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## When the Heavenly Signs Were Untimely

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Having previously uncovered several instances in Chinese history when planetary astrology significantly influenced events on the ground, the present essay takes a slightly different tack. Explored here are two instances when strikingly similar astral signs involving mystical revelations may or may not have had epochal repercussions. The first has to do with a planetary portent during the early Han 漢 dynasty that evokes the same or similar associations as previous epochal dynastic omens, but which was most inopportune given the political developments on the ground. The second has to do with the famous hierophany involving the “unicorn” or *lin* 麟, the mystical creature that has captured the Chinese imagination for millennia. Concerning the *lin*, its origins and history are obscure, bordering on inaccessible. Nevertheless, an attempt is made to assemble the available evidence into a suggestive, if not quite definitive account of that iconic creature’s historical role.

**Keywords:** Planetary astrology, Empress Lü 呂, Confucius, uncrowned king, unicorn capture

## 1. Case One: Early Han 漢

Previous studies have demonstrated the political significance throughout Chinese history of planetary conjunctions during dynastic transitions. From the Three Dynasties period through the late imperial period the cosmo-political ideology of rulership had at its core the doctrine that rulership could only be recognized as legitimately conferred when sanctioned by the Supernal Lord, *Shangdi* 上帝 or *Tian* 天, ideally in the form of a close planetary conjunction. Sometimes, however, significant portents and events on the ground were not exactly in synchrony. One noteworthy case occurred at the Han 漢 dynasty's founding. Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (145–86 BCE) account of Liu Bang's 劉邦 (256–195 BCE) planetary omen is surprisingly cursory: "When the Han arose, the Five Planets gathered in [lodge] *Eastern Well*."<sup>1</sup> What the historian is referring to is a rather nondescript gathering of the planets in May of 205 BCE (not 206), at which time they were spread over a considerable distance. This gathering was a long way from being as impressive as the precedent-setting events of 1953 BCE at the beginning of the Xia 夏, or the 1059 BCE cluster of planets displayed to King Wen of Zhou 周文王 (1152–1056 BCE).



Figure 1: Liu Bang's Mandate omen of May 205 BCE (Starry Night Pro 8.0)

1 Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 27.1348.

Han historians set the nominal beginning of the dynasty at 206 BCE when Liu Bang, Prince of Han, defeated the Qin 秦 army, thereby eliding the subsequent four years of struggle for supremacy (206–202 BCE) between Liu Bang and Xiang Yu 項羽 of Chu 楚. In King Wen’s case at the beginning of Zhou 周 the dense gathering of the planets in 1059 BCE at the “beak” of the Vermilion Bird (*zhuniao* 朱鳥) constellation, the very astral field allotted to the Zhou, preceded the decisive overthrow of Shang 商 in 1046 BCE by thirteen years, or one Jupiter cycle.<sup>2</sup>

Centuries later in the *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the Former Han), Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) provides more detail. He writes:

In the tenth month of the first year [of Emperor Gao 高皇帝, 206 BCE] the Five Planets gathered in *Eastern Well*. Extrapolation using the astro-calendrical system [indicates that] they followed Jupiter. This was the tally [omen signifying] Emperor Gao had received [Heaven’s] Mandate. A former advisor of Han said to Zhang Er 張耳 [d. 202 BCE]: ‘Eastern Well is the Qin [astral] field. When the King of Han [Liu Bang] entered Qin the Five Planets followed Jupiter and gathered so that Han ought to gain all-under-Heaven through Rectitude.’

漢元年十月，五星聚於東井，以曆推之，從歲星也。此高皇帝受命之符也。故客謂張耳曰：「東井秦地，漢王入秦，五星從歲星聚，當以義取天下。」<sup>3</sup>

This account echoes a rule made definitive by inclusion in Sima Qian’s “Tianguan shu” 天官書 (Treatise on the Celestial Offices).<sup>4</sup> The appeal to the astral-calendrical system (extrapolation using the astral-calendrical system),

2 The Jupiter station “Quail Fire” (*Chunhuo* 鶉火) in the Vermilion Bird constellation marked by Alphard (Alpha Hydrae) was the allotment of the Zhou in the early “field-allocation” (*fenye* 分野) system of astrology. The *Guoyu* 國語 correctly identifies Quail Fire as the location of Jupiter in 1046 BCE when the Zhou overthrew the Shang, one Jupiter cycle after the gathering of 1059 BCE. When the *Guoyu* was compiled in the late fourth-century BCE accurate retrospective calculation of Jupiter’s position would not have been possible. See David W. Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China: Conforming Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 197, 204 and *passim*.

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4 “When the five planets follow [Jupiter] and all gather in one lodge, the state below can captivate all-under-Heaven by means of Rectitude” 五星皆從而聚於一舍，其下之國可以義致天下 *Shiji*, 27.1312.

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however, is problematical.<sup>5</sup> If the event was witnessed and recorded at the time no “extrapolation” should have been required. As we saw above, in fact Liu Bang’s planetary alignment occurred not in 206 BCE, but in May 205 BCE, the following year, and thus not in the autumn at all. Nor was it anywhere near as compact as King Wen’s Mandate portent of 1059 BCE. The faulty record was later criticized by Gao Yun 高允 (390–487 CE), who pointed out that in the tenth month the sun should have been in lodges six or seven *Wei* 尾 (Tail) and *Ji* 箕 (Winnowing Basket, Sco–Sgr). Since it is physically impossible for the inner planets Mercury and Venus to be observed in late autumn so far from the Sun as Eastern Well (lodge 22, Gem), the dating cannot possibly be right.<sup>6</sup> That the prevailing cosmo-political ideology would have required such an omen by Liu Bang’s time is likely, given the historical precedents and Confucius’ lament over the failure of a “River Diagram” (*Hetu* 河圖) or “Luo Writing” (*Luoshu* 洛書) to materialize in his day, more than three centuries earlier.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Dowager Empress Lü 呂 Interregnum

Emperor Gao, Liu Bang, died in his twelfth year 195 BCE after a serious illness. Liu Ying 劉盈, Emperor Hui 惠 (210–188 BCE), son of Grand Empress Dowager Lü 呂太后 (241–180 BCE) was enthroned shortly after. The Dowager Empress effectively ruled as regent until Emperor Hui’s premature death and then in her own right (her reign years being enumerated as *Tai Hou nian* 太后年) until 180 BCE. Apart from the political acumen she demonstrated during the interval 205–202 BCE when Liu Bang left her in command of Guanzhong 關中, Grand Empress Lü is best known for her vengeful cruelty coupled with her concerted efforts to sideline the Liu clan of Emperor Gao, as she orchestrated the most serious challenge to the continuity of the Former Han dynasty. Wielding power after Liu Bang’s demise, Dowager Empress Lü’s chief preoccupation was to install dozens of Lü clan members

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as rulers of kingdoms and appanages throughout the empire, effectively supplanting and neutralizing the Liu clan. Finally, only a *coup d'état* by the Lius and her own death in 180 BCE brought her scheming to an end.

Empress Lü's rule is of particular interest for other reasons as well, most notably for several astral omens. Sima Qian summarizes the astral events of the first century of the Han dynasty this way:

When Han arose, the Five Planets gathered in *Eastern Well*. During the siege of Pingcheng 平城 [202–201 BCE], the moon was [encircled by] a seven-layered halo in [lodges] *Triaster* [Orion] and *Net* [Taurus]. When the Lü clan rebelled, the sun was eclipsed, and it grew dark in the daytime [188, 181 BCE].... When battle was joined [the comet] set and the blood of the corpses flowed below. During the *Yuanguang* 元光 ["Epochal Brilliance;" 134–129 BCE] and *Yuanshuo* 元狩 ["Epochal Imperial Hunt;" 122–117 BCE] reign periods, Chi You's Banner 蚩尤之旗 [comet] appeared twice, spanning half the sky. Afterward, the imperial armies sallied forth four times, punishing the Yi-Di 夷狄 for several decades, and attacking the Hu 胡 [Xiongnu 匈奴] even more aggressively. When the Yue 越 Kingdom was terminated [112–111 BCE], Mars guarded [*Southern*] *Dipper* 南斗 [Sgr]. When the Chaoxian 朝鮮 Kingdom was taken [109–108 BCE], a star became fuzzy in River Garrisons 河戍. When the armies campaigned against Ferghana 大宛 [104–102 BCE], a star became fuzzy [tailless comet] at *Zhaoyao* 招搖 ["Twinkling Indicator," aka *Yaoguang* 搖光 η UMa]. These are the major standouts. As for the ins and outs of lesser anomalies, they are too numerous to mention. Seen in this way, it has never happened that an event was not first preceded by some visible manifestation.<sup>8</sup>

漢之興，五星聚于東井。平城之圍，月暈參、畢七重。諸呂作亂，日蝕，晝晦。……及兵起，遂伏尸流血其下。元光、元狩，蚩尤之旗再見，長則半天。其後京師師四出，誅夷狄者數十年，而伐胡尤甚。越之亡，熒惑守斗；朝鮮之拔，星芘于河戍；兵征大宛，星芘招搖：此其瑩瑩大者。若至委曲小變，不可勝道。由是觀之，未有不先形見而應隨之者也。<sup>9</sup>

8 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 27.1348–49. See also: Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 507–9. Thus, there can be no doubt that Sima Qian was well informed about celestial portents during the first century of the Han dynasty.

