SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

Number 104 July, 2000

Popular Astrology and Border Affairs in Early China: An Archaeological Confirmation

by
David W. Pankenier

Victor H. Mair, Editor
Sino-Platonic Papers
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA
vmair@sas.upenn.edu
www.sino-platonic.org

SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS is an occasional series edited by Victor H. Mair. The purpose of the series is to make available to specialists and the interested public the results of research that, because of its unconventional or controversial nature, might otherwise go unpublished. The editor actively encourages younger, not yet well established, scholars and independent authors to submit manuscripts for consideration. Contributions in any of the major scholarly languages of the world, including Romanized Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM) and Japanese, are acceptable. In special circumstances, papers written in one of the Sinitic topolects (*fangyan*) may be considered for publication.

Although the chief focus of *Sino-Platonic Papers* is on the intercultural relations of China with other peoples, challenging and creative studies on a wide variety of philological subjects will be entertained. This series is **not** the place for safe, sober, and stodgy presentations. *Sino-Platonic Papers* prefers lively work that, while taking reasonable risks to advance the field, capitalizes on brilliant new insights into the development of civilization.

The only style-sheet we honor is that of consistency. Where possible, we prefer the usages of the *Journal of Asian Studies*. Sinographs (*hanzi*, also called tetragraphs [*fangkuaizi*]) and other unusual symbols should be kept to an absolute minimum. *Sino-Platonic Papers* emphasizes substance over form.

Submissions are regularly sent out to be refereed and extensive editorial suggestions for revision may be offered. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with wide margins and submitted in duplicate. A set of "Instructions for Authors" may be obtained by contacting the editor.

Ideally, the final draft should be a neat, clear camera-ready copy with high black-and-white contrast.

Please note: When the editor goes on an expedition or research trip, all operations (including filling orders) may temporarily cease for up to two or three months at a time. In such circumstances, those who wish to purchase various issues of *SPP* are requested to wait patiently until he returns. If issues are urgently needed while the editor is away, they may be requested through Interlibrary Loan.

N.B.: Beginning with issue no. 171, *Sino-Platonic Papers* has been published electronically on the Web. Issues from no. 1 to no. 170, however, will continue to be sold as paper copies until our stock runs out, after which they too will be made available on the Web at www.sino-platonic.org.


國中勳
國中勳

David W. Pankenier, "Popular Astrology and Border Affairs in Early Imperial China"
Sino-Platonic Papers, 104 (July, 2000)

Popular Astrology and Border Affairs in Early Imperial China: An Archaeological Confirmation

David W. Pankenier

Lehigh University

A Recent Niya Discovery

In 1995 one of the most unique archaeological discoveries in recent years drew attention once again to the ancient oasis settlement of Niya 尼雅 in the Taklamakan Desert (Fig 1). Located on the southern branch of the Silk Route in the shadow of the Kunlun Mountains and buried by shifting sands since about the end of the 4th century, Niya was the westernmost settlement in the small desert kingdom of Shanshan 鄯善 (Kroraina) whose capital was at Loulan 樓蘭 on the north shore of Lop Nor. Niya became famous after Sir Aurel Stein publicized the results of his 1901 expedition to Xinjiang (followed by those of 1906, 1913, and 1931).[1] Along with his contemporary, the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, Stein reported the discovery of a conflux of diverse cultural influences – Buddhist, Chinese, Hellenistic, Iranian – in these remote regions of Central Asia located precisely at the interface between the Xiongnu 匈奴, Kushan, and Han Empires. The reported traces of long-buried Buddhist desert kingdoms caused a sensation. Subsequent expeditions led to the discovery of caches of numerous documents written on wooden strips mainly in Kharosthi and, of course, Stein's and Paul Pelliot's famous discovery of thousands of medieval manuscripts in one of the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas in Dunhuang.

After a long hiatus, further discoveries of the ruins of Han dynasty agricultural garrisons in nearby Cherchen 車尔臣, Kroraina (Loulan), and other sites, including Han administrative records on wooden strips dating from as early as 49-8 B.C., revealed a good deal about the organization of Chinese garrison colonies and the life of soldiers

[1] Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan: Detailed Report of Archaeological Excavations in Chinese Turkestan Carried out and Described under the Orders of H.M. Indian Government* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publishers, 1981 rpt. of 1907 edition).

stationed in the area.[2] Joint Sino-Japanese archaeological expeditions resumed in earnest in the 1980s and continued for several seasons despite the extremely challenging working conditions. These efforts culminated in 1995 with the excavation of a Niya burial ground that once again demonstrated the unique mix of ancient cultural influences in the Tarim Basin and the remarkable degree of preservation of artifacts buried in the desert soil. Lying in the tomb of a beautifully dressed Europoid couple, excavators found an Eastern Han silk brocade artifact whose striking multicolored decor and rare state of preservation made it one of the ten most important archaeological discoveries of 1995 (Pl. 1). Not only were the colors still fresh and bright, but woven into the decorative pattern of this unique textile remnant, now recognized as a bowman's arm guard, is also the remarkable legend, "when the five planets appear in the east it is beneficial for China." One could hardly ask for more eloquent testimony to the pervasiveness of astrological thinking in early China than this accessory from one of the remotest frontiers of the empire. While there is much to be said about the importance of the Niya finds and about the fascinating ethnic and cultural diversity of the strategic desert kingdom of Shanshan, my specific focus here will be on this silk brocade armguard and its place in the history of astrology in China.[3]

---

[2] See Yü Ying-shih, "Han Foreign Relations," in Denis Twitchett & Michael Loewe eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1, *The Ch'in and Han Empires 221 B.C. – A.D. 220* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 420. Chinese materials excavated by Hedin and Stein, though somewhat later, were also directly related to the activities of the Chinese troops stationed in Loulan and present a picture of a self-contained community which hired local residents on occasion as the need arose; see John Brough, "Comments on third-century Shan-shan and the history of Buddhism," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 28 (1965): 582-612, esp. 605. The Chinese documents found by Stein were later studied and published by Henri Maspero and Edouard Chavannes: Maspero, *Les documents chinois de la troisième expedition de Sir Aurel Stein en Asie centrale* (London: 1953), 169-252; Chavannes, *Documents chinois découverts par Aurel Stein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913), 721-950. Valerie Hansen, *The Documents of the Silk Road* (forthcoming) sketches the social history, economics, and culture of the region based on the documentary evidence.

