CHAPTER 15

The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac during the Tang and Song Dynasties: A Set of Signs Which Lost Their Meanings within Chinese Horoscopic Astrology

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1 Introduction

The concept of the twelve signs of the zodiac entered China at the latest during the Qi dynasty (AD 479–502). The earliest Chinese source to mention the signs of the zodiac is the 56th text in the collection of Buddhist Scriptures Dafangdeng dajijing 大方等大集經 (hereafter Dajijing) translated by the Indian Buddhist Narendrayasas. This text lists the twelve signs:

所言辰者，有十二種。一名彌沙，二名毘利沙，三名彌偷那，四名羯迦吒迦，五名𦂅�呵，六名迦若，七名兜邏，八名毘梨支迦，九名檀尼毘，十名摩伽羅，十一名鳩槃，十二名彌那。

What is called Chen 辰, there are twelve kinds. The first is Mesa, the second is Vrsabha, the third is Mithuna, the fourth is Karkataka, the fifth is Simha, the sixth is Kanyā, the seventh is Tulā, the eighth is Vrsika, the ninth is Dhanu, the tenth is Makava, the eleventh is Kumbha, the twelfth is Mina.¹

This set of names is a transliteration of the Sanskrit names.² Chinese names for two of the signs, Scorpio and Libra, are found in an excavated fragment from Turpan dating to the Tang dynasty (AD 618–904).³

This paper examines the spread of the twelve signs of the zodiac in China during the Tang and Song dynasties (AD 618–1279). Previous scholars who have examined the transmission of the zodiac to China have mostly based their discussion on a comparison of the names for the signs of the zodiac found on

¹ Dafangdeng dajijing (Vol. 56: 373).
³ Hsia (1976: Fig. 4).
Chinese star maps in comparison with their counterparts in ancient Greece and India. However, because the zodiac was incorporated within the tradition of horoscopic astrology which developed in China during the Tang and Song dynasties, references to the twelve signs of the zodiac are also found in a variety of astrological texts. Chinese horoscopic astrology inherited, modified and syncretized the astrological and divine ingredients of both Chinese and foreign cosmological and divinatory systems. Evidence for the spread and application of the zodiac are scattered in a wide variety of Chinese Buddhist scriptures, Taoist scriptures, horoscopic-astrological books, and manuscripts from Dunhuang which contain many texts of Chinese horoscope astrology. In this paper, therefore, I will explore the twelve signs of the zodiac in these sources to discuss the function of the zodiac within Chinese horoscope astrology.

Firstly, I will analyze the Chinese names and the sequences of the twelve signs to trace the process of its reception into Chinese tradition. I will then explore how the signs worked in combination with the Chinese systems of Lunar Mansions, Luminaries and Earthly Branches in fortune-telling, blessing and exorcism. In Chinese horoscope astrology, the meaning of the twelve signs of the zodiac gradually changed to become another set of symbols for the Five Phases and the twelve Earthly Branches.

2 Chinese Names of the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac

Scholars such as Hsia Nai, Chen Meidong, Niu Weixing and Chen Wancheng have collected and analyzed the Sanskrit and Chinese names of the signs of the zodiac. On the basis of these studies, I have searched for references to the signs of the zodiac in Chinese Buddhist scriptures, Taoist scriptures, horoscopic-astrological books, Dunhuang manuscripts and other ancient works. I have found twenty-seven sources which record, sometimes incompletely, the signs of the zodiac. In Tab. 15.1 I have gathered the all of the

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6 The 27 recording materials are as follows: Wenshu shili pusha ji zhuxian suoshuo jixiong shirishan’er xiuyaojing 文殊師利菩薩及諸仙所說吉凶時日善惡宿曜經 (hereafter Shan’e