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The Empress Dowager's first solar eclipse occurred in mid-afternoon on July 17, 188 BCE and the unfortunate Emperor Hui died a month afterward. In 181 BCE, her seventh year, "on the *jichou* 己丑 day [March 4] the sun was again eclipsed, and broad daylight once again became dark. The Empress Dowager abhorred this and was not pleased. She remarked to her attendants, 'this is because of me.'"<sup>10</sup>

Although we do not know who held the office of Prefect Grand Scribe-Astrologer before Sima Qian's father, Sima Tan 司馬談 (ca. 165–110 BCE), who served Emperor Wu in that office from 140–110 BCE, the above excerpt from the "Treatise on the Celestial Offices" shows that from the very beginning of the Han watches were kept for astrological portents. What is particularly interesting in the present context is that sandwiched among Sima Qian's year-by-year listing in the "Basic Annals" (*benji* 本紀) of the many appointments by the Dowager Empress before and after, in her third year 185 BCE the Scribe-Astrologer curiously notes simply: "no events" (*wu shi* 無事).<sup>11</sup> Apart from the highly selective *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn) chronicle, where noting lacuna as "*wu shi*" might be expected, there is only one earlier such notation by Sima Qian in the "Basic Annals." In Qin Shihuang's 秦始皇 (259–210 BCE) thirtieth year it says "in spring and summer, no events" (*chun xia wu shi* 春夏無事), which seems unremarkable. William Nienhauser noted that during the summer of 185 BCE the *Han shu* records widespread flooding across China which Sima Qian neglected to mention.<sup>12</sup> Nienhauser goes on to

10 See William H. Nienhauser Jr. et al., *The Grand Scribe's Records: Vol. II, The Basic Annals of the Han Dynasty* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 124; Ban Gu, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty* vol. 1, translated by Homer H. Hubs (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1938), 185; Xu Zhentao, David W. Pankenier, and Jiang Yaotiao, *East Asian Archaeoastronomy: Historical Records of Astronomical Observations of China, Japan, and Korea* (Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach, 2000), 32. Typically, as an obscuring of the "Great Yang" light solar eclipses were baleful omens for the ruler, no doubt all the more so during her reign.

11 Nienhauser drew attention to this anomaly, noting that: "Here we can see at work the strategy Empress Lü employed repeatedly in bringing the Lüs to power: first enfeoff a member of the Liu Family or one of their supporters... to appease the great ministers and other Lius, then appoint members of her own clan." See Nienhauser, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, II, 117, n. 75.

12 The *Han shu* (3.98) also records that *qiu xing zhou jian* 秋星晝見 "in autumn the stars were seen in daylight"; however, such wording refers to a phenomenon that can only occur during a total solar eclipse and so probably refers to the eclipse of July 188 BCE whose path of maximum eclipse passed directly over Shaanxi. There were no solar eclipses visible from China in 185 BCE.

comment: “this record of ‘nothing happening’ must certainly have drawn many readers’ attention. Strangely enough, the section for the years of Empress Lü’s reign is the most complete traditional account of events for each year in the Han dynasty.”<sup>13</sup>

Now, one might simply bracket this third year of “no events” as a curiosity but for an interesting celestial coincidence. In late March of 185 BCE, in the pre-dawn hours, the Five Planets could be seen to gather in a most impressive cluster (merely 10° apart this time). This occurred in the same location, the “Dark Temple” (*Xuangong* 玄宮; Square of Pegasus), as Yu the Great’s momentous conjunction of 1953 BCE at the beginning of the Xia (Figures 2 & 3).<sup>14</sup> The planets typically take many days to gather and then disperse, so it is hardly likely that this easily visible and striking celestial convergence could have been missed due to bad weather. Surely, it must have been disturbing that Liu Bang’s “Mandate” portent was nowhere near as impressive as this repetition of Yu the Great’s spectacular omen during the regency of Dowager Empress Lü!

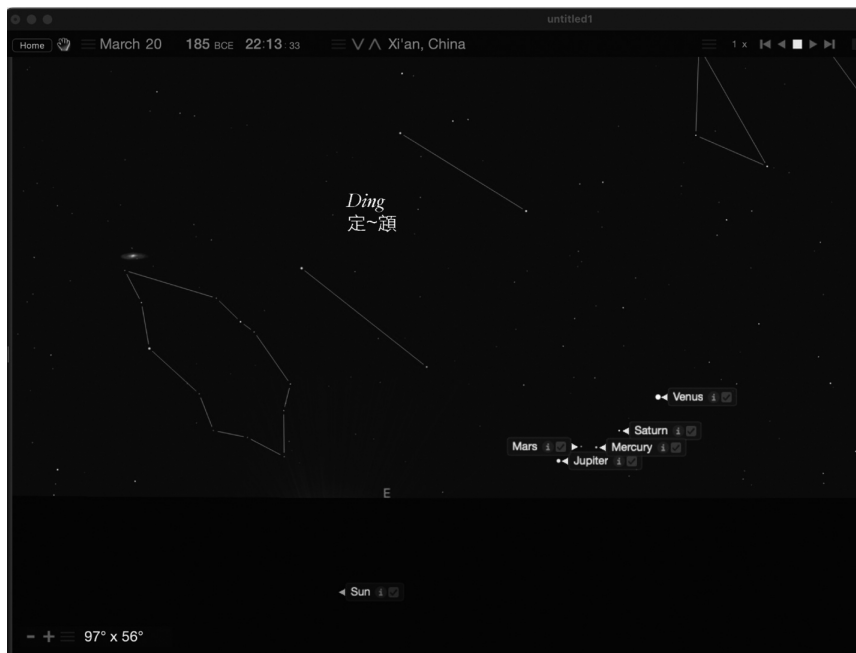


Figure 2: Dowager Empress Lü’s planetary omen of 185 BCE. (Starry Night Pro 8.0)

13 See Wang Yizhi 王益之, *Xi Han nian ji* 西漢年紀 (Annalistic Records of the Western Han), punc. and coll. Wang Genlin 王根林 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1993).

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comment: “this record of ‘nothing happening’ must certainly have drawn many readers’ attention. Strangely enough, the section for the years of Empress Lü’s reign is the most complete traditional account of events for each year in the Han dynasty.”<sup>13</sup>

Now, one might simply bracket this third year of “no events” as a curiosity but for an interesting celestial coincidence. In late March of 185 BCE, in the pre-dawn hours, the Five Planets could be seen to gather in a most impressive cluster (merely 10° apart this time). This occurred in the same location, the “Dark Temple” (*Xuangong* 玄宮; Square of Pegasus), as Yu the Great’s momentous conjunction of 1953 BCE at the beginning of the Xia (Figures 2 & 3).<sup>14</sup> The planets typically take many days to gather and then disperse, so it is hardly likely that this easily visible and striking celestial convergence could have been missed due to bad weather. Surely, it must have been disturbing that Liu Bang’s “Mandate” portent was nowhere near as impressive as this repetition of Yu the Great’s spectacular omen during the regency of Dowager Empress Lü!

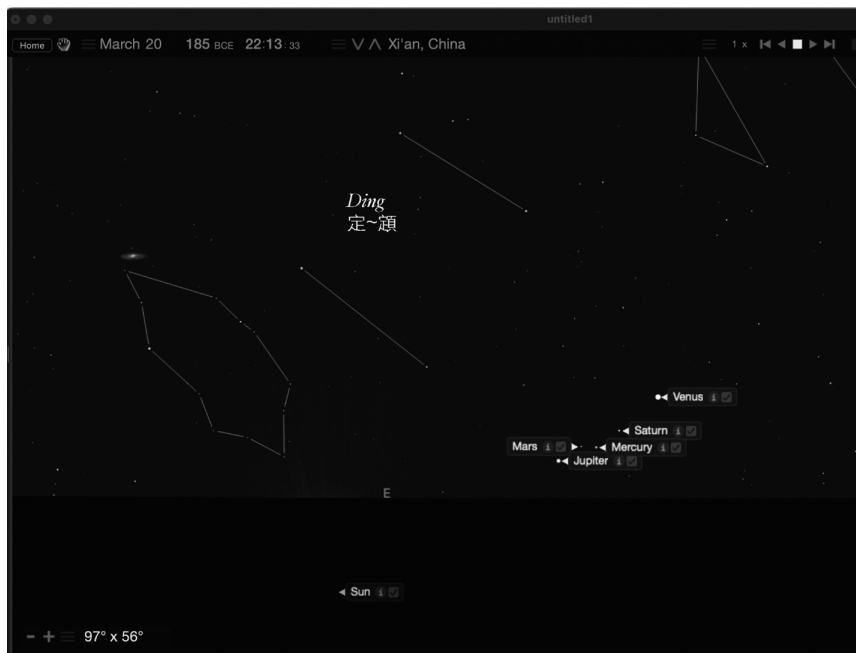


Figure 2: Dowager Empress Lü’s planetary omen of 185 BCE. (Starry Night Pro 8.0)

13 See Wang Yizhi 王益之, *Xi Han nian ji* 西漢年紀 (Annalistic Records of the Western Han), punc. and coll. Wang Genlin 王根林 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1993).

14 See Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 34, 204–5.



Figure 3: Yu the Great’s planetary omen of Feb. 1953 BCE in essentially the same location as Empress Lü’s in 185 BCE. (Starry Night Pro 8.0)

Liu Bang’s celestial omen signaling Heaven’s conferral of the Mandate was noteworthy and timely, since it occurred near the location of King Wen’s portent 854 years earlier, albeit with the planets much more scattered. The planetary gathering of 185 BCE, in contrast, was ideal in all respects—more dense, readily observable, and in the very same location as Yu the Great’s spectacular celestial sign in the “Dark Temple” (*Xuan Gong* 玄宮) which established the very precedent for Heaven-conferring planetary omens (Fig. 4a below). But because of the awkward timing—Emperor Gao had been dead for ten years and a scheming female usurper was now in control of the government—it could hardly have been an auspicious omen for the Liu clan. Could the omission of such a noteworthy omen have been deliberate? Might the record have been suppressed?