[3] For a survey of the history of exploration in the Niya region, see Wang Binghua 王炳華, "Chenluo shamo de shenmi wangguo – Niya kaogu bainian ji" 沉落沙漠的神秘王國－尼雅考古百年祭, *Wenwu tiandi* 文物天地 (*Cultural Relics World*) 2 (1997): 3-9 and Wang Yue 王樾, "Niya kaogu dashi ji" 尼雅考古大事記, *Wenwu tiandi* 2 (1997): 12-14. Readers interested in a detailed analysis of the composition and unusual weaving technique exhibited by the silk brocade may consult Yu Zhiyong 于志勇, "Xinjiang Niya chutu 'wuxing chu dongfang li Zhongguo' caijin qian xi" 新疆尼雅出土五星出東方利中國彩錦淺析 in Ma Dazheng 馬大正 and Yang Lian 楊鐮 eds. *Xiyu kaocha yu yanjiu xubian* 西域考察與研究續編 (Ürümchi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1998), 187-188, 194. The consensus of Chinese experts is that this piece and others like it found at Niya probably made their way there as gifts from rulers in north central China. Yang Boda 楊伯達 and specialists at the Suzhou Silk Museum identified the silk brocade remnant from which the armguard was fashioned as having originally come from Shu. The catalogue entry by Ruan Qiurong 阮秋榮 from a recent exhibition reads as follows: "L. 18.5 cm W 12.5 cm. Unearthed from Tomb No. 8 of No. 1 Graveyard at Niya, Minfeng 民豐 County in 1995. In the

Early Planetary Astrology

The evidence has long indicated that from the earliest times the ancient Chinese were astute observers of celestial phenomena and that such observation was not the result of disinterested star-gazing. Original records of regular astronomical observation ranging from the mundane (sunrise and sunset, solstices, individual stars and planets) to the exceptional (lunar and solar eclipses, sunspots, supernova, etc.) appear as early as writing itself in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions, but for many years the conventional view has been that astrology played no significant role in Chinese intellectual history before the Warring States period.[4] The very fact that astronomical records first appear in the context of Shang dynasty oracular divinations, and that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* accurately reports numerous solar eclipses (not to mention three comets) should be sufficient to give pause, but until recently the role of astral-terrestrial correspondences in the very earliest period has not been adequately explored.[5]

---

collection of the Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology of the Uygur Autonomous Region. Rectangular in shape with rounded angles, the brocade face is ornamented with Chinese characters *wu xing chu dong fang li zhong guo* and lined with *juan* 絹 silk. The four sides are bordered with white *juan* silk and the long sides are also adorned with three yellow *juan* silk ribbons. The brocade is a double warp plain woven fabric with five sets of warp in different colors – blue, yellow, green, white, and red – interwoven with two sets of weft. The ground being in blue, the motif is a paralleled decoration of such auspicious birds and beasts as peacocks, cranes, twin-horned fabulous animals, dragons and tigers, with intervals of curled vines [clouds?] of plants and sets of one flower and two buds. In the middle of the pattern are woven Chinese characters *wu xing chu dong fang li zhong guo* in clerical script. After the character "5" three-colored concentric ring ornaments [Sun and Moon?] are woven every three characters. The color scheme is strikingly new. Of compact texture, the armguard is rich with beautiful and graceful patterns. Brocades in this style and design are extremely rare among artifacts unearthed in the country."

[4] For a recent restatement of this view, see, for example, Nathan Sivin, "State, Cosmos, and Body in the Last Three Centuries B.C.," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55.1 (1995): 5-37, especially p. 10: "The first doctrines of the Mandate, if indeed they are as old as the early Chou, did not incorporate astrology as an early warning system. The new astral rationale became preponderant after power had effectively gravitated into the hands of the potentates, the most ambitious of whom, as time passed, saw themselves eminently qualified to become hegemon or even to succeed the Chou king." Sivin's brief synopsis focusing on transmitted texts overlooks inscriptional evidence of the doctrine of the Mandate's antiquity. Scientifically excavated Western Zhou bronzes prove that the notion of the Mandate is contemporaneous with the Zhou Conquest of Shang. For example, the mid-11th century B.C. *He zun* inscription, dating from King Cheng's 5th year (1031 B.C.), quotes his father King Wu's triumphant declaration of the founding of Cheng Zhou (i.e., Luoyi 洛邑): "King Wen received that Great Mandate. After King Wu had defeated the Great City Shang he ritually announced to Heaven, 'Let me reside in this central walled settlement (中國), and from here govern the people.'" Evidence for the emergence of concepts of astral-terrestrial correspondence and astrology as early as the 2nd millennium B.C. is presented in David W. Pankenier, "The Cosmo-political Background of Heaven's Mandate," *Early China* 20 (1995): 121-176.

[5] Though he recognizes the connection ("State, Cosmos, and Body in China," 9-10) between Shang divination, astronomical observation, the Zhou rulers' seeking direction from their anthropomorphic

For some time now I have been studying the development of ancient Chinese astrology, especially the unique role played by conjunctions of multiple planets in political and military decision making, and in the formation of dynastic ideology. An accumulation of historical evidence in combination with computer simulations of the actual celestial circumstances at specific dates in the ancient past indicates that a scheme of astral-terrestrial correspondences underlay Chinese astrological speculation from at least the 2nd millennium B.C. During the 1st millennium B.C., when well-documented and epoch-making military confrontations were either in the offing or already underway – most notably the Conquest of Shang in 1046, the Battle of Chengpu in 632, and the founding of Han in 205 B.C. – massings of multiple planets at a particular location in Cancer-Gemini were taken to signify heavenly sanction for the enterprise.[6] This particular location in the sky was symbolically important because it corresponded to the head of the Vermilion Bird constellation, the celestial manifestation of the legendary phoenix, traditionally a harbinger of dynastic change and the dawning of an age of peace and prosperity.

Although field allocation (*fenye* 分野) astrology is hardly mentioned in the pre-Han classical philosophical writings, numerous allusions in late Warring States narratives like *Zuozhuan* 左傳 and *Guoyu* 國語, in *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, and in the *Chuci* 楚辭, as well as an abundance of archaeologically excavated artifacts ranging from cosmographs (*shipan* 式盤) to the Mawangdui 馬王堆 silk manuscripts, make it clear that a theory of astral-terrestrial correspondences and mutual resonance (*ganying* 感應)

Heaven, and the evolution of astrology, Nathan Sivin nevertheless argues that astrology played no significant role before the rise of the hegemons half a millennium later. Sivin also considers the macrocosm-microcosm analogy between the cosmos and centralized political order to be a product of the last three centuries B.C. In contrast, evidence of astrological interpretations given to specific verifiable celestial phenomena in Shang and early Zhou is offered in Pankenier, "The Cosmo-political Background of Heaven's Mandate," and "Applied Field Allocation Astrology in Zhou China: Duke Wen of Jin and the Battle of Chengpu (632 B.C.)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119.2 (1999): 261-279. It was Peter Berger who observed that, "Probably the most ancient form of legitimation is the conception of the institutional order as directly reflecting or manifesting the divine structure of the cosmos, that is, the conception of the relationship between society and cosmos as one between microcosm and macrocosm. Everything 'here below' has its analogue 'up above'"; see *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1990), 34. For the "cosmization" of the institution of kingship, see *The Sacred Canopy*, 36. In "The Cosmo-political Background of Heaven's Mandate" I argue that this process of cosmization had already occurred by the late Shang dynasty.

