹ Twitchett and Loewe, 1986, p. 360.

² Joseph Needham, unaware of the connection between the two, credited Zou Yan with extending Five Elements theory to the dynastic world. While this is debatable, there is no doubt, as Needham has pointed out, of the psychological impact which attended the substitution of cyclical historical influences à la Zou Yan for the inscrutability of Heavenly intervention: "The conception of the five elements . . . provided, in effect, a theory for the rise and fall of ruling houses, bringing human affairs and their history under the same 'law' . . . as the phenomena of non-human Nature. . . . If Zou Yan had had the 'know-how' of the atomic bomb in his possession he could hardly have faced the rulers of the States with a steadier eye" (Needham, 1969, 238-239).

³ Twitchett and Loewe, 1986, 360-362. The cosmological and millenarian cast of the Yellow Turban leadership's thinking is abundantly clear in a letter to the Han general Cao Cao in 192 rejecting any suggestion of rapprochement: "The element of Han is already exhausted, a yellow house will be established, and the great movements of Heaven are not, sir, something that you can encompass" (Twitchett and Loewe, 1986, p. 368).

⁴ As one scholar points out, "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 the 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" (Yabuuti, 1973).

With the bureaucratization of the imperial administration and the consequent domestication of astrology, when the imperial prestige was at stake a prudent self-censorship on the part of officialdom became the rule. As one might expect, with few exceptions, the planetary clusters which were observed were taken to reflect heavenly endorsement of the ruling dynasty. Should the planets prove uncooperative, and an anticipated event not be forthcoming, interpretive license could be exercised and the requisite omen tailored from whole cloth, or, alternatively, its failure to materialize could be attributed to the surpassing virtue of the emperor. In the imperial age no unpredicted planetary massing had nearly the implications for the ruling dynasty as did the events in the formative period, though it must also be admitted that no directly observable later cluster was nearly as spectacular as the archaic precedents in 1953 and 1059 BCE. If the empire was prosperous, strong, and at peace, no pretender, however well-placed, was likely to challenge the legitimacy of the dynastic mandate simply on the basis of what transpired in the sky. And even if a gathering was thought to be potentially ominous a potential threat could usually be averted if the emperor took the ritually prescribed steps.

How far removed later astrological theory was from the early precedents is evident from the treatment of another very dense, though quite unobservable massing of planets in 1524 CE in Pisces (lunar mansion *Yingshi* "Build Halls").

Table 3. The Conjunction of 1524

	Sun	Me	Ve	Ma	Ju	Sa	Sign
1524 February 5	325.1°	315.4°	334°	339.5°	340.3°	339.7°	Psc

The astronomical phenomenon itself merited only cursory mention in the standard history of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), compiled, as was customary, by the following dynasty. But a sense of the degree to which astrological potentology had been domesticated by the 16th century may be gleaned from the private musings of two well-placed observers of court affairs, Lang Ying (*fl. ca.* 1524) and Zhu Guozhen (*jìnshi* "presented scholar" degree conferred 1589; d. 1632):

Lang Ying personally witnessed the massing of the five planets (in 1524) and said to someone: 'Shi (lit. "Hall") is the "Hall" of *Yingshi* ("Build Halls"). Gan De and Shi Shen [4th c. BCE astrologers and star catalogers] both indicated that Hall stands for the Great Temple [to the dynastic ancestors]. I know from this that 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!' Coming to the 15th year of the Jiajing reign period (1536), Emperor Shi Zong of the Ming set in motion great building projects and the Nine Temples were rebuilt in response to the so-called "Build Halls" portent. Zhu Guozhen of the Ming, in chapter 15 "Clusters of the Five Planets" of his *Yonglong xiao pin*, contains a record that differs slightly from Lang Ying's: 'In the third year of the Jiajing reign period (1524), the five planets gathered in *Yingshi*. The Court Astrologer, Le Huo, memorialized the throne: "When planets gather, either there is great good fortune, or there is great calamity: when they gathered in Room (Sco), Zhou flourished; when they gathered in Winnowing Basket (Sgr),¹ Qi became hegemon; when the Han arose, they gathered in

¹ The account of this conjunction, said to have occurred in the 7th century BCE, makes its first appearance in the literature in the *History of the Sui Dynasty* compiled in late the 5th century CE, hence it is quite suspect. I have previously pointed to the appearance of the planets in the region of Sgr in November 722 BCE as a possibility (Pankenier, 1981–1982), but without much confidence, as the portent would have had to precede the rise of Duke Huan of Qi to the status of Hegemon in 679 BCE by far too long. Moreover, not all of the planets would have been visible simultaneously. Because of the wholesale fabrication of celestial portents in the Han, texts from that period and their derivatives which purport to record pre-Han astronomical phenomena cannot be used with confidence without independent corroboration from pre-Han sources (Pankenier, 1990).

