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The well-known concern of traditional Chinese culture for divinatory techniques has recently produced a number of interesting and, sometimes, groundbreaking works. Partially fuelled by archaeological discoveries, scholarly interest in the ways in which the ancient Chinese endeavoured to foresee coming events is gradually unveiling obscure facets of mantic practices gathered under the collective noun “calculation and arts” (*shushu* 數術).¹ Studies by Li Ling 李零 and Marc Kalinowski, for instance, have shed new light on features and strategies of Warring States (403-221 BC) and Han (206 BC-AD 220) circles dealing with divination. Nor is this effort limited to pre-imperial and early imperial China. Kalinowski’s translation of the medieval treatise *Wuxing dayi* 五行大義 (*The Compendium of the Five Agents*) constitutes an outstanding resource for scholars approaching the theoretical principles and technical bases of Chinese traditional divination.² Ho Peng Yoke’s new work *Chinese Mathematical Astrology* must be understood within this framework. Professor Ho is a well-known scholar in both Chinese and Western sinological circles. His *Li, Qi and Shu: An Introduction to Science and Civilization in China* remains an insightful entry point into Chinese science. In the same way, his translation of the monograph on astrology (*Tianwen zhi* 天文志) of the *Jinshu* 君書 (Book of Jin) is a very


valuable aid for all those approaching the complex world of official astrology. With his new and appealing study *Chinese Mathematical Astrology—Reaching out to the Stars*, this distinguished scholar introduces a Western audience to a still little known field by analysing and discussing the three divination techniques known as “Three Boards” (san shi 三式): Taiyi 太乙, *Qimen dunjia* 奇門遁甲, and *Liuren* 六壬. These mantic practices, which developed over a long span of time, constituted the official divination system under the Song dynasty (960-1278). Ho Peng Yoke illustrates the main features of these techniques in the central part of his work (third, fourth and fifth chapters). The book also offers an insightful introduction and two appendixes devoted to traditional Chinese astrology and fate calculation.

Chapters One and Two furnish the introduction to *Chinese Mathematical Astrology*. Chapter One mostly aims to outline the subject under discussion and to cover a few basic problems, such as the key role mantic practices have played in Chinese culture. Chapter Two provides a helpful summary of the keystones of Chinese divination. Given the technical focus of the work, little space is left to explore theoretical questions. The discussion of one of the most influential concepts of traditional China, namely the interaction between the human sphere and natural realm, is confined to a very short illustration of Neo-confucian thought. This approach is also apparent in the treatment of *yinyang* 阴陽 dualism and in the illustration of the ways in which the Five Agents (*wuxing* 五行) interact with each other. While avoiding any long excursus on the philosophical flavour of these *topoi*, the author first summarizes the main laws that govern the interchange of the *wuxing* and then proceeds by reviewing the temporal significance of the *yinyang/wuxing* framework. In particular, he dwells on the classification of the heavenly stems (*tiangan* 天干) and earthly branches (*dizhi* 地支), either as *yin* or *yang* or as *wuxing* products.

In order to help the reader to gain a fuller understanding of the working of the three cosmic boards, the author efficaciously reviews central technical themes, such as the magic square of order 9—*jiugong* 九宫 (Palace of Nine Halls)—, the *Yijing* 易经 (Classic of Changes), and the structure of the Chinese calendar. Certain aspects of calendar-making constitute, for instance, a prerequisite for approaching the three boards. Beside designating hours of the day, days, months, and years by the *tiangan-dizhi* system, Chinese almanacs were complex mathematical systems that took into account phases of the moon for scheduling months and the apparent motion of the sun for fixing the twenty-four fortnightly periods of the year. These luni-solar systems, which also tracked planetary motion, essentially consisted of numerical constants that denoted the periodicity of the recurrence of given astronomical phenomena. For a smooth working of the

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calendar, the scholars in charge needed a starting point. This was reckoned as the Superior Origin \( (shang-yuan 上 元) \), namely that moment in the distant past when several heavenly phenomena as well as a new sexagenary cycle happened to occur together.