Sima Tan entered Emperor Wu’s service as *Tai shi ling* 太史令 (Grand Scribe Astrologer) in 140 BCE, having been born not long after the attempted usurpation by the Lü clan. During his younger years those events would still have been fresh in memory. As we saw above, in the Simas’ collective account in the *Shiji*, Sima Qian surprisingly makes only passing mention of the Five Planet omen that was taken to have signaled the conferral of Heaven’s Mandate on Liu Bang. At the same time, in the “Basic Annals” he goes out of his way

to stress the inauspiciousness of Empress Lü's inopportune solar eclipses. In his "Treatise on the Celestial Offices" Sima Qian even states explicitly that: "In my own perusal of the scribal accounts, I have examined into their events and movements, and in the [past] one hundred years there has not been an instance when the Five Planets have appeared and not reversed course and retrograded."<sup>15</sup> This being the case, how could the Grand Scribe-Astrologer not have come across a record of such an impressive planetary gathering as Empress Lü's?

We now know that the date of Liu Bang's reported planetary omen is a year off: the alignment occurred in 205 BCE and not in Emperor Gao's first year 206 BCE at all. At the very least, mention of the event shows that knowledge of it ought to have been current by mid-century and known to Sima Tan, given his access to the archives of his office. Thus, it is very strange that Liu Bang's planetary omen is not detailed in the "Basic Annals" of Emperor Gao but instead appears in Sima Qian's brief synopsis of major astral portents in the "Treatise on the Heavenly Offices." The *Han shu* account is manifestly wrong in important respects, so that it could hardly be contemporaneous with the event, notwithstanding the attribution to Zhang Er.<sup>16</sup>

After the Liu's restoration as rightful possessors of Heaven's Mandate, perhaps it was recognized that something had to be done to counter the Dowager Empress's very impressive planetary omen at the height of her machinations two decades after Liu Bang's portent. We will never know for certain, but perhaps one might be permitted to speculate that it was after this most inconvenient celestial omen for the Han dynasty during the Empress Dowager's regency that the Liu clan holdovers and retired loyalists were spurred to manipulate the record on Liu Bang's behalf. All this may have come about in reaction to the patently obvious interpretation of the planetary omen of 185 BCE — that Heaven was now endorsing the Dowager Empress Lü's efforts to supplant the Han and establish a new dynasty in her own right. Tidying up after their coup and in the interest of national security, Liu officials might have judged it essential to suppress Heaven's inexplicably inopportune omen.

15 Sima Qian, *Shiji* 27.1350: 「余觀史記，考行事，百年之中，五星無出而不反逆行。」

16 The maxim about the planets following Jupiter signifying rectitude first appears in Sima Qian's authoritative "Treatise on the Celestial Offices," so Zhang Er's supposedly having cited it is also scarcely credible.

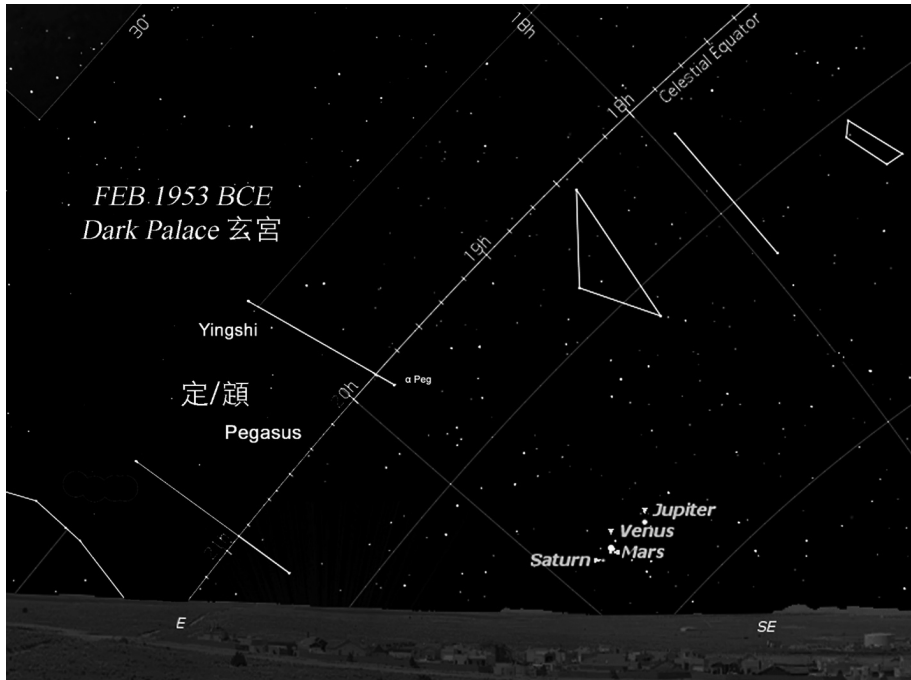


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### 3. Case Two: Whence the Unicorn—*Qilin* 麒麟?

The *lin* or *qilin* is one of the most curious and mysterious of creatures. All students of Chinese civilization are familiar with this mythical beast and its ancient role as the presage of an approaching era of peace and prosperity, governed by a supremely benevolent sagely ruler such as the legendary Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu the Great 大禹. The *qilin's* righteous benevolence (*ren* 仁) and charisma purportedly extended to the world of nature where its hooves and horn would never injure a living thing. According to long tradition, historical precedents show that this supernatural creature's all too rare qualities foretell a reformation in worldly ways and the coming of a sage destined to wholly transform the age in the best way imaginable.

As Edwin G. Pulleyblank has shown, traditions also mix the *lin* with the fabulous Heavenly Horse (*tianma* 天馬), which Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) for one sought to acquire from the “newly contacted” peoples of the far western regions.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the cultures of the western highlands and through them the sedentary settlements of the central plains had been in contact with the western regions for millennia. It was from Central Asia and the steppes via intermediaries including Tibeto-Burman ethno-linguistic groups and Indo-Europeans such as the Tocharians (*Yuezhi* 月氏), that technology transfers such as bronze metallurgy and the horse-drawn chariot found their way into Three Dynasties China.<sup>18</sup>

The following passage at the end of the *Chunqiu* is most often cited as emblematic of the *qilin's* iconic role. Within the Confucian tradition, this event is imbued with great historical and metaphysical significance. Early Han commentaries claim to preserve the elderly Confucius' sentiments on learning of the capture of a unicorn in 481 which have resonated down the centuries.

Lord Ai, 14<sup>th</sup> year: “In the spring of the fourteenth year, during a hunt in the west a *lin* was caught.”

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This crucial passage at the core of the Confucian political/philosophical agenda of the era is explicated this way in the *Gongyang Commentary* 公羊傳：

“Why is this recorded?” “It was an anomaly.” “How so?” “It is not a creature of the Central States.” “Well then, who caught it?” “Someone gathering kindling.” “Someone gathering kindling is an inconsequential person. Why then label it a [royal] hunt?” “To magnify it.” “Why magnify it?” “Because it was the capture of a *lin*.” “Why is that a reason to magnify it?” “Because the *lin* is a benevolent creature. When there is true king it appears; when there is no true king it does not.” Someone who reported it said: “There was an elaphure [deer] with a horn.” Confucius said, “For whom has it come!? For whom has it come!?”

When Yan Yuan died, Confucius said, “Alas! Heaven bereaves me!” When Zi Lu died, Confucius said, “Alas, Heaven has visited this on me!” When the *lin* was captured on a hunt in the west, Confucius said, “My Way is finished!” “Why does the [*Spring and Autumn Annals*] end with Lord Ai’s fourteenth year?” “It was fulfilled!” “Why did the Noble Man compile the Springs and Autumns?” “In order to dispel chaos and restore order nothing is more efficacious than the Springs and Autumns.” “Then, is it not known whether it was for this reason, or because the Noble Man took pleasure in speaking about the Way of Yao and Shun? In the end, did he not enjoy knowing that a future Yao or Shun would come to know him?” “To codify the essential import of the Springs and Autumns to await the coming of a later Sage who would know the Noble Man from his endeavors, indeed he would have found gratification in this.”

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#### 4. About the *Lin*

The earliest appearance of the *lin* in the literature is in the *Book of Odes*’ (*Shijing* 詩經) “Lin zhi zhi” 麟之趾 (Feet of the *lin*):

The feet of the *lin*: The noble sons of our prince, Ah! they are the *lin*!  
麟之趾、振振公子。于嗟麟兮。

The forehead of the *lin*: The noble grandsons of our prince, Ah! they are the *lin*!  
麟之定、振振公姓。于嗟麟兮。

The horn of the *lin*: The noble kindred of our prince, Ah! they are the *lin*!  
麟之角、振振公族。于嗟麟兮。<sup>22</sup>

This cryptic ode from the “Zhou nan” 周南 section of the *Book of Odes* is

21 As Mencius (*Mengzi* 2B/13) famously said: “After five-hundred years a sage king must arise; in the interim there must appear men of renown in their time. From the founding of Zhou to the present, seven-hundred years have passed. Based on the elapsed time, [such a one] is overdue, and considering the times it would be fitting. Now, [it seems that] Heaven does not yet wish to instill peaceful governance in the world. If Heaven did so desire, then in the present generation who is there besides me? How could I not be unhappy?” 「五百年必有王者興，其間必有名世者。由周而來，七百有餘歲矣。以其數則過矣，以其時考之則可矣。夫天，未欲平治天下也；如欲平治天下，當今之世，舍我其誰也？吾何為不豫哉？」 Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu*, 4.100. As Gopal Sukhu further points out in reference to the *Gongyang* passage (“Yao, Shun and Prefiguration,” 101): “Dong Zhongshu [董仲舒 179–104] found what he thought was the exact place in the *Annals* where it said, in code, that Confucius literally received the Heavenly Mandate to assume the role of commoner king (*suwang* 素王, sometimes translated ‘uncrowned king’).” It is noteworthy that the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 9/9) does not mention the *lin* in alluding to this episode: “The phoenix does not appear, the River gives forth no diagram, I am finished!” 「鳳鳥不至，河不出圖，吾已矣夫！」 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 9.88.