Eastern Well (Gem); Song prospered when they gathered in Stride (Psc).¹ In the Tianbao reign period (of Tang, 742–756) they gathered in Tail (Sco/Sgr), and the An Lushan rebellion erupted.² The prognostication is: 'When armies throughout the realm plot strategy, the planets gather in *Yingshi*'. . . here the interpretation of the astral omen has shifted from 'reconstructing the Great Temple' to 'armies throughout the realm plot strategy.' The Ming court placed great store by astrology, and Lang Ying and Zhu Guozhen were both famous scholars. Moreover, the two were near contemporaries. And yet, surprisingly, their accounts of a celestial phenomenon as important as a gathering of the five planets are so different. . . . Lang Ying, in summing up the various events which accompanied massings of the five planets throughout history, noted with considerable emotion: 'Alas! From the Zhou dynasty to the present is over 2800 years [*sic*] and yet the five planets have only gathered as rarely as this, while cases where a single planet has trespassed 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.'³

The discrepancy between the two accounts which troubled the modern author of this passage, Wei Shaosheng, is actually not difficult to explain, for this particular juxtaposition of diverging interpretations provides an especially clear example of the applied political science of judicial astrology as it was practiced in the late empire. Apart from the fact that Lang Ying's account actually misdates the event to 1523 (text elided here; the misdating may be due to a copyist's error), the major discrepancy is really one of prognostication rather than historical accuracy. In referring to the shift in interpretation, Wei Shaosheng actually confuses the chronological relationship between the two sources he cites. Zhu Guozhen's account actually quotes the official 1524 memorial to the throne by the Court Astrologer, Le Huo, which follows the regular pattern in citing the five officially recognized precedents and then drawing the standard conclusion in the prognostication: these rare planetary events have dynastic implications in that they portend large-scale military activity. Zhu Guozhen's version of events, while chronologically somewhat later, as is often the case, may actually be less prone to prudent self-censorship than Lang Ying's contemporary account. Moreover, because of Zhu Guozhen's high rank (ultimately, Grand Tutor to the Heir Apparent) he may also have had access to court archives which were inaccessible to Lang Ying.

Thus on close examination, in three of the cited precedents the portents can be seen to have heralded the rise to power, not least through military prowess, of three prestigious dynasties, Zhou, Han, and Song. But the other two precedents which occurred in mid-dynasty, in contrast, portended an ominous turn of events for the ruling house. The first, during the early 7th century BCE, though probably a late invention, was held to have presaged the elevation of Duke Huan of Qi to the status of Lord Protector of the realm in 679 BCE in recognition of the military preeminence among the Zhou vassals of his eastern state of Qi. The second baleful omen occurred during the troubled final years of Emperor Xuan Zong's reign (713–756 CE), when a planetary cluster was thought to have portended the disastrous rebellion

¹ This is a reference to the fortuitous planetary cluster in mid-April of the year 967 during the reign of the first emperor of the Song dynasty (960–1126 CE). The five planets massed in Pisces within about 17° of each other.

² The cluster occurred in Sgr in mid-October of the year 750 in mid-Tang dynasty (618–906 CE). The five planets drew to within about 30° of each other; the An Lushan rebellion, which nearly toppled the dynasty, lasted from 755–763.

³ Wei Shaosheng, 1991, 95–97.

which ultimately brought about Xuan Zong's abdication and marked the beginning of the Tang dynasty's decline. Therefore the implicit message contained in Le Huo's prognostication should have been abundantly clear to the court of Ming Emperor Shi Zong (1522–1566); because the planetary massing of 1524 occurred in mid-dynasty, it would have been seen as an ominous portent with potentially serious implications for the dynasty. It is doubtful, however, whether anyone at court actually had the temerity to voice such an opinion publicly, since that would be tantamount to an indictment of the ruling house and the emperor.

For this reason, Lang Ying's account is especially instructive. In his listing of the relevant precedents, not only does he add to the list two implausible planetary massings during the reign of the Ming founder, Emperor Hong Wu (1368–1398),¹ his reinterpretation of the 1524 conjunction as quoted also seems a transparent effort on the part of court officials to deflect the ominous significance of the portent in a more harmless direction. In contrast to the time-honored prognostication offered by the Court Astrologer, Lang Ying offers an ingenious but forced scholarly interpretation, evidently representative of the "official" view finally adopted by the court, one based not on precedent, but on etymology. Having already proposed, not just one, but two planetary massings at the beginning of the Ming attesting to the legitimacy of the dynasty, court officials were at liberty to reinterpret this latest portent and prescribe the appropriate imperial response to this directive from heaven. Hence, if the explicit connection which Lang Ying makes between the 1524 portent and the subsequent reconstruction of the state temples in 1536 is to be believed, this incident provides a perfect illustration of how an ambiguous celestial portent could be rationalized. In the end its potentially ominous significance for the dynasty was deflected in a non-threatening direction, to the greater glory of the emperor and the state. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that all this activity was occasioned by an event that was physically unobservable.