In approaching the three boards, Ho Peng Yoke first focuses on the method of the Taiyi deity. The author rightly stresses the ambiguousness of the term Taiyi and concludes that it, as well as its variant Taiyi 太 一, referred to a deity inhabiting the Taiyi star, which was supposed to be adjacent to the circumpolar region. By tracing this interpretation back to Sima Qian 司 馬 遼 (ca. 145-85 BC), Ho Peng Yoke also notices in the Shiji 史 記 (Records of the Historian) the existence of a conflicting account (p. 42), according to which the domicile of this puzzling deity is the polar star \( (Beiji 北 極) \). A closer look at the Shiji reveals that the Sima historians consistently opts for the second solution. Yet, it is possible that the conflict mentioned by Ho Peng Yoke actually existed, not within the Shiji, but rather among early imperial communities. The apocrypha, for instance, seem to connect the deity to a region outside the circumpolar area and to the star Taiyi. It was probably during the early medieval era that Beiji gradually lost its significance in this context, whereas the Taiyi star became the most important reference point. Ho Peng Yoke rightly remarks that Xiao Ji 蕭 吉—the author of the Wuxing dayi—as well as the Tang (618-906) scholar Li Chunfeng 李 淳 風—to whom the astrological section of the Jinshu is attributed—take it as the home of the Taiyi deity.

In the official divination board system, the term Taiyi refers to an itinerant deity who travels among the nine halls of the Jiugong magic square. It never stops in Palace Five, while dwelling three years in each of the remaining halls. In his work, Ho Peng Yoke gives a lucid and clear account of the procedure of obtaining a response from the Taiyi system. The practitioners were required to ascertain in which palace the deity was located in a given year by means of a cosmic board made of five concentric circles. The first, in the centre, was usually left empty and taken as a representation of Palace Five; the second, third, and fourth contained the data for the calculations, such as numbers from one to nine denoting the Palaces and the station of the Taiyi. The exterior circle was left for the results of the computation. In order to calculate the position of the Taiyi in a given year, the practitioners used a given Superior Origin as the starting point.

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4 As far as I have been able to ascertain, the only star linked to the Taiyi deity in the Shiji is the Polar Star. In this regard, see also Sun Xiaochun and Jacob Kistemaker, The Chinese Sky Under the Han, (Leiden: Brill, 1997) pp. 96, 123.

5 In this regard, see Choshu isho shusei 重 修 緯 書 集 成 (Revised Collection of Apocryphal Texts) 4B:121 (Tokyo: Meitoku, 1981-1985). Other sources seem to refer to the Taiyi as an itinerant deity dwelling in the circumpolar region. See Huainanzi 淮 南 子 (The Book of the Prince of Huainan) 3:21 (Huainanzi zhuzi suoyin The ICS Ancient Chinese Texts Concordances Series. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1992); Choshu isho shusei 4A:87.
for the calculations. In this way, they were able to locate on the cosmic board the Taiyi as well as several auxiliary deities, such as the Scholar (Wenchang 文昌) or the Attack Initiator (Shiji 始擊). The position of these figures was used for casting the prognostication, which usually concerned state affairs, in warfare and meteorological events.

Little is known about the early history and development of such a technique connected to Taiyi. Even if Han sources seem to refer to a divination system known under this name, The earliest source to describe it in detail is the Song monograph Taiyi jinjing shijing 太乙金鏡式經 (Board Canon of the Bronze Mirror of the Taiyi Deity). In looking at this issue from an historical perspective, Ho Peng Yoke’s work is most helpful. Pointing to the presence of the method within the Nan Qishu 南齊書 (Book of the Southern Qi), the author successfully reconstructs the arguments advanced by the historian Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (489-537), who used this technique for interpreting and explaining past events. Even in the absence of the Superior Origin, Ho Peng Yoke convincingly demonstrates that the Taiyi method used in this medieval work presents the same features as those fashionable under the Tang and the Song.

The concluding section of the part devoted to the Taiyi method is the highlight of this work. After first exploring Greek, Indian and Iranian influences on the development of Chinese divination practices—aspects that emerge from a text of uncertain date known as Zhang Guo xingzong 張果星宗 (Zhang Guo’s School of Astrology)—the author finally turns to the Ziwei doushu 紫微斗數 (Numbers According to Ziwei and the Plough) system of astrology, which remarkably combined some aspects of the Taiyi system with features of western astrology.

The second official divination board system of the Song era was the Qimen dunjia 奇門遁甲, “Strange Gates Escaping Techniques”, as Ho Peng Yoke renders it. He points out that early imperial China saw the rise of several divinatory practices classified under the key-term dunjia. In making the manipulation of a cosmic board the peculiarity of Song Qimen dunjia techniques, Ho Peng Yoke accepts the opinion of the Chinese scholar Yan Dunjie 蕭敦傑 and concludes that this technique was known by the eighth century. This cautious conclusion is mainly due to the lack of early written materials explaining technical procedures. It is however important to recall that, at least in one case, the historian Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643)—the scholar who wrote the bibliographic treatise of the Suishu 隋書 (Book of the Sui)—mentions a lost text that apparently combined the use of a board with a dunjia technique.6

In order to acquaint the reader with Song Qimen dunjia 奇門遁甲 techniques, Ho Peng Yoke chooses to open the discussion with a translation of the

