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Buddhist astrology and astral magic in the Tang Dynasty

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Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that various types of foreign astrology, originating in India, Iran and even as far away as the Hellenistic world, were introduced into China, where they played a significant role in shaping religious, literary and artistic traditions.

It was initially through Buddhism that Indian astrological lore was introduced into China from the fourth to eighth centuries. The primary text during these centuries that explained *nakṣatra* astrology in detail was the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*. In addition, various sūtra and vinaya works explained elements of the Indian calendar, in particular the *pakṣa* cycle, which governs the schedule of *poṣadha*. In the Chinese Buddhist canon, although the practice of astrology is generally prohibited as a livelihood for monks, it is only the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-sūtra* that specifically attacks astrology and refutes its validity. This criticism and the relevant prohibitions against the practice of astrology never arrested Chinese Buddhist interest in astrology. We must bear in mind that there are statements in Mahāyāna scriptures that encourage bodhisattvas to master mundane sciences, which includes astrology and calendrical science. This no doubt gave a degree of sanction to the study of such subjects. If anything did curtail the development of Chinese Buddhist astrology, it was state laws that forbid the unauthorized study of astronomy, astrology and calendrical science. These laws, however, could be ignored as central state authority declined following the An Lushan rebellion during the mid-eighth century.

Although several astrological texts dealing with *nakṣatra* astrology were translated into Chinese from the fourth to seventh centuries, none of these were practical within a Chinese system of astronomy. There were no major attempts at translating and explaining the Indian system of astronomy during these centuries. Moreover, there was actually no need for astrology within Chinese Buddhism until the eighth century, when the Chinese sangha had to properly time rituals as prescribed in Mantrayāna literature. This requirement to time rituals according to an astrological schedule, which differs from the *pakṣa* cycle explained in earlier texts, is explicitly stated in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, translated in 724, and explained in further detail in Yixing's commentary written shortly thereafter. The explanation in the commentary is only a rough overview of contemporary Indian astrology, and would not have been sufficient to determine an auspicious time without further information or instruction. This is what prompted Amoghavajra to compile his astrological manual, the *Xiuyao jing*, in 759. This first draft was an attempt at not only translating astrological lore, but also providing an explanation of how to employ Indian astrology within a Chinese astronomical context. This first result was problematic, which prompted Amoghavajra to revise his manual in 764. As with earlier works, the *Xiuyao jing* employs the Chinese lunar stations as functional equivalents for Indian *nakṣatra*-s, but in this case the whole system is formulated mathematically, eliminating

the need for observational astronomy. It might also be pointed out that the content of the *Xiuyao jing* and Amoghavajra's biographical information indicate that although he might have had an interest in astrology, he was by no means a professional astrologer, especially when we consider that the *Xiuyao jing* alludes to more advanced forms of astrology, such as horoscopy, but provides no concrete details. Amoghavajra, it would seem, relied on the expertise of his peers when it came to advanced astrology. Other esoteric Buddhist literature, some of which was also translated by Amoghavajra, speaks of astrologically determined fate. These factors contributed to a widespread interest in foreign astrology and encouraged the translation of new foreign materials.

Throughout the eighth century, Indian astronomers working for Chinese court, in particular the Gautama family, played a role in facilitating the transmission of new astronomical knowledge into China. Gautama Siddhārtha in 718 translated the *Navagraha-karaṇa*, a manual of Indian mathematical astronomy, which is cited in the *Xiuyao jing*. This demonstrates that Indian court astronomers had a role in the development of Chinese Buddhist astronomy. Around the year 800, however, we can distinguish a shift away from Indian sources of astrology and astronomy, toward Iranian sources. This shift is best explained by the appointment of a court astronomer named Li Su sometime around 781, and the translation of texts on astrology and astral magic by ethnic Iranians, and most likely some members of the Nestorian Christian clergy.

Although such works were not Buddhist, Chinese Buddhists still incorporated the new material into their own practice. These Iranian sources, many of which appear to have been translated from Sogdian, include the necessary lore and techniques required to draft horoscopes; horoscopy being originally a product of Alexandrian Greco-Egyptian culture. This art, which by the late-Tang was often based on a translation of the astrological manual of Dorotheus of Sidon, was used alongside earlier *nakṣatra* astrology. Chinese astrologers continued using Chinese astronomy when practicing foreign astrology, leading to a number of technical problems. Nevertheless, they ultimately produced a functional system. The mature form of Buddhist astrology in the late-Tang is represented by the *Qiyao rangzai jue*. This manual incorporates Cao Shiwei's *Futian li* calendar, which itself was designed under some Iranian influences, and with astrology in mind.