22 *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 in Ruan Yuan 阮元 comp. *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 in *Guoxue jiben congshu* 國學基本叢書 (Taipei: Wenhua tushu gongsi, 1970), vol. I, 1–3, 15, 283.

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The earliest appearance of the *lin* in the literature is in the *Book of Odes*’ (*Shijing* 詩經) “Lin zhi zhi” 麟之趾 (Feet of the *lin*):

The feet of the *lin*: The noble sons of our prince, Ah! they are the *lin*!  
麟之趾、振振公子。于嗟麟兮。

The forehead of the *lin*: The noble grandsons of our prince, Ah! they are the *lin*!  
麟之定、振振公姓。于嗟麟兮。

The horn of the *lin*: The noble kindred of our prince, Ah! they are the *lin*!  
麟之角、振振公族。于嗟麟兮。<sup>22</sup>

This cryptic ode from the “Zhou nan” 周南 section of the *Book of Odes* is

21 As Mencius (*Mengzi* 2B/13) famously said: “After five-hundred years a sage king must arise; in the interim there must appear men of renown in their time. From the founding of Zhou to the present, seven-hundred years have passed. Based on the elapsed time, [such a one] is overdue, and considering the times it would be fitting. Now, [it seems that] Heaven does not yet wish to instill peaceful governance in the world. If Heaven did so desire, then in the present generation who is there besides me? How could I not be unhappy?” 「五百年必有王者興，其間必有名世者。由周而來，七百有餘歲矣。以其數則過矣，以其時考之則可矣。夫天，未欲平治天下也；如欲平治天下，當今之世，舍我其誰也？吾何為不豫哉？」 Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu*, 4.100. As Gopal Sukhu further points out in reference to the *Gongyang* passage (“Yao, Shun and Prefiguration,” 101): “Dong Zhongshu [董仲舒 179–104] found what he thought was the exact place in the *Annals* where it said, in code, that Confucius literally received the Heavenly Mandate to assume the role of commoner king (*suwang* 素王, sometimes translated ‘uncrowned king’).” It is noteworthy that the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 9/9) does not mention the *lin* in alluding to this episode: “The phoenix does not appear, the River gives forth no diagram, I am finished!” 「鳳鳥不至，河不出圖，吾已矣夫！」 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 9.88.

22 *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 in Ruan Yuan 阮元 comp. *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 in *Guoxue jiben congshu* 國學基本叢書 (Taipei: Wenhua tushu gongsi, 1970), vol. I, 1–3, 15, 283.

one of the most obscure in the collection. By likening the founder of the Zhou line “Lord Cultivator” Hou Ji 后稷, to the numinous *lin* whose appearance proclaimed the sagehood of Yao, Shun and Yu, the ode commemorates the founder’s progeny who carried on Hou Ji’s epoch-making works. As odd as the corporal similes are, they may be appealing to notable qualities of the legendary *lin*—feet and a horn incapable of doing injury and a broad forehead emblematic of sagely wisdom. Thought to have been a song or chant that was part of the liturgy of ancestral sacrifices, the ode does confirm that the iconic *lin* was an element of traditions of the cosmo-political lore of the Three Dynasties period.

Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648), “Explications of the true meaning of the *Mao Odes*” says:

The *lin* has the body of a roe deer, the hooves of a horse, and the tail of an ox. It is yellow with round hooves and one horn, the tip of which is fleshy. Its cry is in the note *zhong-lü*; when a king achieves benevolent humanism then it appears.

《毛詩正義·周南·麟之趾》卷 1–3, 15：麟麕身，馬足牛尾，黃色，圓蹄一角，角端有肉，音中鍾呂，王者至仁則出。<sup>23</sup>

*Book of Rites*, “Movements of the Rites”:

The *lin*, phoenix, turtle, and dragon are called the four numinous creatures. When the four are domesticated. . . the Yellow River sends forth the Horse Diagram, the phoenix and unicorn both appear in the suburban fields, the Turtle and Dragon are in the palace moat, while the eggs and young of the other birds and animals can be seen just by glancing about. Then from no other cause the earlier kings were able to fashion the rites to achieve rectitude, embody faithfulness to achieve compliance—this is how to accomplish compliance.<sup>24</sup>

《禮記·禮運》9: 23, 33：麟鳳龜龍，謂之四靈，四靈以為畜……河出馬圖，鳳皇麒麟，皆在郊藪，龜龍在宮沼，其餘鳥獸之卵胎，皆可俯而窺也。則是無故，先王能修禮以達義，體信以達順，此順之實也。<sup>25</sup>

23 Ibid.

24 Idem, 22, 197/1425.

25 *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, comm. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, subcomm. Kong Yingda 孔穎達, in Li Xueqin 李學勤 ed., *Shisanjing zhushu (zhengli ben)* 十三經注疏 (整理本) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 22.818–832.

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Yen Yen asked: “May I ask, to whom was it [the *lin*] responding by appearing now?” The Master answered: “If the Son of Heaven manifests virtue everywhere and the state of Great Peace is about to arrive, then the auspicious signs of the *lin*, the phoenix, the turtle, and the dragon will first appear. At present the Zhou dynastic line is facing annihilation and there is no ruler of all-under-Heaven. So, for whom has the *lin* come?” Then, weeping, the Master said: “I am to humanity what the *lin* is to other creatures. The *lin* no sooner appeared than it died—my Way is finished.” And so, he sang the following song: “In the age of Tang and Yu, the *lin* and the phoenix roamed about. Now is not such a time, so what did it come seeking? Ah *lin*, ah *lin*! My heart is anguished.”<sup>26</sup>

《孔叢子·記問》5, 8: 言偃問曰:「敢問今見其誰應之?」子曰:「天子布德,將致太平,則麟鳳龜龍先爲之祥。今周宗將滅,天下無主,孰爲來哉?」遂泣曰:「予之於人,猶麟之於獸也。麟出而死,吾道窮矣。」乃歌曰:「唐虞世兮麟鳳游,今非其時來何求,麟兮麟兮我心憂。」<sup>27</sup>

*Huainanzi*, “Explication of the Fundamental Canon” (*Sibu beiyao* 四部備要):  
8.1b:

When the [epoch] of Great Purity began . . . Heaven covered all with virtue and Earth bore up all with nurture. The four seasons did not fall out of sequence, wind and rain did not descend excessively, the sun and moon shone brightly and raised up their brilliance. The Five Planets followed their courses and did not stray, the *feng* and *lin* appeared, the milfoil and turtle oracle prognosticated, sweet dew fell, bamboo and fruits were abundant, sulphur emerged, and the red grass sprang forth.

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The *Revolving Dipper Pivot of the Springs and Autumns*<sup>31</sup> says:

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## 5. The Four Numinous Icons

This raises an obvious question, if the *lin* was so iconic and depicted no less reverently than the Dragon or Vermilion Bird, why did it not become an emblem of one of the colors, directions, and seasons? It was only from the Han dynasty on that the Dark Warrior (*xuanwu* 玄武) became firmly established as one of the iconic creatures emblematic of the winter and the North. Indeed, even in the late Han the remarkable silk brocade remnant from Niya 尼雅 omits the dragon and depicts instead a stork, a quail, a tiger, and prominently what looks for all the world like a *lin*. This imagery may be representative of the southwest where the brocade was produced and an indication of the

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31 “Device star” *jixing* 機星 refers to *Tianji* 天機 or Megrez  $\delta$  UMa where the handle of the Dipper joins the scoop. The passage seems to be implying that in an age of great peace the Pole itself lies in the handle of the Dipper where it is depicted on Han period mantic astrolabes *shi* 式. At the time, the Dipper revolved around the Pole some distance away and for most of the previous two millennia there was not even a viable Pole Star. On the allegorical role of the apocrypha, see Sukhu, “Yao, Shun and Prefiguration,” 150–51: “It is precisely divine revelation that the *chenwei* introduce. They thus transform the *Gongyang* conception of the relationship of Confucius to texts. This new conception is exemplified in the *chenwei* (讖緯) that He Xiu incorporated into his sub-commentary. In He Xiu’s sub-commentary, a *chenwei* text descends directly from Heaven.”

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regional variation of the iconography.<sup>33</sup> The dragon, tiger, and deer date back to the third millennium BCE where they are represented in the tomb of a “cosmo-priest” at Puyang. When the brocade was woven, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou were still heavily influenced by the ethnic minorities of the western periphery of the empire from which much of their population descended. As Edwin G. Pulleyblank intimates (see below), it is possible that the *lin* was introduced from a neighboring culture to the west.

This is not the place to study the dispersion of exotic equid imagery and lore from west to east across the steppes and via the trade routes through Mesopotamia, Iran, and Afghanistan to present-day Xinjiang and Qinghai. Onagers and hybrid domesticates like the *kunga* were in wide use as pack animals very early in Mesopotamia and central Asia, long before horses or donkeys reached China. But as Pulleyblank notes, knowledge of the existence of such exotic creatures could well have circulated in western China from an early date even if never actually seen in the flesh.<sup>34</sup>



Part 2, Figure 1: A presumed *lin* (center) depicted in the late Han silk brocade remnant from the desert oasis of Niya bearing the epigram “When the Five Planets appear in the east it is beneficial for China.” (Compare Part 2, Figure 4.) After Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 312.

