

Omenology as choreography

remarks on the ritual nature of political action in response to eclipses
in early imperial China

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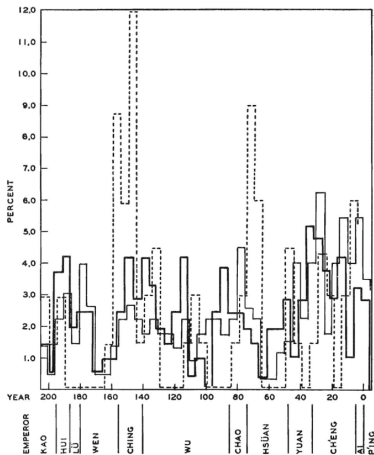
Introduction to early Chinese astral omens

- In Chinese studies, the label 'astrology' is often applied to three things:
 - **Western horoscopy**, which arrives late (4th cent. on) through Buddhism (Kotyk 2017).
 - **'Hemerology'**, i.e. the divination of personal fate via a calendar, gameboard-like schema and the metaphysical associations of ordinal sequences ('day selection' 擇日, 'taboos' 忌諱, divination boards 式盤, 'eight characters' 八字...; see Harper and Kalinowski 2017)
 - **'Omenology'** ('omen reading' 占, specifically that under 'heavenly patterns' 天文).
- I am here to talk about 'omenology'.
- 'Omenology', in China, is similar to the Mesopotamian tradition (Bezold 1919; Pankenier 2014). Notably:
 - Heaven is a mirror of Earth, if not vice versa (Pankenier 2013), its phenomena concerning the empire, its constituents and its enemies.
 - 'Anomaly' 異 is 'calamity' 災, to be interpreted by matching an observation with the correct protasis-apodosis formula from an authoritative catalogue.
 - Fate can be both averted and reversed by established means.

- Principal sources:
 - Omen reading compendia (think *Enuma Anu Enlil*), and syntheses in the histories of 'heavenly patterns' in the dynastic histories.
 - Chronicles of observations, omen readings, and/or consequent events (think the Babylonian Astronomical Diaries), as preserved in the histories of 'heavenly patterns'.
 - Memorials to the throne, as preserved in official biographies and collected writings.
- Principal debates:
 - Was omenology cynically manipulated by courtiers as a political weapon? (Bielenstein 1950, Eberhard 1957, De Crespigny 1976, Bielenstein and Sivin 1977, Bielenstein 1984)
 - Were omen records in fact manipulated retrospectively by historians? (Franke 1950, Kalinowski 1999, Kern 2000, Huang 2004, Pankenier 2012, Morgan 2019, Guo 2023)
 - Chen (2012; 2015):
 - In the Han, omenology was co-opted by 'Confucianism' and fused with classical exegesis, ethical philosophy, court politics and ceremonial.
 - Each generation renegotiated its theory and practice as factions realigned around new questions, incidents and configurations across these interconnected domains.

CHART I

THE PORTENTS OF THE HAN PERIOD, AS REPORTED IN SERIES a, b, AND c. EACH COLUMN REPRESENTS A FIVE-YEAR PERIOD. THE PRESENTATION IS IN PERCENTAGES OF THE TOTAL. KEY: SERIES a: —; SERIES b: — — —; SERIES c: - - - -



Distribution of reported omens 206 B.C.—A.D. 9 from Eberhard (1957)

Question:

- We have debated statistics on *reporting* and *record-keeping*, but what about *outcomes*?
- What was actually *done* about omens like eclipses in terms of *ceremonial*, as documented in ritual literature, and *policy*, as recorded in the imperial annals?

Mesopotamian eclipse ritual

The substitute king (*šar pūhi*):

when bad omens tend to accumulate, the priests select a man of humble birth, or a prisoner, who is dressed in the royal costume, enthroned in the palace, and even provided with a virgin ‘queen’, while the power continues to be exercised by the real king confined to a section of the palace protected from the impurity by ritual barriers made of reeds. When the substitute king is considered to have attracted upon him all the evil which had been predicted, he is executed together with his ephemeral consort, and everything he has touched is burned (Grenet 2020: 22, summarising Bottéro 1978).