[6] See Pankenier, "Applied Field Allocation Astrology in Zhou China," 274.

was a basic tenet of the cosmological thought of the period.[7] Unlike Hellenistic astrology, the Chinese did not stress the uni-directional influence expressed by the axiom "as above, so here below," so much as the converse "as here below, so above" reflected in the belief that temporal misrule could provoke celestial anomalies and other ominous manifestations of Heaven's displeasure. For this reason, astrology and mathematical astronomy bore directly on the security of the state and hence were controlled activities from the early imperial period on, if not earlier. This is one reason for the hereditary, even hermetic, character of the astrologer's profession.

In the Former Han Dynasty, the imperially authorized practitioner of astrological prognostication was the Prefect Grand Astrologer *Tai shi ling* 太史令, whose duty it was to know the historical precedents, to follow the movements of the heavenly bodies, and to advise the emperor on the implications of developments, especially unanticipated changes or anomalies. Sima Qian's 司馬遷 "Treatise on the Heavenly Offices," *Tian guan shu* 天官書 (ca. 100 B.C.), provides a comprehensive survey of the cosmological and astronomical knowledge in the keeping of his office, as well as its practical application, from plotting the locations, movements, and changes affecting the stars and planets to interpreting the significance of their appearance based on the by then well-established system of astral-terrestrial correspondences. According to Sima Qian, the preoccupation with tracking the movements of the heavenly bodies could be traced all the way back to the beginning of history: "For as long as the people have existed, when have successive rulers not traced the movements of the Sun, Moon, stars and asterisms?"

If astrological portents typically had implications for the ruler, high dignitaries, and major affairs of state, because of their rarity, multiple planetary conjunctions, especially dense groupings involving all five naked-eye planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn) ranked as the most portentous of all celestial phenomena and as such had dynastic implications. This pride of place was, of course, reinforced by the historical association of planetary alignments with epochal dynastic transitions, culminating with the most recent event in 205 B.C., officially recognized in *Shiji* 史記 as the astral omen

[7] For a general discussion of these and other aspects of Warring States and Han astrology and cosmology, see Donald Harper, "Warring States Natural Philosophy and Occult Thought," *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 831ff.

signaling the rise of Han.[8] From Sima Qian's account of the significance of planetary massings, it is evident that by the beginning of the Han Dynasty a sign of heavenly endorsement of the transfer of the Mandate to a new dynasty in the form of a conjunction of all five planets had become *de rigueur*. In a conservative science like astrology this kind of axiomatic premise could not take shape and win general acceptance overnight, but must have the sanction of long tradition behind it. Sima Qian evidently took the connection for granted. His concluding summary of the astrological knowledge of his day in his "Treatise on the Heavenly Offices" displays both ancient conceptual roots as well as the Han theoretical reformulation based on the prevailing *Yin-Yang* and Five Phases correlative cosmology:

> Ever since the people have existed, when have successive rulers not systematically followed the movements of Sun, Moon, stars and asterisms? Coming to the Five Houses (Huang Di, Gao Yang, Gao Xin, Tang Yu, Yao-Shun) and the Three Dynasties, they continued by making this [knowledge] clear, they distinguished wearers of cap and sash from the barbarian peoples as inner is to outer, and they divided the Middle Kingdom into twelve regions. Looking up they observed the figures in the heavens, looking down they modeled themselves on the categories of earth. Therefore, in Heaven there are Sun and Moon; on Earth there are *Yin* and *Yang*; in Heaven there are the Five Planets; on Earth there are the Five Phases; in Heaven are arrayed the lunar lodges, and on Earth there are the terrestrial regions.[9]

Therefore, Sima Qian says:

> When the five planets gather, this is a change of phase: the possessor of [fitting] virtue is celebrated, a new Great Man is set up to possess the four quarters, and

---

[8] "When Han arose, the five planets gathered in DONGJING (Eastern Well; Lunar mansion #22, Gem)." *Shiji*, 27.1348. See also *Han shu* 漢書 • *Tianwen zhi* 天文志, 26.1301: "1st year of Emperor Gaozu of Han, 10th month, the five planets gathered in DONGJING [LM #22]. Extrapolation based on the calendar, [indicates] they followed [the lead of] Jupiter. This was the sign that August Emperor Gao received the Mandate. Therefore a retainer said to Zhang Er: 'DONG[JING] is the territory of Qin. When the King of Han (i.e., Liu Bang 劉邦) entered Qin, the five planets followed Jupiter and gathered together, meaning [he] ought to gain all under Heaven by means of Righteousness." The *Han shu* date of 10th month, 206 B.C. for the event is an obvious interpolation based on the date of the Qin King Wangzi Ying's 王子嬰 surrender to Liu Bang in Xianyang 咸陽. The actual planetary alignment occurred the following year, in May 205 B.C. Sima Qian is more circumspect and only says "when Han arose." For conjunctions of the five planets in which Jupiter takes the lead, portending the rise of a "righteous" dynastic founder, see *Shiji*, 27.1312.

[9] *Shiji*, 27.1342.

his descendants flourish and multiply. But the one lacking in virtue suffers calamities to the point of destruction.[10]

Astrological Ethnocentrism

An interesting attribute of field allocation astrology is that the system we find reflected in late Warring States and early Han texts is unabashedly ethnocentric in its celestial and terrestrial correlations. The Chinese world is all that matters, so that the topographical analogy between the Milky Way – the "River of Heaven" – and the Yellow River provides the basic paradigm for the entire scheme of astral-terrestrial relations between the lunar lodges in the sky and the twelve polities (or more anciently, the nine provinces) to which they corresponded on the ground. Most documented prognostication according to the system of field allocation astrology is concerned with the influences of specific heavenly bodies, especially Jupiter, on the terrestrial kingdom identified with the planet's location in the heavens. In this system, the Chinese world represents the known universe and no accommodation is made in the heavens for non-Chinese peoples. By the Former Han dynasty, however, some concession had to be made to political reality. Leaving no room for prognostication concerning non-Chinese peoples was an anachronistic bias that astrology could no longer afford if it was to have a claim to relevance in the early imperial period. Therefore, in consideration of the increasingly problematical opposition between the now unified Han imperium and the aggressive non-Chinese peoples on the periphery like the Xiongnu, Sima Qian asserts in his "Treatise" that in macro-astrological terms the more warlike northern barbarians are *Yin* with respect to the *Yang* of the Chinese *oikumene*. As such they corresponded to the northern and