The works of several Daoist and prominent Chinese authors in the ninth century, such as Du Mu and Du Guangting, also display a strong interest in horoscopy, demonstrating that the popularization of astrology in China increasingly affected all areas of society during the ninth century. It was within this context that astral magic and its accompanying iconography flourished in both Buddhism and Daoism.

Buddhists had at their disposal Iranian astral magic, in addition to a full range of Indian *dhāraṇī*-s and other rituals aimed at eliminating the negative influences of the *navagraha*. I argue that it was Buddhist fears of the *navagraha* deities that prompted the emergence and development of the Tejaprabhā cult, starting from around the turn of the

ninth century. The texts of this cult, and later its icons, generally place the planetary deities in the presence of Tejaprabhā, who effectively tames these malefic beings. This Tathāgata, who is unknown in Indian and Indo-Tibetan sources, became a widely-worshipped figure in China, and later across all of East Asia. We should furthermore recall here that the Sanskrit name Tejaprabhā is not attested in Indic sources. The first appearance of this name is traced back to Nanjō Bun'yū in 1883. Although the Tathāgata in question bears some similarities to Tejorāśi, he still must be regarded as a separate East Asian development. Scholars must now consider whether to continue using the name Tejaprabhā.

Buddhists also incorporated into their pantheon the seven stars of the Big Dipper, demonstrating the rich interaction between Daoism and Buddhism during the late-Tang. This point alludes to the possibility that the Buddhist community that engaged in these practices had become less interested in traditional theories of karma and liberation, and instead focused on astral magic and horoscopy as a means of understanding fate and overcoming obstacles. This in itself is an enormous change from Amoghavajra's time, when the *Xiuyao jing* was compiled for the primary purpose of ascertaining auspicious days to maximize the efficacy of rituals.

Chinese astral magic employed various astrological icons. I proposed that the astrological iconography ought to be divided into three general types: Indian, zoomorphic and Iranian-Mesopotamian. The Indian icons are primarily only found in sources depicting the figures of the Garbhadhātu-maṇḍala. The zoomorphic icons are a peculiar set that is only described in the *Qiyao rangzai jue*. The Iranian-Mesopotamian set, which became mainstream, has in the past been misunderstood as either Indian or Chinese creations, but I have securely established their relationship to Near Eastern traditions, most notably by showing their parallels with the Latin *Picatrix*, a translation of an Arabic manual of astral magic originally based on various Syrian sources. I have also argued that the icon of the planet Yuebei is a form of Iranian Āl or Semitic Lilith. This and its function as the lunar apogee in astrology point to a foreign rather than a Chinese source, which stands in contrast to Mak's assumption that Yuebei is a "Chinese pseudo-planet". Based on the available data, I argue that it was Nestorian (East-Syrian) Christians who transmitted these icons and the associated astral magic around the turn of the ninth century. If Yuebei and Ziqi are, in fact, Near Eastern in origin, then a future investigation of the body of astrological lore and magic associated with them would shed light on the transmission of Near Eastern religious knowledge into China during the late-Tang.

One of the most significant figures that I discussed in this study is Yixing. I demonstrated that we need to understand Yixing in two ways: the historical Yixing and the legendary pseudo-Yixing. The historical Yixing was a court astronomer who reformed the state calendar, producing the *Dayan li*, which incorporated some foreign elements, but was mostly based on Chinese models with a unique reliance on number theory derived from the *Yijing*. We know that Yixing produced a number of other works

on the *Yijing*, though none of these are extant. He also assisted in the translation of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* under Śubhakarasiṃha, though no evidence suggests Yixing actually knew Sanskrit. Hence, we should understand Yixing as an editor, rather than as a translator. He also reformed the state system of ‘field allocation’ astrology. This historical man is different from the later image that developed. Several texts dealing with astral magic were attributed to this new pseudo-Yixing. Yixing, as a court astronomer and early pioneer of Chinese Mantrayāna, was the most suitable figure to whom new forms of Buddhist astral magic and astrology – blending Daoist, Indian and Iranian materials – could be attributed. Fictional accounts from the ninth century were incorporated into later secular and Buddhist biographies of Yixing, leading to several modern studies conflating Yixing and pseudo-Yixing. These studies anachronistically project late-Tang developments back into the 720s, and consequently distort the historical record of Buddhist astrology and astral magic in China. Scholars must now properly differentiate between the real Yixing and the later pseudo-Yixing. When this is done, we can see that the Mantrayāna of the 720s did not include any Daoist influences or practices. These are developments that actually appear several decades after Yixing died.