The kettledrum ritual (*lilissu*):

In anticipation of an eclipse, gates are sealed with a black and white cord and a circle of flour, and the temple sets out braziers and a bronze kettledrum at its gates and in the street. If the eclipse occurs, the *ērib-bīti* priest lights and keeps the brazier lit, the *kalū* priests play the bronze kettledrum and sing, the addressee performs funerary offerings, the people of the land cover their heads and weep in lamentation, and seven soldiers, smeared with mud and equipped with swords, also lament. The king is clothed in ‘the unpolished uniform’ and likewise sealed within his gates. Once the eclipse has passed, the brazier is extinguished with beer, the gates are unsealed, the temples are purified in a *takpertu* ritual, and the brazier, cords, flour and *takpertu* paraphernalia are cast into the river (author’s summary of Brown and Linszen 1997).

Chinese eclipse ritual

History of the Jin 晉書, 'Treatise on Rites: Solar Eclipses':

In Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) ceremonial, on the first day of each month, the Grand Scribe would submit that month's ephemerids, and the attendants and secretaries on duty would read out the ordinances [appropriate to that month] and accept to implement them accordingly. Two days before and after new moon, ox and ale would be taken below the altar of the God of the Soil to sacrifice to the sun. If there was a solar disturbance, a sheep's throat would be cut as an offering upon the altar to secure relief. He who sees to the affair conducts the ritual in a long cap, a robe with a maroon collar, sleeves and hem, and maroon trousers and socks, as is the tradition. ...

(Continued)

Since the Jin (265–420) have received the mandate, only when the sun and moon are about to cross does the Grand Scribe report the syzygy; and the Secretariat announces martial law inside and outside [of the palace] three days prior to the affair. Zhi Yu 摯虞 (250–300) resolved [all] doubts [about the proceedings]:

In case of a solar eclipse, red turbans are worn to aid [the forces of] Yang. As the eclipse approaches, the emperor [dons] plain clothing and avoids the main hall, and strict precautions are taken both inside and outside the palace. The Grand Scribe ascends the [Observatory] Terrace to wait in watch for a solar disturbance, [upon which he] immediately beats the drum at the gate. When the sound of the drum is heard, the [emperor's] attendants wear red turbans, carry swords and enter to attend. All officers at or above the rank of clerk in the Three Communication Agencies each brandish a sword and stand in front of their doors. The Chamberlain for the Palace Garrison gallops his horse in circles around the palace, continuously inspecting the defences. Drums are also beaten at the altar to the God of the Soil, according to the rites of the Zhou. In addition, red silk is formed into a cord to tie around the altar, and the Invocator Scribe delivers a speech to reprimand it. The God of the Soil is a coiled dragon spirit and a High Excellency of the Son of Heaven, thus [the Invocator] reprimands it. [Then,] only when the sun returns to normal, is it stopped.

Observations:

- The imperial ritual is rooted in classical precedence from the Zhou (1045–771 B.C.); it is codified, and it is recorded in canons and histories of state ceremonial.
- The ritual evolves.
 - Here, 2nd cent. B.C.–5th cent. A.D.:
 - the God of the Soil goes from sacrificial recipient to scapegoat;
 - shift from placating the spirits to mobilising in defiance thereof.
 - 5th cent. on:
 - progressively reduced degree and periods of alert
 - conversely, involvement extended to all government agencies.
- With all their common elements, comparison with the Mesopotamian analogue highlights that the Chinese ritual is quite sanguine:
 - red- vs mud-covered soldiers;
 - mobilisation to defensive positions vs mourning and lamentation;
 - magic cord used offensively, to keep the evil in, rather than defensively, to keep the evil out;
 - nothing is contaminated or otherwise in need of purification or elimination.

Q: Why is this the ritual?

A: Because tradition, rooted in scripture, attributed to the ancient Sage Kings.

Q: Why did it evolve the way it did?