---

[10] *Shiji*, 27.1321. That Sima Qian's was the conventional conception is confirmed by Shen Yue's 沈約 (441-513) reiteration of this principle in *Song shu* 宋書 (*Tianwen zhi*, 25.735) where he quotes *Shiji* and amplifies on Sima Qian's last line, "the one lacking in virtue suffers punishment, is separated from his household and kingdom, and devastates his ancestral temple." Shen then says, "Now, in my judgement, based on surviving texts, there have been three conjunctions of the five planets. Zhou and Han [each] relied on [such a one] to rule as King, as did Qi 齊 as Hegemon. [Duke Huan of] Qi finally ended up as Lord Protector, and in the end there was no epochal change. Therefore, there has occurred such a conjunction of the five planets with no [concomitant] change of phase." Similarly, arguing that dynastic change may be portended by massings of only four planets, Shen Yue later points to the transfer of the Mandate from Han to Wei 魏 in AD 220: "Emperor Xian 獻 of Han, 25th year of the Jian'an 建安 reign period. Emperor Wen 文 of Wei (Cao Pi 曹丕) received his abdication; this constituted the change of phase [portended by] the four planets' three [recent] gatherings"; see *Song shu*, 25.736.

western quadrants of the heavens, while the Chinese world, by and large, corresponded to the south and east:

> The 28 lodgings govern the 12 provinces, and the handle of the Dipper seconds them; the origins of [this scheme] are already very ancient. For the Qin frontier, one watches Venus and prognostication [depends on] LANG (Sirius, α CMa) and HU (κ CMa). For the frontiers of Wu and Chu, one watches Mars and prognostication [depends on] NIAO (LIU = LM 24) and HENG (QI XING = LM 25). For the frontiers of Yan and Qi, one watches Mercury and prognostication [depends on] XU (LM 11, β Aqr) and WEI (LM 12, α Aqr). For the frontiers of Song and Zheng, one watches Jupiter and prognostication [depends on] FANG (LM 4, π Sco) and XIN (LM 5, σ Sco). For the frontier of Jin, one also watches Mercury, but prognostication [depends on] SHEN (LM 21, δ Ori) and FA (Great Orion Nebula).
>
> Coming to Qin's annexation of the Three Jin [successor states], Yan, and Dai (i.e., Shandong), from the [Yellow] River [and] Mount [Hua] southward are the Central Kingdoms (*zhong guo*). [With respect to] the area within the Four Seas, the Central Kingdoms therefore occupy the southeast as *Yang – Yang* is the Sun, Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn. Prognostications [about *zhong guo* are based on astral locations] situated south of [the asterism TIAN-] JIE,[11] and BI (LM 18, ε Tau) governs them. To the northwest are the Hu, Mo, Yuezhi and other peoples who wear woolens and furs and draw the bow as *Yin – Yin* is the Moon, Venus, and Mercury. Prognostications [about them are based on astral locations] situated north of [TIAN-] JIE, while MAO (Pleiades, LM 19, 7 Tau) governs them.
>
> Essentially, the Central Kingdom's mountain ranges and watercourses run northeast, rising in [Mount] Long and Shu (i.e., Gansu and Sichuan), and terminating at the Bo[-hai Gulf] and [Mount] Jie [-shi](near Shanhaiguan). For this reason, Qin and Jin are fond of using weapons, furthermore their prognostications [depend on] Venus, ruler of the Central Kingdoms, while the Hu, and Mo, who have repeatedly invaded, are uniquely prognosticated [based on] Mercury. Mercury's comings and goings are swift and sudden, so as a rule [that planet] governs the barbarians. These are the cardinal principles.[12]

---

[11] "Celestial Street"; i.e., two minor stars in Taurus near Aldeberan marked by κ Tau and within the range of Lunar Mansion BI; see Sun & Kistemaker, 180. Earlier in the "Treatise" (27.1306), Sima Qian says: "Between MAO and BI is Celestial Street. To its *Yin* [side] are *Yin* kingdoms, to its *Yang* [side] are *Yang* kingdoms." In their commentaries, Zhang Shoujie 張守節 and Pei Yin 裴駰 elaborate on prognostications relating to border affairs governed by the appearance of these two asterisms. Between the two is the spot where the Sun, Moon, and five planets ford the Milky Way. To the south are the Hua-Xia states, and to the north the barbarian (Yi-Di 夷狄) peoples. Hence, the Jupiter station at this location is called DA LIANG "Great Bridge."

[12] *Shiji*, 27.1347. Note how even in this revised scheme Sima Qian's geographical focus is still on North China and the Yellow River watershed; he gives surprisingly short shrift to the Yangtze and Jiangnan region.

By referring to a map of the sky (Fig. 2), it becomes apparent that this broad generalization invokes the parallelism between the celestial topography and the geo-political realities of north central China in the late Warring States and early Han periods. Essentially, the wintry = *Yin* celestial fields north and west of the Milky Way as archetypal RIVER (i.e., LM 10-18, provinces Yang 揚 through Liang 梁, or Capricorn through Taurus) correspond to the historical fields of activity of the peripheral "barbarian" peoples. On the other hand, the summery = *Yang* celestial fields south and east of the Milky Way (i.e., LM 19-5, provinces Yong 雍 through Yu 豫, or Taurus through Scorpio) correspond to the Hua-Xia heartland. Interestingly, Sima Qian also adduces the powerful Chinese border-states of Jin 晉 and Qin 秦 as cases in point of "hybrid" Chinese polities whose martial proclivities clearly reflected the influence of barbarian peoples with whom they had been in constant contact for centuries.

Astrological prognostication on this macro-level, which departs in important respects from the traditional system of field allocation astrology,[13] reflects the "us vs. them" polarity between the Chinese imperium and surrounding peoples which became a major preoccupation of the imperial court from the early Former Han dynasty on.[14] Apparently in this same vein, and clearly anticipating the epigram later woven into the Niya brocade armguard, elsewhere in the "Treatise on the Heavenly Offices" Sima Qian asserts: "when the five planets are disposed in mid-sky and gather in the east, China (*zhong guo* 中國) benefits; when they gather in the west, outsiders (*wai guo* 外國) who use weapons gain."[15] Based on the above we may fairly conclude that this astrological

[13] In the classic field allocation scheme of astral-terrestrial correspondences all 28 lunar mansions are allocated to the 12 provinces of the Hua-Xia world. No provision is made for non-Chinese peoples, nor is there any trace of *Yin-Yang* correlative cosmology. Sima Qian's "cardinal principles" of astrological prognostication as regards non-Chinese peoples, based loosely on a north-south analysis of the celestial topography and also on the notion that *wen* : *wu* :: *Yang* : *Yin*, and so *zhong guo* : *wai guo* :: *Yang* : *Yin*, appears to be a relatively recent development. Associating Wu 吳 with southern lunar mansion no. 23 "Bird" in Hydra also directly contradicts the earlier scheme in which Wu and Yue 越 are connected with lunar mansions NANDOU LM #8 and QIANNIU LM #9 in the winter quadrant.

[14] It will be helpful to keep the ambiguities of this kind of "macro-astrological" pronouncement in mind when we later consider what is meant by "gather (or appear) in the east" in this context. It should already be clear that we are not dealing here with the same level of specificity as in the regular field allocation system.