33 Variations on the Vermilion Bird *zhuniao* 朱鳥 of the South include the quail *chun* 鶉 (as in Jupiter station Quail Fire, *Chun huo* 鶉火), red sparrow *zhuque* 朱雀, and scarlet crow *chihu* 赤鳥. Sima Qian occasionally mentions such variations in nomenclature in passing his “Treatise on the Celestial Offices” but without comment.

34 For a discussion of ancient equids, see Tim Brinkhof, “Kunga: How Mesopotamian horse breeders created the world’s first hybrid animal,” *The Past*, January 24, 2022, accessed July 19, 2023, <https://bigthink.com/the-past/kunga-first-hybrid-animal/>.

Why the *lin* did not become one of the four iconic emblems and lost out to the Dark Warrior during the Han remains a mystery. Some very early depictions of the four emblems substitute either a deer or a fish for the turtle, but they did not last. It is curious that such an iconic emblem as the *lin* did not also figure prominently in the sky along with the constellations Vermilion Bird, Dragon, and White Tiger. Some of the components of the huge Vermilion Bird (south) and Cerulean Dragon (east) constellations retained their identities and are easily recognizable in their “ball-and-link” shapes while possible alternative asterisms to the standard lodges of the west and north disappeared even before the thoroughgoing imperialization of astral nomenclature during the Han.<sup>35</sup>

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The Phoenix is the fowl of Quail Fire and the essence of *yang*. The *qilin* is the creature of *Xuanxiao*, the essence of *yin*.... If virtuousness can cause it to come, its essence must arrive.

《鶡冠子》曰：鳳凰者，鶡火之禽，陽之精也，騏驎者，玄枵之獸，陰之精也。……德能致之，其精畢至。<sup>36</sup>

As the *lin* is the icon of gentleness and benevolence, *yin* as its essence makes good sense. The chronogram *Xuanxiao* corresponds to the lodges *Nü* 女 Serving Girl, *Xu* 虛 Ruins, and *Wei* 危 Roof (together Capricorn – Aquarius) at the center of the northern palace of the heavens containing the winter solstice. It is directly opposite chronogram *Chun huo* or Quail Fire, the location of the summer solstice in the Bird constellation.

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regional variation of the iconography.<sup>33</sup> The dragon, tiger, and deer date back to the third millennium BCE where they are represented in the tomb of a “cosmo-priest” at Puyang. When the brocade was woven, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou were still heavily influenced by the ethnic minorities of the western periphery of the empire from which much of their population descended. As Edwin G. Pulleyblank intimates (see below), it is possible that the *lin* was introduced from a neighboring culture to the west.

This is not the place to study the dispersion of exotic equid imagery and lore from west to east across the steppes and via the trade routes through Mesopotamia, Iran, and Afghanistan to present-day Xinjiang and Qinghai. Onagers and hybrid domesticates like the *kunga* were in wide use as pack animals very early in Mesopotamia and central Asia, long before horses or donkeys reached China. But as Pulleyblank notes, knowledge of the existence of such exotic creatures could well have circulated in western China from an early date even if never actually seen in the flesh.<sup>34</sup>



Part 2, Figure 1: A presumed *lin* (center) depicted in the late Han silk brocade remnant from the desert oasis of Niya bearing the epigram “When the Five Planets appear in the east it is beneficial for China.” (Compare Part 2, Figure 4.) After Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 312.

33 Variations on the Vermilion Bird *zhuniao* 朱鳥 of the South include the quail *chun* 鶉 (as in Jupiter station Quail Fire, *Chun huo* 鶉火), red sparrow *zhuque* 朱雀, and scarlet crow *chihu* 赤鳥. Sima Qian occasionally mentions such variations in nomenclature in passing his “Treatise on the Celestial Offices” but without comment.

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Perhaps the unicorn was in fact a masked horse like the principal horses in the Pazyryk graves. None of the horse masks in them were strictly unicorns. In the first kurgan one was of a reindeer, the other of a sort of griffin. Nevertheless, one surely has here a clue to explain the meaning of the masks. The horses were masked because they represented supernatural beings, Heavenly Horses conveying the deceased to immortality. It is noteworthy that in early Chou burials we also find horses with bronze "demon masks" which probably have, I suggest, a similar religious significance. Of course, it is dangerous to draw historical conclusions too readily from comparative mythology but in this case the family affinity of the *ch'i-lin*, Carriage Yellow, the Heavenly Horses of Ta-yüan, the yellow, masked horses of the Pazyryk graves and the masked horses in Chou burials seems remarkably close, even to details. There may be a still further point of contact—the name *ch'i-lin* itself. This is explained by the learned commentators as a compound made up of two words, *ch'i*, signifying the male, and *lin*, signifying the female. When the two characters are used together, however, they form an inseparable unit that can be singular as well as plural and there is nothing in actual usage to substantiate the idea that there was a difference of gender. If *ch'i-lin* is, as it appears to be, an unanalysable disyllabic word it is quite anomalous in terms of Old Chinese structure and it suggests a foreign origin.<sup>37</sup> The place occupied by the horse in Chinese mythology provides a definite link with Indo-Europeans and specifically with Tocharians.... The name of the *ch'i-lin* or Chinese unicorn is probably cognate to *ch'i-lien*, the *Yüeh-chih* word for "heaven."<sup>38</sup>

## 6. A Miraculous Revelation

One attribute of the *lin*, its "forehead" *ding* (定 ~ 顛 \*tien<sup>c</sup>) mentioned in the ode "Feet of the *lin*," is of particular interest here.<sup>39</sup> We saw how the *Heguanzi* identified the *lin* with the northern palace of the heavens where the

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39 Old Chinese reconstructions are from Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 214.

winter solstice occurred. Now, it so happens that there is another asterism in the northern palace that has a very suggestive identity. That is the one we know as the Great Square of Pegasus, which appears in the *Odes* in the guise of *Ding* 定 ~ 顛 (*Ding zhi fang zhong* 定之方中, When *Ding* had just culminated). It was this square constellation whose unique orientation was used from at least the early first millennium BCE on to bring down a true north-south line from the Pole in order to correctly align high-value structures on the ground.<sup>40</sup> In the late Spring and Autumn period this method was still ritually prescribed even after the shadow gnomon became routinely used for the same purpose, because the Pole was the abode of the Supernal Lord and sanctification was an aspect of the process. By the fifth century when the lacquer hamper found in the tomb of Lord Yi of Zeng 曾侯乙 (d. 433 BCE) was inscribed with the names of the twenty-eight lodges, the *Ding* square had already been transformed into two lodges, East Aligner (*dong ying* 東營) and West Aligner (*xi ying*) 西營 before finally being renamed Align-the-Hall (*yingshi* 營室) and Eastern Wall (*dongbi* 東璧), all of which recall its ancient alignment function.<sup>41</sup> Align-the-Hall was the location of the mid-winter sun before that seasonal nexus processed into lodge Roof on the eastern edge of chronogram *Xuanxiao* 玄枵. The *Ding* square was also called the Pure Temple (*Qing miao* 清廟), the very Dark Temple *Xuangong* in which Yu the Great received his mandate to rule from the Supernal Lord.<sup>42</sup>

The domestication of the horse after which it spread eastward across the steppes from about the fourth millennium BCE on could well have been the vector that resulted in that revolutionary alien development being commemorated by elevation to the heavens.<sup>43</sup> Chariot technology reached Shang dynasty China only after mid-second millennium BCE when ceremonial burials of chariots and horse teams also began to appear. But it is entirely possible that rumors of the miraculous qualities of a domesticated quadruped that could fly like the wind seeped into China along with other technological

40 See Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 127ff.

41 Similarly, Sima Qian carefully points out that the curiously named asterisms that comprised the forepart of the Vermilion Bird of summer in his time were formerly named for parts of the Bird from its beak through its crop, suggestive of regional variation in the names of asterisms. See Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 198, n. 12, 466; *Shiji*, 27.1303.

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## 7. An Ancient Precedent Becomes the Rule

We now go back to the early second millennium BCE, to the transition from the late Longshan 龍山 culture to the earliest period of Erlitou 二里頭 settlement in north-central China, contemporaneous with the reputed founding of the Xia “dynasty.” As I have demonstrated previously, it was at this time, in February 1953 BCE, that the most spectacular conjunction of the Five Planets in human history occurred. This was the event that established a precedent in the cosmo-political ideology of early China after which precisely this kind of celestial omen was required to signal heavenly approbation and sanction of

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For the present, however, we need only look closely at the 1953 BCE event. Figure 2 shows the conjunction of planets that occurred in February that year and the locations of the relevant lodges. The Five Planets are gathered in a tight circle measuring less than 4° in diameter (eight lunar diameters) just below the Great Square of Pegasus or *Ding* (定~顛 “Forehead”?) that in Western tradition comprises the torso of the upside-down flying horse. The planets had followed the ecliptic eastward from right to left, fording the

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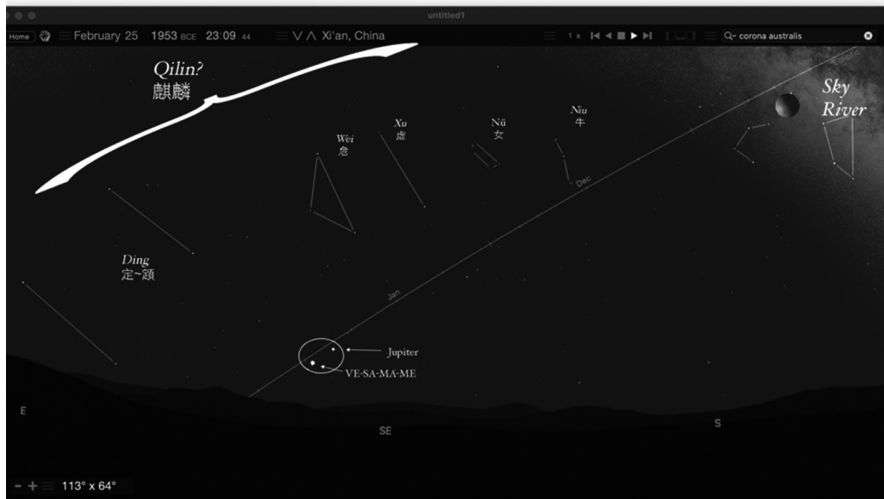
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*Yuan shi*, 1.24. Chief among Genghis Khan’s early advisors was the learned Confucian Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 (1190–1244 CE) a member of the Khitan royal family. For an account of his life and career, see Song Zizhen 宋子貞, “Zhongshuling Yelü Gong shendao bei” 中書令耶律公神道碑, in Yelü Chucai, *Zhanran jushi wenji* 湛然居士文集, punc. and coll. Xie Fang 謝方 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 323–35.