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Huangdi yinfujing 黃帝陰符經 (The Canon of Yellow Emperor’s Secret Tal-lies), a short document in 602 characters later included in the Ming 明 (1368-1644) monograph Dunjia yanyi 遁甲演義 (Explanation of the Dunjia). Little is known about origin and authorship of this brief treatise, and Ho Peng Yoke is probably right in taking the eighth century as the lower limit and the eleventh as the upper for its composition. By referring to the official Song manual Jingyou dunjia fuyingjing 景祐遁甲符應經 (The Canon of Dunjia Responses from the Jingyou Reign [1034-1038]), the author manages to demonstrate that the prerequisite for understanding the Huangdi yinfujing 黃帝陰符經 is a full grasp of dunjia. Moreover, as the author convincingly argues, this short text was probably written for people who were already trained in this technique and who wished to memorize the most essential points of it.

A few aspects of the Qimen dunjia technique are well worth stressing. The Song board was composed of a movable heavenly disc (tianpan 天盤) and a stationary earthly board (dipan 地盤). Each disc was divided into eight sections containing the necessary data. On the dipan, the positions of the numbers of the magic square, the nine stars of the Plough, the Eight Trigrams, and the Eight Doors (bamen 八門)—one of the most important concepts of the method—were fixed. The positions of the stems and branches, on the contrary, depended on the fortnightly period in which the response was required. These data were usually classified in a yinyang-wuxing framework. These sets of data recurred on the tianpan as well. In this case, however, their position would vary in accordance with computations.

The Qimen dunjia, as it is illustrated in the Huangdi yinfujing, was a technique used for predicting military affairs, even if practitioners could take advantage of it for forecasting rain or other meteorological phenomena. For the casting of a prognostication concerning warfare, for instance, two elements were of basic importance. First, ascertaining the fortnightly period, day, and double-hour enabled the practitioner to examine the relationship between stems in the light of the wuxing theory. Second, the position of the Eight Doors, or of the eight Deception Gates (zhamen 詐門), in respect to the three stems yi 乙, bing 丙, and ding 丁—which were referred to as the Three Distinguished Ones (sangi 三竒)—could reveal then auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of certain military strategies.

The Liuren method, translated by Ho Peng Yoke as “the art of the six yang waters”, is the third practice of the san shi. Given the long history of this system, which was known since the Warring States period, as well as the impressive archaeological discoveries related to it, the author reasonably opts for focusing on the Song technique. In a discussion about the features and manipulation of the board, Ho Peng Yoke first presents a translation of a few significant excerpts from the Mengxi bitan 夢溪筆譯 (Dream Brook Essays), where the well-known Song scientist Shen Gu 沈括 (1031-1095) points out mistakes in tracking Jupiter and solar motion. These inaccuracies were seen as the cause of defi-
ciencies in the Liuren and calendrical computations. The choice of borrowing Shen Gua’s words proves to be advantageous from at least two viewpoints. First, the passages from the Mengxi bitan help the reader to immediately connect the Liuren technique to accurate astronomical observation. A correct forecasting based on this device presupposes the right choice of the fortnightly period and the correct identification of the Jupiter station. Second, Shen Gua’s discussion also works as a device for introducing the use of the Twelve Spirits (tian si’er chen 天十二辰) and the Twelve Divine Generals (shi’er shenjiang 十二神将). The first were the deities associated with the twelve lunar months of the year, which, as usual, were named after the twelve branches. The latter, also associated with the twelve dizhi, were the main characters of Liuren prognostication.

The dizhi appeared on both heavenly and earthy discs on the Liuren boards: those on the tianpan signify the lunation of the year, whereas those on the dipan refer to the double-hours of the day. In order to select the branch on the heavenly board, the practitioner used the day in which the response was required; the choice of the branch on the dipan, on the other hand, was completely ad hoc. The matching of the two discs had to work as the starting configuration for the manipulation of the board. As in the case of the Taiyi and of the Qimen dunjia, the Liuren practitioners could use this technique for forecasting weather or military affairs. Yet, the most noteworthy element is that this method was also used for the prediction of mundane matters.

Ho Peng Yoke devotes the last part of his work to presenting two important features of the Chinese mantic system. In the appendices, the author first reviews traditional Chinese astrology, and then observes what “astrology” means today in the Chinese-speaking world by dwelling on the Ziping 子平 method of fate calculation. He is well acquainted with both the topics in view of his previous works. Thus, the appendices are mainly intended to provide the reader with the most basic features of these arts. In the astrological section, he offers a concise and yet exhaustive description of the traditional Chinese sky, rightly stressing the political dimension of astrology. In the Ziping Fate-calculation section, he focuses on the possibilities the Chinese had to cast prognostications concerning the fate of individuals. This method, which may date back to the Tang, mainly worked with the birth-time of the inquirer, namely year, month, day, and daytime.