[15] *Shiji*, 27.1328; *Han shu* 26.1283 reproduces the same axiom, substituting *da li* 大利 "greatly benefits" in the case of China and *yi di* "barbarians" for *wai guo* "foreign kingdoms." On the political and cultural opposition posited between *zhong guo* and *wai guo* at this epoch and its antecedents, see the comments by

axiom is the *locus classicus* of the epigram woven into the Niya brocade, representing a remarkable archaeological confirmation of Sima Qian's account of the conventional thinking. But there may be more to this story than meets the eye.

Zhao Chongguo 趙充國 and the Campaign of 61 B.C.

Throughout the reign of Emperor Wu 武 of Han (141 – 87 B.C.), as betokened by that ruler's posthumous title, imperial policy toward peripheral areas and their largely nomadic inhabitants was expansionist and aggressive. This was particularly true in the northwest, where long and costly campaigns against the Xiongnu, initially in response to increasingly bold border raids and incursions, gradually became the norm.[16] Much manpower and treasure were expended in fighting the Xiongnu and in alternately coercing and bribing their rivals to collaborate with Han efforts to restrain the Xiongnu and each other, with decidedly mixed results given the fluid power relations among competing forces along the ill-defined frontier. By the early 1st century B.C. the drain on the imperial treasury had long been a serious problem, tarnishing Emperor Wu's legacy and leading to a partial Chinese withdrawal from Korea in 82 B.C. But the practice of periodically dispatching comparatively small task forces into the far northwest continued until about 65 B.C., when a shift in policy began to make itself felt.

The Han court still faced a serious challenge in pacifying the frontiers, both in terms of creating buffer zones between frontier settlements and potentially troublesome tribal peoples, and in terms of provisioning the Chinese garrison forces whose long-term presence served to pacify the border areas. Provisioning Chinese forces in this area was especially problematical because of the extremely long supply lines and the great quantities of feed grain required by the draught animals and the mounted troops' horses.[17] In an attempt to achieve a less costly and more permanent solution, imperial policy

---

E. Bruce Brooks (Warring States Working Group listserv, supplement to #1919/498, sequence 1944) and Yu Zhizong, "Xinjiang Niya chutu . . . caijin qianxi," 189, n. 1.

[16] For a detailed study of military policy and border affairs in early Han, see Michael Loewe, "The Campaigns of Han Wu-ti," in *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, ed. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. et al., (Harvard University Press, 1974), 67-122.

[17] What this meant quantitatively is spelled out in a memorial by Zhao Chongguo analyzed by Michael Loewe, see "The Campaigns of Han Wu-ti," 97.

shifted from one of expansion toward a strategy of gradual colonization of frontier areas. Late in 61 B.C., General Zhao Chongguo, a veteran of many years of service in Central Asia and campaigns against the Xiongnu, proposed a new way of consolidating Chinese influence by permanently establishing self-supporting agricultural garrisons *tuntian* 屯田 along the frontiers. An informative sampling of the administrative records of just such a garrison at Cherchen from the years 49 – 8 B.C. have been analyzed, and these materials, together with other finds excavated from the civilian communities of Niya and Loulan, provide an unprecedented look into life on the frontier in the early imperial period.[18]

Of particular interest here, however, is a Chinese campaign into the northwest that lasted throughout 61 B.C. In April-May of that year,[19] in response to border unrest, and at the venerable age of 76 *sui*, General of the Rear Zhao Chongguo was dispatched to quell an uprising by Western Qiang 西羌 people who frequently allied with the Xiongnu against Han. In 104 B.C. Emperor Wu established the frontier commanderies of Dunhuang 敦煌, Jiuquan 酒泉, and Zhangyi 張掖 precisely with the intention of separating the two peoples and preventing their joining forces. The Qiang appear to have been ancient adversaries of the Chinese and may have been the same ethnic group referred to by that name in the Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions. They enjoyed the unhappy distinction of being among the captives most frequently sacrificed in bloody rites dedicated to the Shang royal ancestors. Unlike the Xiongnu, however, the Qiang never coalesced into a tribal federation, and their pronounced tendency toward internecine conflict was already pointed out by Zhao Chongguo in a memorial to Emperor Xuan (74 – 49 B.C.) written in 63 B.C.: "It is relatively easy to bring the Qiang under control because they are divided into many warlike tribes and always attack each other. It is not in their nature to become unified."[20] Traditionally nomadic pastoralists, in

[18] See, for example, Christopher Atwood, "Life in third-fourth century Cadh'ota: A survey of information gathered from the Prakrit documents found north of Minfeng (Niya)," *Central Asiatic Journal* 35.3-4 (1991): 161-199. Atwood studied the Niya Kharosthi documents dating from A.D. 236-321 discovered by Stein. Based on the Kharosthi documents, the Chinese military presence in the 3rd - 4th centuries, as in the 1st century B.C., was limited in scope. The Chinese appear only marginally in the documents as merchants, fugitives, and as among the few who used gold; see Atwood, 190-191. See also Michael Loewe, *Records of Han Administration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

[19] Homer H. Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Vol. 2, 241.

[20] Tr. Yü Ying-shih, "Han Foreign Relations," *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 1, 422; cf. *Han shu*, 69.2972.

the 2nd century B.C. the Western Qiang were active in a broad swath of territory extending along the Kunlun Mountains from Dunhuang in the east to the Pamir in the west. By the mid-1st century B.C. some had turned from herding to agriculture and significant numbers lived interspersed with Chinese settlers in the frontier areas. According to authoritative contemporary sources, abusive treatment of the Western Qiang by rapacious Chinese frontier officials was a chief cause of their frequent revolts.[21]

By the autumn of 61 B.C., concerned about the impending onset of winter and the mounting cost of the campaign, Emperor Xuan 宣 became frustrated with Zhao Chongguo's apparent inaction. The Emperor wrote a letter upbraiding his field commander for his dilatoriness and urging him in the strongest terms to engage the enemy expeditiously. Zhao, a seasoned veteran of many border campaigns, was not intimidated. In his response he defended his tactics with an eloquent disquisition on military strategy and border affairs, especially the merits of waiting out this particular enemy, citing the *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法 as authority: "One who is skilled at warfare makes his opponent come to him, and is not made to come by his opponent."[22] In the end, Zhao's well-considered strategy achieved complete success with a minimum of conflict.

What is especially interesting about this particular exchange, however, is another factor stressed by Emperor Xuan, one not specifically rebutted by Zhao in his response. In concluding his letter, Emperor Xuan emphasizes that the astrological circumstances favor immediate action against the enemy: "At present the five planets appear in the east, [signifying that] China will be greatly benefitted, while the Man and Yi [barbarians] will be utterly defeated. Venus appears on high, and so [the time] is auspicious for the one who employs troops to penetrate deeply and boldly do battle, but unpropitious for the one who dares not engage."[23] Emperor Xuan clearly has in mind the principles cited above from Sima Qian's "Treatise on the Heavenly Offices," so here we have yet another revealing example of the application of astrological theory to strategic decision-making in actual historical circumstances.