5. CONCLUSION

What we have been able to learn about the role of Heaven's Mandate and early Chinese astrological theory has come after extensive analysis of a variety of pre-Han sources leading to the fortunate discovery that parallel accounts of the planetary massings in the 2nd millennium BCE have survived in two distinct versions. The first of these, in the *Bamboo Annals*, embedded explicit mention of two planetary gatherings in 1576 and 1059 BCE in a chronological matrix with which distinctive quasi-legendary accounts could be seen to coincide as figurative renderings of the same astronomical events. With this key in hand it became possible to distinguish historical fact from legendary accretion and to establish that the earliest datable planetary observation in 1953 BCE was also observed and interpreted astrologically.

From the point of view of the comparative history of astronomy, it is especially noteworthy that the planetary massings observed by the Chinese during the 2nd millennium BCE, and associated by them with the founding of the first three historical dynasties, began with an event in Pisces. Thus was established a sequence analogous to one which would ultimately come to be defined in Babylonian and later Western astrology as a triplicity — Pisces, Scorpio, Cancer — though in that context by means of an explicitly geometrical zodiacal relationship and on a different time scale. When the optimal period of 516.33 years for such massings as observed by

¹ The events alluded to occurred on March 25, 1385 and February 19, 1387. The actual wording of the record in the History of the Ming Dynasty (*Mingshi* 26.376) indicates that the five planets were "all visible." In fact, the five planets were separated by more than 56° in the first instance and 168° in the second, which explains why the usual term for planetary massings *heju* "gathered together" was not used.

those early Chinese is extrapolated forward from 1576 BCE, it becomes apparent that the Ming dynasty conjunction of February 1524 belongs to the same remarkable series of conjunctions: 1576, 1059, 543 BCE . . . 1524, 2040. Though space does not permit detailed comparison here, the ominous massing of 1524, so adroitly domesticated in the Chinese context, loomed vastly larger in the consciousness of early 16th century Europeans, coinciding as it did with the Radical Reformation (Zambelli, 1986).

In China, these early observations and their interpretation provided the empirical basis both for the archaic theory that Heaven was disposed to intervene in history at periodic intervals, as well as for later naturalistic speculation based on Five Elements correlative cosmology. Both are fundamental aspects of traditional Chinese political and religious thought, and the tension they engendered at the heart of the Great Tradition and popular thinking about dynastic change (i.e. whether the operative principle underlying the dynastic succession depends on divine providence or cyclical process) has endured until the present. On occasion, chiliastic movements with anti-dynastic overtones were instrumental in seriously challenging, though never actually supplanting ruling dynasties. In times of stress, the popular imagination continued to have recourse to a cosmic authority that indisputably transcended the temporal power, nourishing a hope in supernatural intervention on behalf of those disenfranchised by the historical process. The seductive appeal of Zou Yan's five-phase cycle notwithstanding, the unpredictability of change rendered events inexplicable by means of mere historical causes, hence Confucius' followers' famous laments at being passed over by Heaven, despite the evident ripeness of the time and their 'self-evident' qualifications to hold the mandate.

With the Han dynasty and the advent of the imperial era of Chinese history, the establishment of Confucianism and the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven as the state ideology was realized. After this, Five Elements process theory declined in political significance since it was fundamentally inimical to the imperial dynastic system, while astral portentology remained in the domain of officially controlled activity, along with the sciences of divination and calendars. Throughout the history of imperial China, the Chinese variety of astrological history, wedded as it was to this-worldly concerns, remained non-teleological and never rose above a cyclical interpretation of the growth and decay of imperial dynasties. In more recent times, despite decades of indoctrination in Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought, one still encounters ordinary Chinese citizens (not to mention foreign observers of the Chinese scene) quite willing to opine about the legitimacy and longevity of the present regime in terms of the traditional concept of the Mandate of Heaven. Given the pace of change in China and imminent changes in the leadership, it remains to be seen whether the diffuse gathering of planets in the spring of the year 2000 will be interpreted along historical lines. Perhaps Chinese millennial thinkers, if such still exist, are awaiting a spectacular massing to rival the archetypal events of the 2nd millennium BCE. As it happens, just such a spectacle will occur in September, 2040 to coincide, in all likelihood, with China's resumption of superpower status.

Table 4. The Planetary Conjunction of 2040

	Sun	Me	Ve	Ma	Ju	Sa	Sign
2040 Sep 8	166°	186.5°	192.9°	195.8°	190.2°	191.4°	Vir

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