Milky Way, the Sky River (astral correlate of the Yellow River), on their way to the gathering.<sup>48</sup> They then passed through the lodges Southern Dipper, Oxherd, Serving Girl, Ruins, and Roof, the latter three identified with the *lin* in *Heguanzi*, finally reaching  $\alpha$  Pegasi, the lead star of asterism *Ding*.



**Figure 2:** The densest gathering of the Five Planets in human history in February 1953 BCE around the beginning of the Erlitou period and the Xia “dynasty.” In the weeks prior the planets would have forded the Sky River just as the Moon is doing here and then passed above the ring of stars Celestial Turtle *tian yuan* 天龜 (Corona Australis) on their way to lodge *Yingshi*, the west side of the Great Square of Pegasus. Lodge *Dongbi* forms the Eastern Wall of *Ding*.<sup>49</sup> Might the three lodges identified in *Heguanzi* have been the body of an early *lin* constellation? (Starry Night Pro 8.0)

This remarkable planetary gathering occurred at the same time as the catastrophic flooding of north China, commemorated in Chinese tradition as having been relieved by the heroic founder of the Xia dynasty, Yu the Great.<sup>50</sup>

48 The identification of the Yellow River with the Milky Way has a very long history in cosmography and especially in field-allocation *fenye* 分野 astrology where it serves as the fundamental reference axis for the identification between the twenty-eight lodges (and twelve Jupiter stations) with terrestrial polities. See Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 299ff.

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50 Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 34. David W. Pankenier, “*Mozi* and the Dates of Xia, Shang, and Zhou: A Research Note,” *Early China* 9/10 (1983–85): 175–83.

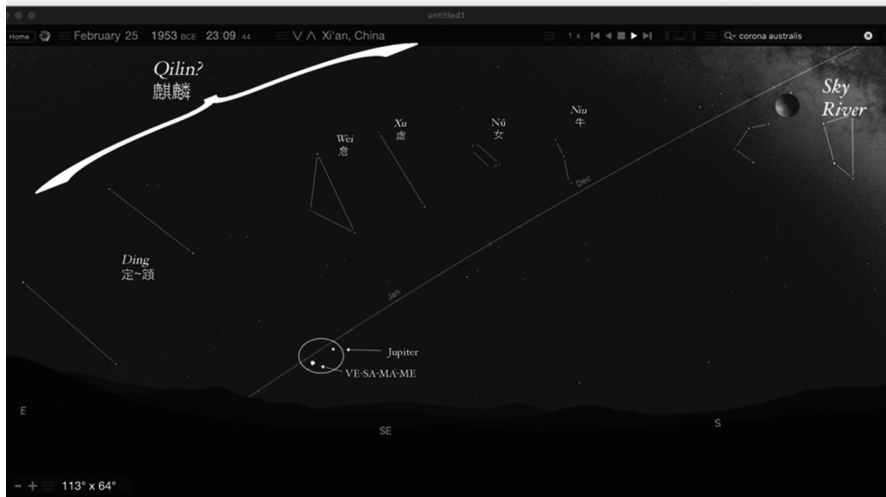
Recent scientific study has established that after a serious climatic downturn that utterly destroyed China's Longshan culture, a history-making catastrophic flood followed that caused the Yellow River to radically change course and inundate vast areas, from which disaster recovery would have taken decades. Ancient tradition does indeed appear to preserve the memory of that epoch-making event, after which the earliest stage of Erlitou emerged, leading gradually to the urbanization of the central plain. The process of reclamation of the land could well explain the extraordinary accomplishments attributed to Yu. Crediting a single culture hero with the "invention" of cultural advancements like agriculture or writing is typical, if fantastic.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, assertions that those pre-Three Dynasties disasters and the storied recovery are entirely inventions need to be reconsidered.

Oral history can have great value even if much evidence is circumstantial and substantiation may never be achievable. Singularly influential texts (e.g., "Tribute of Yu" *Yu gong* 禹貢, *Mozi* 墨子) recount how the Supernal Lord rewarded Yu for his labors in driving out the *San Miao* 三苗 rivals and restoring the land after disaster by conferring on him the rulership of the country, which later came to be known as Xia. In the account in *Mozi* (fl. late 5<sup>th</sup> c.), Heaven bestowed the rulership on Yu the Great in the Dark Palace (which in *Mozi*'s time denoted the winter palace of the heavens with that

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51 The earliest textual reference to Yu the Great's appointment by Heaven to tame the waters and virtuously rule the land recently came to the light on a mid-Western Zhou bronze inscription (ca 900 BCE) the *Sui (Bin) gong xu* 遂公盨; Li Xueqin 李學勤, "Sui gong xu yu Da Yu zhi shui chuanshuo" 遂公盨與大禹治水傳說, *Zhongguo shehui kexue xueyuan yuanshao* 中國社會科學院院報 January 23, 2003: 1–23. See also Wu Qinglong, et al. "Outburst flood at 1920 BCE supports historicity of China's Great Flood and the Xia dynasty," *Science* (2016), 353/6299, 579–82. (DOI: 10.1126/science.aaf0842). Sun Qianli, "Climate as a factor for Neolithic cultural collapses approximately 4000 years BP in China," *Earth-Science Reviews*, October, 2019, accessed July 20, 2023, 197, 102915, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.earscirev.2019.102915>. Cf. Chang Kwang-chih, *The Archaeology of Ancient China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 133–37. See also, Constance A. Cook, "Sage King Yu 禹 and the Bin Gong XU 鬲公盨," *Early China* 35 (2013): 69–103; Chen Shu 陳舒, "Collected Interpretations of the X Gong Xu," *Early China* 35 (2013): 135–55.

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“Pure Temple” at its heart).<sup>52</sup> A parallel, even more influential tradition, has it that the Supernal Lord caused a Heavenly Horse (*tianma*) to rise out of the Yellow River bearing on its back a message of esoteric governing wisdom dubbed the (Yellow) River Diagram (*Hetu*).<sup>53</sup> This supernatural equine is often depicted as resembling either a horse or the *lin*, as in Figure 1, or more bizarrely as in Figure 4b. Over time and down the centuries, descriptions of the two miraculous creatures appear to have co-mingled.<sup>54</sup> A duplicate tradition, presumably a regional variant, has a mystical numerological diagram being delivered in the form of an image inscribed on the carapace of a Sacred Turtle (Corona Australis) that surfaced at the same time in the Luo River, a major tributary of the Yellow River adjacent to Erlitou in China’s heartland. This was the Luo Writing (*Luoshu*) and the mystical diagram came to be known as the magic square, emblematic of the “magic” of numbers.<sup>55</sup> The pair of revelations are illustrated in Figure 3, a late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) traditional depiction of the event.

52 *Mozi*, “Fei gong xia” 非攻下 in Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Mozi jian gu* 墨子閒詁 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 5.147. According to the “Yu gong” chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚書 Heaven bestowed the Dark Jade Scepter 玄珪 of appointment on Yu in the Dark Palace. See Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 34.

53 In addition to the capture and killing of the *lin* Confucius reportedly laments as a further cause of sorrow Heaven’s failure to make a River Diagram appear for him. Later hagiographic accounts claim that the unicorn spit out three such documents presaging the rise of Liu Bang and his founding of the Han dynasty.

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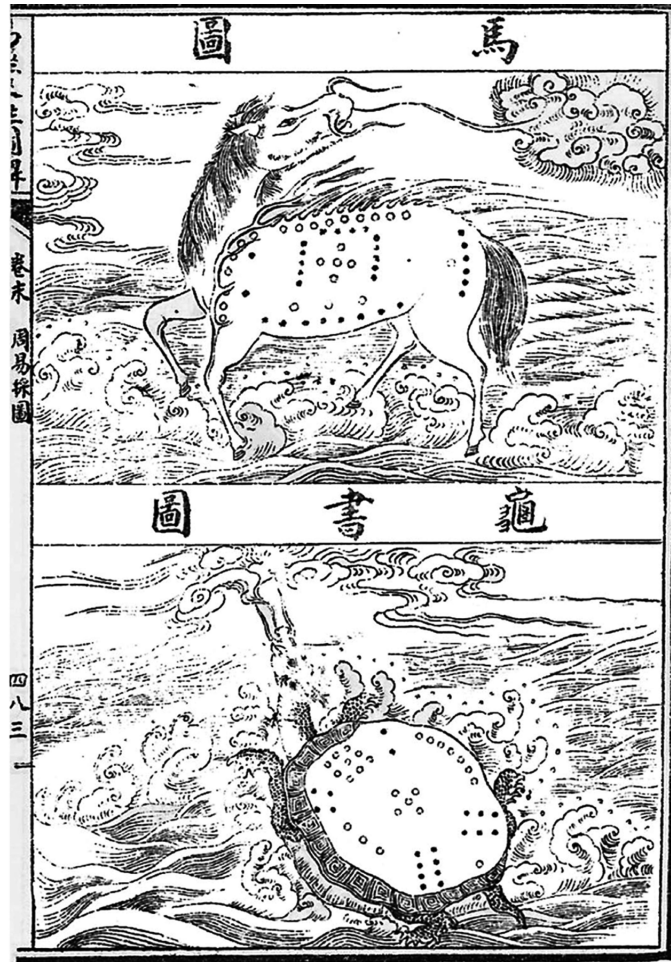


Figure 3: Classic depictions of the River Diagram (top) and Luo Writing (bottom), revealed by the numinous creatures. After Lai Zhide 來知德, *Yijing Lai zhu tujie* 易經來註圖解 (Diagrammatic explications of Lai's annotated *Book of Changes*) (Taipei, Zhongguo Kong xue hui, 1971), 483b.