---

[21] Yü Ying-shih, "Han Foreign Relations," 424-425.

[22] *Han shu*, 69.2981.

[23] *Han shu*, 69.2981.

In his "Treatise," Sima Qian is vague about the precise meaning of "appear in the east" in reference to the planets' beneficial influence. In the context of Warring States period field allocation astrology it would be natural to take "in the east" to refer to the eastern quadrant of the heavens, that is, lunar mansions #1 Jiao 角 (Vir) - #8 Ji 箕 (Sgr). On such a reading, however, the astral omen would have to be interpreted anachronistically as relating to events within the Warring States period kingdoms of Wei 衛, Qin 秦, Chu 楚, Zheng 鄭, and the Royal Zhou 周 domains. But as we saw above, in Han dynasty prognostications involving the binary *Yin-Yang* analysis, where what is politically and culturally Chinese is contrasted with what is politically and culturally non-Chinese, a looser revised scheme of astral-terrestrial correspondences is applied. In point of fact, by November of 61 B.C. when Emperor Xuan was observing the skies, the five planets were actually strung out across well over half the sky between Taurus and Scorpio (LM #19 - #5), conventionally SW through E. Rather than being clustered in the eastern quadrant of the heavens, the planets were all located in the "southern" or *yang* half of the heavens associated with "*zhong guo*" in the new theory set forth by Sima Qian in his "Treatise." Judging from the actual circumstances, therefore, Emperor Xuan's prognostication, in which the planets are "on our side," is clearly based on Sima Qian's binary *Yin-Yang* rendition of the earlier field allocation scheme. Given the planets' dispersal over more than 160° in longitude, almost from horizon to horizon, this planetary configuration could not possibly qualify as a conjunction "in one lodging" (i.e., less than 15°), so it would not have been considered to have dynastic consequences.

Clearly, we are not dealing here with the most spectacular and rarest of planetary massings, but with a somewhat more commonplace prognostication that illustrates their role in ordinary political and military decision-making. Not until mid-November 61 B.C. were all five planets west of the Sun, strung out in an arc stretching across the pre-dawn sky (Fig. 3). Venus had previously reached maximum western elongation from the Sun (45°) in mid-September, but at 35° west elongation would still have shone brilliantly in the southeast as the Morning Star. Emperor Xuan was thus quite right to take particular note of Venus "high in the sky," and his interpretation that this bode well for China also derives from Sima Qian's "Treatise," where Venus is denoted "ruler of the Central

Kingdoms" and governs prognostications concerning the Qin frontier. Mercury, in contrast, was east of the Sun throughout most of the summer and early autumn and would have been observed after sunset in the west. Thus Emperor Xuan's statements about the easterly location of all five planets and Venus's simultaneous appearance "on high" could only have been made after about mid-November, by which time Mercury had switched horizons from west to east and began to appear in the pre-dawn sky. It follows, therefore, that the letter was written after mid-November, some seven months after Zhao Chongguo was dispatched to the far northwest, time enough for the Emperor to become more than a little anxious about the outcome of his mission.

Given the circumstances, "appear in the east" and "disposed in mid-sky" must refer to the planets' rising one after another above the eastern horizon, and to their pre-dawn appearance strung out across the sky (Fig. 3). Emperor Xuan clearly does not mean to say that the planets were located in the seven lunar mansions (corresponding to Virgo - Sagittarius) associated with the eastern quadrant of the heavens. This by itself is a significant insight into the contemporary application of astrological theory and resolves the ambiguity about the meaning of "gather in the east" *ji yu dong fang* in Sima Qian's "Treatise." Another indication of the role of astrological prognostication is the attitude toward the planetary omens displayed by the principal actors in this exchange. Emperor Xuan, esconced in his palace far from the events on the ground, seems more inclined to give weight to theoretical astrological considerations than his veteran field commander Zhao Chongguo. One gains the impression from the emperor's letter that the occurrence of an exceptional planetary omen should be sufficient to convince the general to attack promptly so as not to lose his unique advantage. Coming at the very end of the letter, mention of the planetary omen seems intended to clinch the Emperor's admonition to act expeditiously.

Zhao Chongguo's rebuttal, on the other hand, maintains a diplomatic silence on the matter of astrological omens. As an expert on border affairs and a veteran of numerous campaigns in Central Asia, from his tone it seems clear that he ascribes greater weight to patient diplomatic maneuvering and carefully laid military strategy than to planetary astrology. This should come as no surprise, though perhaps a less capable general than Zhao might have had more difficulty persuading the emperor to allow him a

free hand. In any case, we have here documentary evidence that, given the occurrence of a significant astral omen,[24] planetary astrology was given serious consideration at the highest level in connection with major military undertakings, even if in this instance astrology was trumped by superior military strategy and generalship. In the end, on reading this exchange one cannot fail to be impressed by Emperor Xuan's deference to his field commander's informed arguments and more measured strategy.

Conclusion

Given the remarkable coincidence between the historical record and the Niya "five planets" brocade, it is tempting to speculate about a possible relationship between the Niya armguard and General Zhao's campaign in the very region where the Han contended for *lebensraum* with border peoples like the Western Qiang and Xiongnu. The area at risk in 61 B.C. included Dunhuang, and the Han authorities recruited several thousand mercenaries for the campaign from among the non-belligerent ethnic groups living in the general area, including the Lesser Yuezhi 小月支 and other Qiang tribes like the Ruo 婼 (var. Chuo) Qiang.[25] We know little about the ethnicity of the tall fair-haired bowman from Niya buried with the "five planets" brocade, bow and arrows, except that he was clearly Europoid. Linguistic evidence provided by the names of a thousand residents of nearby Loulan indicates they were Tocharians.[26] Whether the tomb occupant actually understood the significance of the inscription on his armguard is, perhaps, doubtful. The various brocade artifacts found in Niya tombs were definitely not made to order but were almost certainly fashioned locally from textile remnants or trade goods.

---

[24] As it happens, the *Han shu* also records the appearance of a comet in the eastern quarter in the 6th month of 61 B.C., though the astrological interpretation of this apparition is not mentioned. See H.H. Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Vol. 2, 241.

[25] The Chinese considered the people of the Shanshan kingdom, whom they called Lesser Yuezhi, to be related to the inhabitants of the Kushan Empire to the west, whom they called the Greater Yuezhi 大月支. On Ruo Qiang collaboration with the Han in punitive campaigns against other Qiang tribes, see *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 1, 425. At the time the Ruo Qiang inhabited the region southeast of the Cherchen River and present day Ruoqiang 若羌, about midway between Dunhuang and Niya; see Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, *Zhongguo lishi ditu ji* 中國歷史地圖集, Vol. 2, *Qin, Xi Han, Dong Han shiqi* 秦漢東漢時期 (Beijing: Zhongguo ditu chubanshe, 1982), 37-38.