A: In response to external factors:

- As the mathematics of eclipse prediction improved, the level and period of alert was decreased, saving time and resources (Chen 2012).
- In 8 B.C., the Han established a tripartite cabinet, called the Three Excellencies (Grand Tutor, Grand Commandant and Grand Minister of Works). Two years later, in 6 B.C., they began a tradition of blaming and firing the Excellencies for solar eclipses, which shifted attention away from the Palace (emperor, eunuchs and in-laws). After the collapse of the Han, in 221 and 222, Emperor Wen of the Wei (r. 220–226) ordered an end to calls for removal of both the his Excellencies and in-laws, because it would be wrong to blame anyone but the emperor himself (Chen 2015, 193–205). A generation later, the new ceremony saw the God of the Soil punished as a 'High Excellency', and court officers mobilised in an exercise in solidarity.

Virtue and imperial action

Problem: cynical and biased against ‘pseudo-science’, twentieth-century scholars failed to consider how, *after Confucians got their hands on it* (Chen 2015), Chinese omen literature is filled with the language of morality.

Sima Qian (c.146–c.86 B.C.), *Shiji* ‘Tianguan shu’ (91 B.C.; cf. Pankenier 2013: 510):

If there is a solar disturbance (*bian*), practice virtue; if there is a lunar disturbance, reduce punishments; if there is a planetary disturbance, join in harmony.

Li Chunfeng (602–670), *Yisi zhan* (645):

The sun is the essence of Yang, and the treasure of brightness. Its *qi* spreads virtue and vitality. Vitality on earth is called ‘virtue’, as virtue is a generative force. When virtue is harmed, destruction follows. Therefore, when the sun is eclipsed, there is necessarily a calamity [involving] the destruction of the kingdom and death of the ruler.

When the sun is eclipsed, the kingdom that has lost its virtue is destroyed.

When the sun is eclipsed, he who is king cultivates virtue. The rites of cultivating virtue emphasise self-castigation. This is the reason that when Yu [the Great] and Tang [the Accomplished] blamed themselves, they came back more vigorous than ever from it.

History of the Later Han, 'Basic Annals', Emperor Ming of the Han (r. 58–75):

*Renyin*₃₉, new moon eve (16 Dec 65), the sun was eclipsed, total. The emperor issued an edict, stating:

'I, lacking virtue, have inherited the great patrimony [of imperial rule], and yet I have provoked resentment among men, below, and stirred the three luminaries [of Heaven], above. The disturbance (*bian*) of a solar eclipse is a particularly grave calamity (*zai*), which the diagrams and prophecies of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* consider the supreme accusation. [The duty to] eternally reflect upon one's fault rests solely on My person. Let all officials strive to fulfil their duties and to speak [freely] without regard to taboos.'

Upon this, those in office all submitted sealed memorials, each speaking of successes and failures. The Emperor, upon reading the memorials, deeply reproached himself and then presented them to the officials. The emperor issued an edict, stating:

'Everything of which the officials have spoken is My fault. I have failed to address the grievances of the people, and to restrain the craftiness of the lower officials. Instead, I have frivolously employed human labour, lavishly constructed palace buildings, come and gone without restraint, and allowed my emotions to get the better of me. In the past, "the reception gate was left unguarded, and 'Guanju' [was sung] to satirize the age," and "the drifting thistledown was carried by the wind, lamented by Weizi." Constantly reviewing the previous admonitions, I am shaken with apprehension. I fear only that my feeble virtue may lead to complacency over time.'

History of the South, 'Basic Annals', Emperor Ming of the S. Qi (r. 494–498):

Month XI, *renshen*₀₉ (14 Dec 494), the sun was eclipsed. The emperor stayed in his lodgings to bathe and abstained from [sex]. On the day, [he] purified himself and ate vegetarian, broke with his duties at court, withdrew from others, and sat kneeling in simple attire until [that day's] tasks were complete. ...

History of the Liang, 'Basic Annals', Emperor Wu of the Liang (r. 502–549):

Month V, *renchen*₂₉ (10 June 522), the sun was eclipsed, total. *Guisi*₃₀ (11 June), a general amnesty was declared under heaven, and instructions were sent down to the four quarters to immediately report any suffering among the commoners. Excellencies, ministers and officials were each to submit a sealed memorial, and governors to recommend virtuous, upright and outspoken gentlemen from the commanderies and kingdoms.

