The term Onmyōdō 一般道 generally refers to a divination system based on ancient Chinese thought that also includes other elements such as Indian astrology and Japanese religious rituals. Recent scholarship has shown that Onmyōdō did not exist as a quasi-religious system in China; instead it appears to be a Japanese formation. However, it would be impossible to understand the formation and the role of Japanese Onmyōdō without examining its historical roots in China.

Origin of Onmyōdō

Onmyōdō is based on two major trends of classical Chinese thought: doctrines concerning yin and yang and those concerning the five agents (wuxing; gogyō 五行). According to Chinese cosmology, all phenomena are constituted by a primordial breath-like substance called qi (ki 氣); qi appears either as yin (dark, moist, cold, feminine) or yang (bright, dry, hot, masculine), or, according to the five agents doctrine, as the five constitutive elements of the world: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These two doctrines and their underlying systems were combined by the Chinese natural philosopher Zou Yan (305–204 B.C.E.). However, it should be noted that a calendar combing the ten heavenly stems (shigan; jikkan 十干) and the twelve earthly branches (shierzhi; jūnishi 十二支), which derives from a combination of yin-yang and five-phases thought, appears to have been used since the Shang 商 dynasty (ca. 1600–1100 B.C.E.). Subsequently, Dong Zhong Shu 董仲舒 (179–104 B.C.E.), who established Confucianism as China’s state ideology, further incorporated Zou Yan’s thought, along with other doctrines, into his own version of Confucian thought. Thus, we can say that the combined doctrine of yin-yang and the five agents is not a characteristic of a particular

1 Properly speaking, these are “agents” and not “elements,” because they are not differentiated elements (as in the Aristotelian sense), but rather different variations of qi.
philosophical school; rather it is an intellectual system that pervades ancient Chinese thought.

According to Dong Zhong Shu, there is a relationship between heaven (tian 天) as macrocosm and humanity (ren 仁) as microcosm; thus, peculiar natural phenomena were believed to affect human lives, especially that of the ruler. This connection was further justified by the fact that the Chinese emperor was envisioned as the Son of Heaven (Tianzi 天子). Dong Zhong Shu believed that no dynasty can last forever, and attempted to explain changes in dynasties as parallel to the changes in the five phases. Systems were devised in order to prevent, as much as possible, such changes. In particular, any strange natural occurrence could be a clue to a possible uprising. Thus, in China, Onmyōdō-related thought was used mainly in order to predict rebellions possibly leading to dynastic changes. This aspect was also introduced to Japan.

Indian astrology and divination methods were parts of Indic knowledge later transmitted to China together with Buddhism. In particular, the mikkyō patriarchs Śubhākarasimha and Amoghavajra brought to China a well-developed form of traditional Indian astronomy (in turn influenced by Hellenistic astronomy) as part of their new esoteric Buddhist teachings. The Sukuyōkyō 宿曜経 (full title Monjushiri bosatsu kyū shosen shosetsu kikyō jijitsu zen’aku sukuyō kyō 文殊師利菩薩及諸仙所説吉凶時日善惡宿曜経, T. 1299) is its most representative text, and Indian astrology came to be known in Japan as Sukuyōdō 宿曜道. Sukuyōdō is based on the twenty-seven or twenty-eight positions of the moon in the sky (xiu; suku or shuku 宿, “lunar mansions”), and also refers to days of the week with the same names that are still used in modern Japanese. Sukuyōdō can be divided into three parts: calendar, divination, and related rituals; this tripartite division is also common to traditional Onmyōdō. Sukuyōdō intermingled with the already existing forms of Chinese astrology based on yin-yang and five-agents doctrines, but also with Daoist thought and practices. It is in this form that this complex of doctrines and practices was transmitted to Japan, where it was further developed.

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2 It refers to the sun, the moon, and the five planets known in antiquity: 月火水木金土日.