[26] See T. Burrow, "Tocharian Elements in the Kharosthi Documents from Chinese Turkestan," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1935): 667-675. Although these documents date from some two centuries later, given the identical burial customs and grave goods present in the tombs, it is likely that the Han period population of the area was much the same.

The current consensus among archaeologists is that the colorful examples found at Niya are typical late Eastern Han products, in which case they would have been made some two centuries after Zhao Chongguo's campaign. All that we may fairly conclude, in the absence of more precise dating of the tomb, is that the only apparent connection between the Niya "five planets" brocade and Zhao Chongguo's campaign is the astrological epigram "when the five planets appear in the east, it is beneficial for China."

We have briefly traced the development of thinking about planetary influences with the help of theoretical discussions in authoritative sources and practical application in specific historical circumstances. This latest stage in the development of planetary astrology represents a reformulation of the earlier Warring States astrological theory, adapting the former preoccupation with a multivalent world to the circumstances of the early empire with its binary "*zhong* vs. *wai*," "us vs. them" view of contemporary power relations. At the same time, by comparison with the situation in early Zhou and Warring States times, thinking in astrological terms appears to have moved decidedly "down scale." Judging from the appearance of the epigram in the Niya brocade, what began as an esoteric, even hermetic, science of astral divination, enjoyed such widespread popularity by the 2nd - 3rd centuries that one of its central tenets could even become an element in the decorative repertoire of makers of luxury goods. One could hardly ask for more eloquent testimony to the ubiquity of astrological conceptions in the early empire.

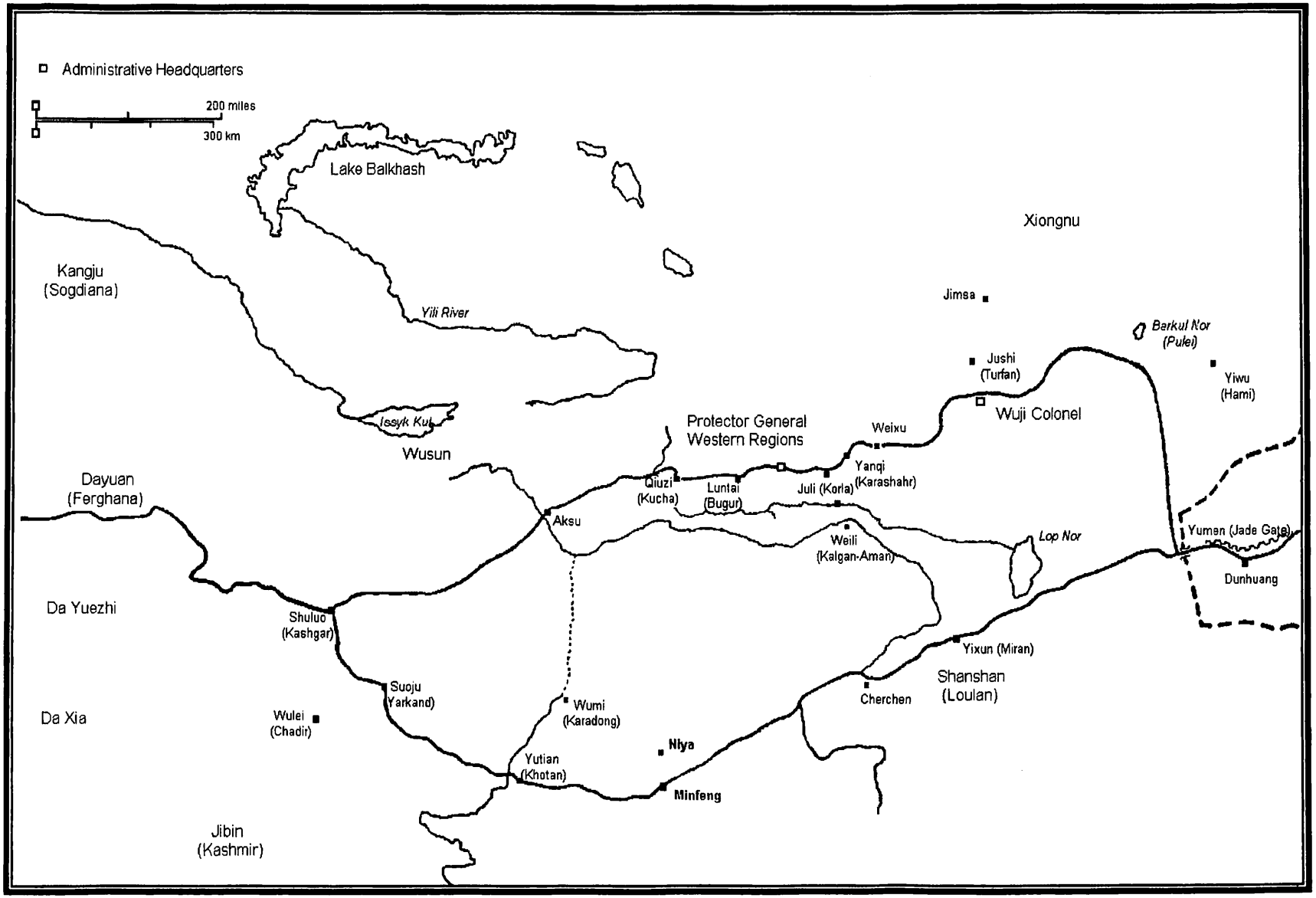

Fig. 1. The Location of Niya near the present-day Minfeng County on the southern Silk Route.