History of the North, 'Basic Annals', Emperor Taiwu of the N. Wei (r. 423–452):

Grand Continuation, inaugural year, spring, month I, *jiwei*₅₆, new moon (14 Feb 435), the sun was eclipsed. *Renwu*₁₉ (9 Mar), all sentences below death were lowered by one degree. *Guiwei*₂₀ (10 Mar), the palace women of [the late emperors] Daowu (r. 386–409) and Mingyuan (r. 409–423) were released and ordered to marry. *Jiashen*₂₁ (11 Mar), [there was] a general amnesty and change of the [political] era.

Total: 111 records of gov't responses to solar eclipses, A.D. 25–618

	type	sum	span
Criminal amnesty/leniency			
	general amnesty 大赦	30	27–574
	sentence reduction 降罪	7	115–593
	partial amnesty 曲赦	4	461–513
	invest. wrongful imprisonment 詳理冤獄	3	53–80
Punishment of officials			
	firing of Grand Commandant 太尉罷	21	81–194
	firing of Grand Minister of Education 司徒罷	5	127–500
	firing of Grand Minister of Works 司空罷	2	171–561
	reduction of official grades 各降一等	1	399
Investigation/invitation of criticism			
	invitation of criticism 詔上封事	12	31–522
	request counsel	8	70–519
	national inquiry 詔使者巡	5	417–565
Self-criticism			
	self-criticism 自責	15	31–572
	accept Excellency's resignation 三公遜位	5	70–474
Reduction of spending/imposition			
	reduction of spending 節約·節制	7	154–494
	reduction of taxes 減賦	5	103–454
	reduction of corvée 減役	2	266–477
	reduction of entertainment staff 免酺等官	1	75

(Continued)

	type	sum	span
Recommendation of moral men		14	
Withdrawal from duties		13	
avoid throne room 避正殿		8	31–559
five-day retreat from court 不聽事五日		5	31–494
Political reform		13	
change of political era 改元		10	158–572
emperor cedes throne 禪位		1	220
sacrificial reform 改祀		1	331
divorce 改婚		1	435
Sacrifice/ceremony		12	
Philanthropy		8	
Order officials to do better		6	
Promotions		6	
granting of noble titles 賜爵		5	53–574
increase of official grades 加官級		1	566
Cessation of hostilities		5	
Other		2	

Li Chunfeng, *Yisi zhan*, 'Chap. 19, Cultivating Virtue':

The 'cultivation of virtue' refers to transforming evil into good, and disorder into order. ...

[But] when their actions are not in conformity with the Way, and when their principles do not accord with righteousness, then it [shall] be show to them in disasters, and they [shall] be taught to follow goodness without cease. They [shall] rectify their mistakes and renew themselves, and thus will their abundant virtue necessarily flourish. ...

This is taken as a constant principle throughout the present text. Therefore, below every omen reading (*zhan*) it says 'Cultivate virtue to exorcise it'. The cultivation of virtue is the same for both lord and servant; it is not solely incumbent upon those in the position of the superior. ...

To remedy this, the ruler [should] govern by the Way, and his ministers [should] remonstrate out of loyalty. They should advance and employ the worthy and good, withdraw and depose slanderers and sycophants, lighten punishments and forgive prisoners, foster orphans and sustain widows, lessen taxes and loosen corvées, pity and aid the wretched, release the accumulation of idle women from the Rear Palace and pair them with the widowed and solitary men of the world under heaven...

Conclusion

- In China, omenology was fused with Confucian moral philosophy under the Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220).
- In scripture and in the liturgical canon, the correct response to a solar eclipse is the kettledrum ritual, which evolves, by the third century A.D., from a sacrifice to a sort of military exercise.
- At the same time, the moral turn in omenology seems to have informed how the throne responded to solar eclipses with withdrawal, introspection, and grace; and over time, these decrees evolved into a new, extracanonical ritual—a dance to be performed in rhythm with the cosmos as announced by mathematicians.
- Therefore, when we discuss theory, practice, politics and *belief* in relation to astrology, it is probably important to consider its known real-world effects.

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