## 8. The River Diagram, the Heavenly Horse and the Unicorn

The identification of the Chinese *lin* with the northern lodges including the Great Square, is for the present conjectural. But as Pulleyblank and others have shown the transmission of ideas during the eastward migrations of the domesticators of horses across central Asia is quite likely.<sup>56</sup> The arrival of Indo-

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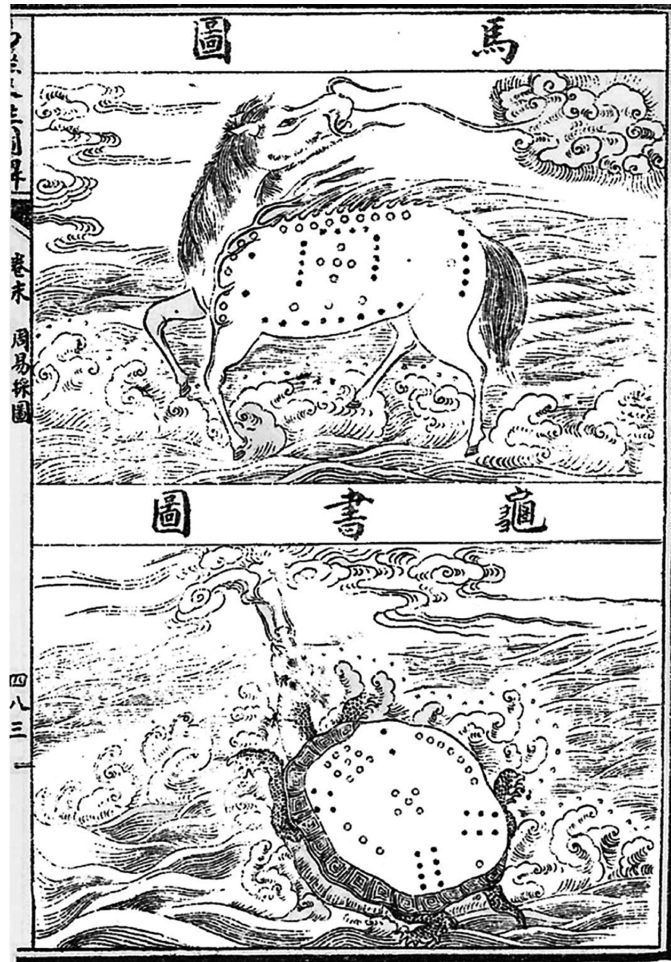


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European speakers on the borders of present-day China may have occurred even earlier. The account of the mysterious creature bearing the River Diagram might have taken shape over time along with culture hero Yu as the ancient Chinese became familiar with the horse.

My hypothesis is that the fanciful cosmic significance of the iconic *lin* may be attributable to its prehistoric association with the locus of the planetary phenomenon of mid-twentieth century BCE and potentially with an asterism of which only *Ding* “forehead” survived until the time of the ode “Feet of the Lin” in the Western Zhou. The planetary apparition was contemporaneous with the widespread climate disruption that decimated the Longshan culture and the flooding, followed by what was no doubt an agonizingly slow recovery. These traumatic developments and the process of resettlement of the transformed reclaimed land became deeply imprinted in cultural memory. Of course, the Yellow, Fen, and Luo Rivers, etc., would certainly have created their own new channels without Yu’s assistance.

When the planetary conjunction occurred and Erlitou began to take shape the horse had still not appeared in China and would not for some time. But by the nineteenth century BCE, along with bronze technology transfer and trade in jade, cowries, loan words from adjacent cultures and the like, rumors of a domesticated fleet-footed equid resembling a cervid with near-miraculous qualities should already have begun to filter into China from the west.<sup>57</sup> A millennium later such an animal was perhaps still being depicted as one of the four iconic creatures emblematic of the cardinal directions and seasons, together with the Phoenix and Dragon. Despite the differences in cosmopolitical and religious significance between the more ancient and uniquely revelatory *lin* and the Heavenly Horse, the two tended to merge over time.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, confusion reigned between the two in the popular mind but the miraculous epiphany of the *lin* was preserved in cosmo-political ideology and allegory as the preeminent supernatural revelation foretelling the emergence of a transformational sage ruler.

## 9. An Inopportune Repeat of Yu the Great’s Momentous Omen

There is a surprising twist to the story which came to light while searching

57 See *Kongzi jia yu (Sibu beiyao)*, 6.4b. *Mengzi* 2A/2. *Lun heng (Sibu beiyao)*, 11.10a, 14.3b.

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for other occasions when there might have occurred striking planetary gatherings at the same time as epochal historical events such as the Han founding. As has been demonstrated, there were numerous occasions when the historical record shows that a correlation between dynastic transition and a five-planet gathering figured prominently. The question arises, “might there have been occasions when such an event occurred but went unmentioned by scribe-astrologers, whether because it was politically inconvenient or for other reasons?” Indeed, as we saw in Part One such a politically inconvenient astral omen has come to light. Now, it appears that still another, more remarkable, historical coincidence of this kind occurred.

I introduced the account of the capture of a *lin* toward the very end of Confucius’ life. Now, here in Figure 4 is a computer-generated image of the sky above north China in early 480 BCE following the *lin*’s supposed appearance and just before Confucius’ demise in 479 BCE. This is what the sky looked like in the early spring of Lord Ai’s fifteenth year. Here, remarkably, we see four of the five planets gathered very close together in the same location as Yu the Great’s hierophany in 1953 BCE, when the celestial sign confirming his appointment—the mystical River Diagram—was revealed. Jupiter is some distance away to the east, so this gathering was not as spectacular as the rarest and densest of such events revealed to Yu when all five planets were within a circle of only four degrees. But in the mind of the scribe-astrologer of the state of Lu it is hardly likely that such a planetary gathering would have made no impression. All the more so because all-important Jupiter was guarding the lodges Stride-Pasture (*Kui-Lou* 奎婁, Andromeda-Aries) identified with Duke Ai’s and Confucius’ own state of Lu 魯—strongly energizing that state, according to the field-allocation *fenye* astrology of the time.

In the *Gongyang* exegesis of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, according to which Confucius supposedly concluded the canonical narrative history with the *lin*’s capture, a rejuvenated kingdom of Lu under Confucius’ virtuous rule was supposed to initiate the transformation of all-under-Heaven, much as Yu the Great, Yao, and Shun had in high antiquity. Confucius was a devoted student of the past and traveled widely, seeking out those with deep knowledge of Xia, Shang, and Zhou culture, and he was well informed in astrological matters and the sky, including the Xia calendar.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, as he was still alive in 480 BCE, Confucius must certainly have witnessed the planetary gathering.

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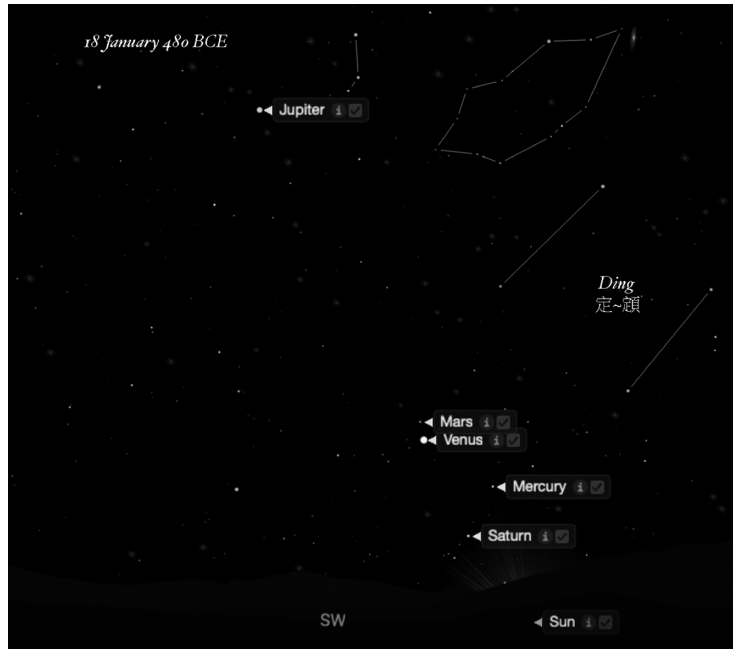


Figure 4a: The sky above China in January 480 BCE when four of the five planets gathered in the same location as in the time of Yu the Great, 1953 BCE. (Starry Night Pro 8.0)



Figure 4b: A late depiction of the episode of the captured *lin* being shown to Confucius and disciples. After [baike.baidu.com](http://baike.baidu.com): *Xi shou huo lin tu ce* 西狩獲麟圖冊 .

It would have been hard to miss: the planets took weeks to converge and weeks to disperse again.