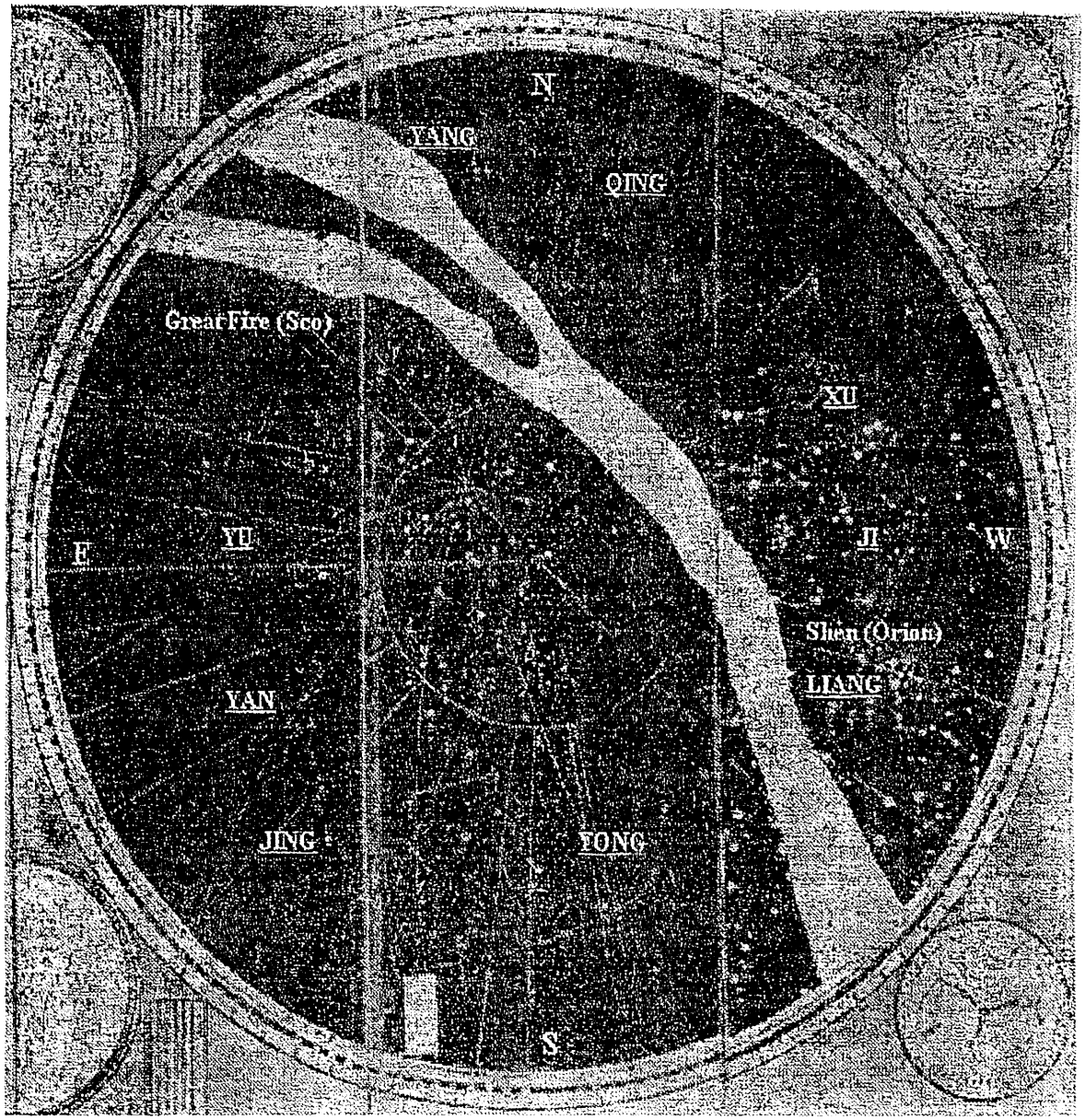

Fig. 2. Map of the heavens showing the disposition of the nine provinces surrounding the Milky Way. The Milky Way, as archetypal RIVER, divides the celestial topography into Yin (north and west) and Yang (south and east) halves.

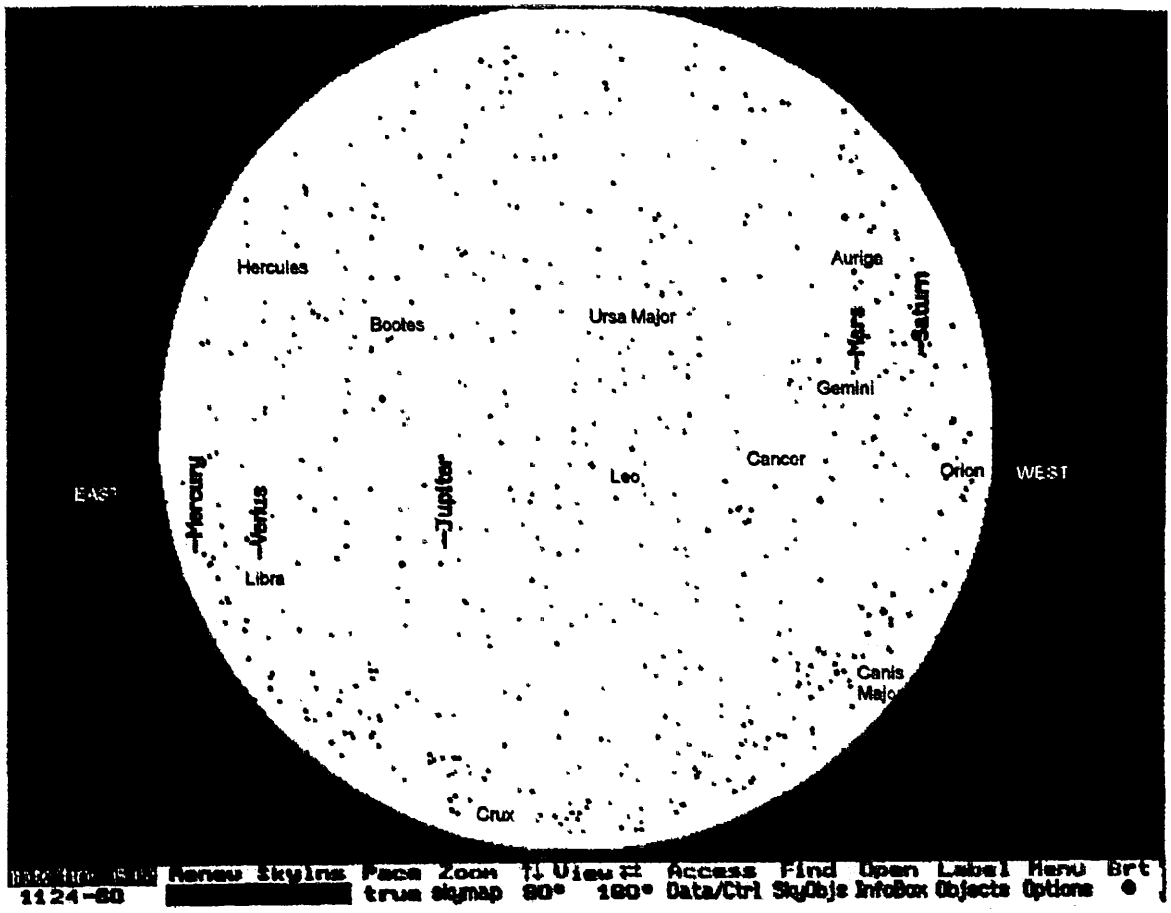

Fig. 3. Locations of the five planets about 1½ hours before sunrise on 24 Nov 61 B.C. The eastern horizon is on the left. Saturn, westernmost of the five, rose first at 16:29 the previous afternoon. Mercury, last to appear, rose at 4:39 in the morning. From Saturn to Mercury is some 162° in longitude. (*Dance of the Planets* © ARC Software)

Since June 2006, all new issues of *Sino-Platonic Papers* have been published electronically on the Web and are accessible to readers at no charge. Back issues are also being released periodically in e-editions, also free. For a complete catalog of *Sino-Platonic Papers*, with links to free issues, visit the *SPP* Web site.

www.sino-platonic.org