Even when we rule out the possibility of the historical Yixing as having been a practitioner of foreign astrology, it is still clear that Mantrayāna in China took great interest in astrology. Although this is known by modern scholars, it has not yet been considered if astrology played a role in political decision making, particularly in the days of Amoghavajra. We might wonder if the Tang court ever consulted Buddhist astrology when undertaking religious or mundane decisions. We might also consider the possibility that rituals performed by Amoghavajra for the state were timed in accordance with the astrological schedule he produced in the *Xiuyao jing*. Such investigations might draw on the details made available in this study.

Finally, this present study demonstrates that Buddhist astrology and astral magic in the Tang dynasty exercised deep influences across East Asia during the centuries following the demise of the Tang. Specimens from Dunhuang and Bezeklik indicate that astrologers were practicing foreign astrology, but not the specifically Buddhist type that we saw with the *Qiyao rangzai jue*. During the early Song dynasty, it seems that Buddhist interest in astrology declined, which appears to be a result of there being no pressing need to observe it, given the rise of Chan and Pure Land traditions, in which astrology is arguably irrelevant. Buddhists in these regions did, however, continue to worship Tejaprahbā, which indicates that this deity had lost his earlier connection to astrology, and instead simply became a common member of the Buddhist pantheon.

In contrast to the situation in China, Buddhist astrology and astral magic continued to flourish in Japan after its introduction in the ninth and tenth centuries. I argue that Buddhist astrology in Japan ought to be divided into two general types. First, the astrology used by Mikkyō (Shingon and Tendai) practitioners as a way of determining auspicious days for rituals based on the *Xiuyao jing*, which I call “Mikkyō

Astrology”. This is traced back to the early ninth century when Kūkai brought back to Japan a copy of the *Xiuyao jing* and insisted on its implementation. This system was separate from the Sukuyōdō tradition, which emerged in the tenth century via figures such as Nichi’en and Hōzō. The Sukuyōdō practiced horoscopy using texts such as the *Duli yusi jing*, *Qiyao rangzai jue* and Cao Shiwei’s *Futian li* calendar. They also developed throughout the Heian and Kamakura periods the astral magic they had inherited from China. Unlike in Chinese Buddhism, there was an ongoing need to observe astrology in Japanese Mikkyō, which explains why Mikkyō Astrology has survived until even the modern day. To iterate, I argue that Mantrayāna has been the main motivating factor in East Asia behind whether a Buddhist tradition seriously studies astrology.

In light of the close connection between astrology and religious practices, I am very much inclined to think of astrology, and its associated practice of astral magic, as comprising a kind of “sub-religion” that has often been embedded, whether formally recognized or not, within larger religions. As this study indicated, the horoscopy and astral magic practiced by Japanese monks were similar to what a Christian monk in medieval Europe might have done with the *Picatrix* in hand. Their respective traditions are both traced back to the Near East. Buddhism and Christianity are separate religions, but we can see common practices on their peripheries. One of these is astrology, which itself has its own premises, doctrines, beliefs and gods. Astrology might require astronomical knowledge, but that by no means renders it a science according to modern definitions. At the same time, however, few at present would identify astrology as religion. The main objection would be to point to the theories of Ptolemy, who conceived of the planetary influences in a naturalistic or even materialist manner. Ptolemy, despite his later popularity, is actually unusual so far as classical astrology is concerned. The literature that I have read tends to suggest that the early tradition of Hellenistic astrology thought of the planets as gods with their own unique qualities and even personalities, a convention that was transferred into India and East Asia. The Greco-Egyptian tradition of magic also produced means to interact with the planetary deities, which also went eastward. This very religious conception of astrological lore and practice is actually what we see throughout the history of astrology. Astrology, in my opinion, is basically religion, and should be treated as such by scholars.

As a final word, this study, having excavated a major, albeit often overlooked, set of practices and arts within Buddhism, will hopefully provide a foundation for further research on similar topics. It is my hope that the significant role of astrology in Asian history, art, science and religions becomes widely recognized in the academy, given its demonstrated influence and enduring appeal to numerous communities over the centuries. In the case of Buddhist Studies, it is clear that astrology has been important to Buddhists since the beginning of the religion in India. Astrology was initially transmitted into East Asia via Buddhism alongside usually recognized Buddhist practices, such as meditation

and devotional cults. It is widely known that institutional Daoism adapted many elements from Buddhism for their own purposes, but until now scholars have remained unaware that Daoists also made some use of Buddhist astrology, or at least systems of astrology heavily influenced by the earlier Buddhist tradition. The role of astrology in Buddhist culture therefore ought to be widely considered and appreciated as a conduit through which foreign knowledge and practices entered China. Moreover, the predeterminism inherent within astrological thought and its relation to karma also ought to be recognized in discussions concerning Buddhist ideas of fate and destiny.