Considered as whole, Ho Peng Yoke’s Chinese Mathematical Astrology proves to be an interesting work that will fascinate a wide spectrum of readers, for it offers an insightful and detailed reconstruction without sacrificing concis-

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7 Besides the detailed presentation and discussion of astrology in the already mentioned The Astronomical Chapters of the Chin shu (op. cit. footnote 3), Ho Peng Yoke has discussed Ziping in his Cong li qi shu guandan lun ziping tuimingfa 從理氣數觀點論子平推命法 (The Ziping Fate-Calculation Method as seen from Li, Qi, and Shu) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988).
ness and clarity. While intrepid general readers are given the chance to see how ancient and modern Chinese thought about the possibility of predicting the future, scholars interested in problems concerning divination in ancient cultures will find it a useful source for approaching Chinese techniques. In particular, they will welcome the paragraph on Greek, Indian, and Iranian influences on Chinese mantic practices. Finally, looking at it from a sinological viewpoint, the book is recommended for two main reasons. First, it undoubtedly works as an enlightening portrayal of a part of imperial culture that, as the author stresses at the beginning, has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves. Second, besides depicting the meaning and working of the three boards, Ho Peng Yoke has managed to establish a sort of virtual dialogue between tradition and modernity by introducing the ways in which features of imperial techniques have evolved over the centuries up to our contemporary age. While noticing these merits and enjoying this stimulant reading, the sinologist will also find a few arguments that suffer from oversimplification. Aside from a few minor problems, it is, for instance, difficult to understand why Neo-Confucianism is presented as a theoretical pillar of divination. If it certainly played a role in the survival and evolution of mantic practices, its part in fueling them is debatable. It would perhaps have been more appropriate to dwell on the theory of “attraction and response” (ganying 感應) and to explore in more detail in which way the Three Powers (sancai 三才)—Heaven, Earth, and Man (tian di ren 天地人)—interact with each on the basis of earlier sources. A further problematic aspect is the system of references used in the book. The footnotes are, in fact, rarely very informative, whereas references to both primary and secondary sources are often given without page numbers, and, in some cases, are either confusing or erroneous. Moreover, many arguments presented in the text are not sufficiently documented since references to primary sources are often missing.

In the introductory section, for instance, Ho Peng Yoke presents the well-known binominals Hetu 河圖 (Diagram of the Yellow River) and Luoshu 洛書 (Script of the Luo River). On p. 20, the author says that king Wen 文 obtained the Hetu and drew the Eight Trigrams. Yet, at least from the Han onwards, Fuxi 伏羲 is explicitly credited with the creation of the bagua 八卦. See Hanshu 漢書 (Book of the Han) 27A:1315 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1964). This interpretation became the standard explanation in the following centuries. With regard to the structure of the Changes, the role of king Wen 文 was more ambiguous. Generally, he was credited with the composition of the short commentaries to the hexagrams (guaci 卦辭). See, for instance, Suishu 32:912. Zhongyi zhengyi 周易正義 (Correct Meanings of the Book of Changes) 8:90 (Shisanjing zhushu, Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji, 1998).

Most references are given without page numbers. See, for instance, p. 170, footnotes 26, 27, 28. At p. 169, footnote 7, the author refers to a study by Christopher Cullen written in 1986. Yet, the final bibliography does not list such a work. On p. 141, Ho Peng Yoke mentions the astrological handbook Xingjing 星經 (Classic of Stars) as a source of the fourth century BC. Given that references are missing, it is difficult to understand
Yet, if the reader is going to accept these minor limitations, he will undoubtedly enjoy a very informative and, above all, stimulating study.

which text is actually meant. In all probability, the author intended to refer to the handbook allegedly written by Shi Shen. Yet, it is questionable whether this lost book, which exists only in fragments, can be linked to the fourth century BC. Sun Xiaochun and Jacob Kistemaker, for instance, have argued that the stars described in several fragments conserved in medieval as well as Tang sources rather portray stars and asterisms of the first century BC. In this regard, see Sun Xiaochun, and Jacob Kistemaker, op. cit. (footnote 4), in particular pp. 68-69. In some cases, the addition of footnotes could have improved the clarity of the argumentation. On p. 150, for instance, the author paraphrases Jinshu 11:307-309 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1974) without indicating this. Hence, he attributes the calendrical system Santongli 三統曆 (Triple Concordance Calendar) to the Han historian Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 AD). This could easily puzzle the reader since Ho Peng Yoke had rightly credited the early Han scholar Liu Xin 劉歆 with the drafting of this system on p. 31.