While the *tianma/lin* episodes are rendered in metaphorical language, the astral omens are scientifically verifiable. In the present case, first a total solar eclipse occurred in the fifth month of Lord Ai's fourteenth year (19 April 481 BCE) as recorded in the *Annals*, no doubt interpreted as an ill omen for the Zhou king. There then followed the hopeful sign of the planetary conjunction in precisely the same location as the one that conferred sagehood on Yu the Great. Later, Mencius would allude to the tradition that a sage ruler would arise every 500 years,<sup>60</sup> and he was clearly well-versed in the chronology so that he knew that the Shang dynasty had lasted just over half a millennium (*wu bai you yu sui* 五百有餘歲) and that from the Zhou founding to Confucius about the same number of years had elapsed.<sup>61</sup> Confucius would have known this too.

## 10. Conclusion

The events of 480 BCE should have caused a stir among Confucius' followers and admirers, as well as others with knowledge of the esoteric traditions. The celestial revelation would have demanded an explanation consistent with Confucius' teaching and with hoary tradition pertaining to the *lin*. My conclusion is that sometime shortly after Confucius' passing an expedient account of the events was created with that in mind. Prompted by the astral omen, an allegory of the *lin*'s capture consistent with tradition was conjured up, perhaps at the same time as the attribution to Confucius of the editing of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, since the revelation of the *lin* concludes the *Gongyang Commentary* which elides the rest of Lord Ai's reign and marks the epic climax of Confucius' career.

It is no surprise that the *Annals* do not mention the planetary event because they never do, recording only eclipses, comets, strange anomalies and the like. Both *Zuozhuan* and *Guoyu* mention Jupiter's location in a handful of cases when it had political or military significance according to field-allocation astrology. So, too, does the *Li gui* 利簋 inscription contemporaneous with the Zhou Conquest.<sup>62</sup> *Huainanzi* 淮南子 mentions the impressive comet that

60 See *Mengzi* 2B/13, Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu*, 4.100.

61 See *Mengzi* 7B/38, Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu*, 14.320.

62 See Constance A. Cook and Paul R. Goldin, *A Sourcebook of Ancient Chinese Bronze Inscriptions* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China, 2016), 10.

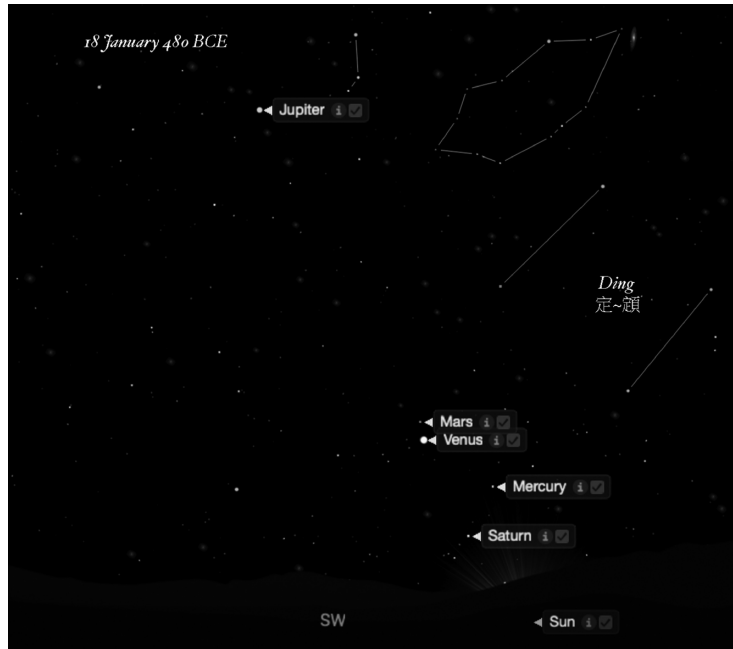


Figure 4a: The sky above China in January 480 BCE when four of the five planets gathered in the same location as in the time of Yu the Great, 1953 BCE. (Starry Night Pro 8.0)



Figure 4b: A late depiction of the episode of the captured *lin* being shown to Confucius and disciples. After [baike.baidu.com](http://baike.baidu.com): *Xi shou huo lin tu ce* 西狩獲麟圖冊.

It would have been hard to miss: the planets took weeks to converge and weeks to disperse again.

While the *tianma/lin* episodes are rendered in metaphorical language, the astral omens are scientifically verifiable. In the present case, first a total solar eclipse occurred in the fifth month of Lord Ai's fourteenth year (19 April 481 BCE) as recorded in the *Annals*, no doubt interpreted as an ill omen for the Zhou king. There then followed the hopeful sign of the planetary conjunction in precisely the same location as the one that conferred sagehood on Yu the Great. Later, Mencius would allude to the tradition that a sage ruler would arise every 500 years,<sup>60</sup> and he was clearly well-versed in the chronology so that he knew that the Shang dynasty had lasted just over half a millennium (*wu bai you yu sui* 五百有餘歲) and that from the Zhou founding to Confucius about the same number of years had elapsed.<sup>61</sup> Confucius would have known this too.

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appeared in late 1059 BCE associated with that watershed event. And the *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書 uniquely preserves a verifiable record of a total lunar eclipse in March 1065 BCE.<sup>63</sup> Last but not least, the mid-Han apocryphal *Chunqiu yuan ming bao* 春秋元命苞 preserves a recognizable account of King Wen's Mandate planetary conjunction of May 1059 BCE in the Vermilion Bird (phoenix) while also identifying the planetary omen as a "diagram."<sup>64</sup>

There can be no doubt that such esoteric astral lore was somehow being transmitted. At court level, however, it may have been closely held during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods just as in imperial times because of the implications for "national security," as we might say today. But such portentous events in the sky would have been widely visible and surely remarked upon. Given the absence of exterior lighting in ancient times, the brilliant display of stars overhead would have appeared much closer and much more imposing than today.

To sum up the evidence regarding the *lin* in particular:

- (i) Yu the Great, *Tao Tang shi* 陶唐氏, of NW ethno-linguistic Longshan (Qiang-Rong?) origin, receives the Heavenly Mandate via an unprecedented planetary omen (mystical Heavenly Horse and Sacred Turtle diagrams) in the mid-Winter Dark Palace of the heavens. Yu is celebrated as having been instrumental in the recovery leading to the rise of Erlitou after a severe climatic downturn and catastrophic flooding that destroyed the Longshan culture. These events established the precedent that dense planetary gatherings signaled the impending conferral of Heaven's Mandate.
- (ii) The precedent is repeated in 1059 BCE and 205 BCE at the founding of the next two "legitimate" dynasties.

63 See Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China*, 196, n.9. *Huainanzi*, "Bing lue xun" 兵略訓: "When King Wu attacked [Shang] Zhòu, he faced east to greet Jupiter ... a broom star appeared and extended its handle toward the men of Yin" 「武王伐紂，東面而迎歲……彗星出而授殷人其柄」。See Liu An 劉安 comp., *Huannanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 Annot., He Ning 何寧 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 15.1065. Donald K. Yeomans, and Tao Kiang, "The Long-Term Motion of Comet Halley," *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 197 (1981), 633–46.

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- (iii) In 480 BCE and 185 BCE, Yu the Great's impressive planetary gathering is repeated in the very same location. The 480 BCE portent can be associated with the all-important but "inopportune" epiphany of the *qilin* associated with Confucius. The second such untimely planetary omen occurred during the regency of Dowager Empress Lü during her efforts to supplant the Han dynasty. Knowledge of the 480 BCE hierophany became a crucial part of Confucius' hagiography. Knowledge of the second event is suppressed or ignored because of its unacceptable implications. A less than impressive planetary alignment in 205 BCE is pressed into service after the fact to buttress Liu Bang's status as recipient of the Celestial Mandate.
- (iv) There is evidence to suggest that the lore concerning a heavenly horse (unicorn) was introduced from the western regions along with other influential technologies by "barbarians" such as the Qiang-Rong. This may include a focus on stellar configurations including the winter lodges specifically identified with the unicorn by Heguanzi and including the Great Square of Pegasus, the location of the epoch-making planetary clusters. Heguanzi is known to have been a member of an ethno-linguistic minority of the southwest such as the Western Qiang who also had a reputation for being knowledgeable in astrology and the calendar.<sup>65</sup> It was from those same western peoples that "heavenly" horses were sought by Chinese rulers for centuries.

The evidence is circumstantial but taken together it is suggestive enough to deserve to be put on record.

Indirection, metaphor, and allegory are fundamental to the transmission of esoteric teaching from master to disciple—as is the case with culturally vital mythic lore.<sup>66</sup> When it came to teaching via "subtle words with great meaning" (*wei yan da yi* 微言大義) Confucius did not trouble to spell things out: "If I elucidate one corner [and the listener] does not return the other three, I don't repeat myself."<sup>67</sup> In the case of the *lin*, the remarks attributed to Confucius—"For whom has it come? For whom has it come? It is over for

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66 "The job of the exegete was to decipher these encoded judgments . . . It is the way of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to raise the past to illuminate the future," Sukhu, "Han Imperial Genealogy," 97, 98.

67 *Lunyu*, 7/8: 子曰：「舉一隅不以三隅反，則不復也。」 Yang Bojun, *Lunyu yizhu*, 7.67.

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# 當天象不合時宜

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我曾經揭示了幾個中國歷史上星宿對人事影響甚鉅的例子，而本文則換個角度來看問題。本文探討了兩個例子，這兩個例子都涉及到星象的神秘啟示，它們可能會、也可能不會產生劃時代的影響。第一個例子牽涉漢初的星象預兆，讓人聯想起其他朝代的徵兆，但從當時的政局來看，這種預兆並不合時宜。第二個例子是著名的「獲麟」異象，幾千年來麒麟一直盤踞著國人的心。然而，麒麟的起源和歷史不明，幾乎無法考究。雖然如此，本文仍然將相關證據匯集起來，嘗試建構麒麟的歷史角色，儘管這未必是不刊之論。

**關鍵詞：**五星星占 呂太后 孔子 素王 西狩獲麟