Research Note

Translating 宿 *sukh/xiu and 舍 *lhah/she—‘lunar lodges’, or just plain ‘lodges’?*

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In pre-modern China, people who made observations of the positions of heavenly bodies, or who did calculations about those positions, frequently used as a reference frame a system that sliced the heavens into twenty-eight unequal divisions, ranging in width from over 30 degrees to around 2 degrees. Each of these divisions shared its name with a particular asterism, whose westernmost star marked the start of the division in question. This system is first fully evidenced in quantitative form in the Western Han, although the asterisms themselves are attested as a complete set in a depiction from the fifth century BC: see Wang Jianmin 王健民, Liang Zhu 梁柱 et al. (1979). The Chinese phrase most commonly used to refer to this system of celestial divisions and asterisms is èr shí bā xiù 二十八宿, meaning ‘the twenty-eight xiù’ (when in this essay I use modern standard pronunciation, I do so purely for convenience of reference). In some texts the word shè 舍 is used where we might expect to find xiù. I shall however turn to the question of shè after discussing the more commonly used term.

So how should one render xiù in English, assuming that one feels unable to avoid the problem by transliterating rather than translating, and simply writing ‘the twenty-eight xiù'? Several prominent western scholars have chosen to translate this word using terms such as ‘lunar mansions’.

*While I use tone markings for modern readings of Chinese words in my main text, I have refrained from using them in my title or in references to published work, since this may cause problems with bibliographical search functions. The asterisk before a reconstructed ancient form is a conventional indication that it is not attested by actual usage. I am grateful to the two anonymous referees for their suggestions for improving this essay, which I have gladly adopted.
or ‘lunar lodges’—a rendering which clearly suggests to the reader that the xiù have some intimate link with the moon, as opposed to the sun and five visible planets. I, on the other hand, have usually simply written ‘lodge’, partly because I have never been able to understand why the lunar connection was being assumed. (In using ‘lodge’ rather than ‘mansion’, I have fallen in with the trend noted in Major (1976), following the lead of Nathan Sivin.) Recent discussions with colleagues have prompted me to look into the question more carefully and to set out the reasons why I think a non-lunar rendering makes for a more accurate translation.

Oddly, I have only found a single example where a writer who uses a ‘lunar’ translation explains why this is done: that exception is Joseph Needham—see below. For that reason I suspect that the ‘lunar lodges’ rendering has remained current because each of its users has assumed that there must be a good reason for the habits of those they have copied.

Most of my own work has centred on the early imperial age, from the late third century BC to the early third century AD, from which comes the earliest extensive technical literature relating to the heavens, a literature that formed the basis of all later writing of that kind. It is this literature that I principally cite in this study. I have chosen to limit myself to what can be deduced from such texts, without relying on the opinions of commentators writing centuries later. In trying to establish the core meanings of words, I have also cited a few older texts that were regarded as canonical in the early imperial age.

This issue raised here is not a new one. The undoubted pioneer amongst European scholars in the field, Antoine Gaubil (1689-1759), who worked in Beijing for many years and was the first European to read the relevant Chinese literature intensively, simply rendered xiù (which he romanises as sieu) into French as “constellations”, without any specifically lunar reference - see for instance Gaubil, Antoine; ed. Souciet (1732: 80). While Gaubil states that the 28 xiù are also very often called ‘les 28. Che’ (‘the 28 shè 舍’) he distinguishes shè from xiù by claiming that shè ‘à la rigueur ... pris astronominiquement’ (‘strictly speaking ... taken astronomically’) does refer specifically to ‘le lieu de la Constellation où la ☽ se trouve tous les jours’ (‘the position of the constellation in which the moon is found each day’), or to the daily motion of the moon. What basis Gaubil might have had for claiming that shè does have lunar connections (while xiù apparently does not), we shall see further on in this essay. He does however seem to have confused the non-sinologue Ludwig Ideler a century later, who used him as his source for such matters. In his review of Chinese chronology, Ideler stated that the xiù were ‘ein durch den periodischen Umlauf des Mondes bestimmter Zodiakus von 28 Theilen’ (‘a ‘zodiac’ with 28 divisions defined by the periodic cycle of the moon’), and gave them the title ‘Mondstationen’ (‘Moon-stations’): Ideler, Ludwig (1839: 99). A few
decades later, Jean-Baptiste Biot criticised Ideler for having described the *xiù* as ‘Moon-stations’ claiming that the sinological researches of Stanislas Julien and Edouard Biot had not shown any reason for believing that the *xiù* had any particular lunar associations: Biot, Jean-Baptiste (1862: 113-114). The confusion about the lunar connections of *xiù* is thus of quite early date.

A similar problem seems to have arisen in nineteenth-century discussions of the *nakṣatras* system of ancient India. In early times this was a twenty-eight fold system of division of the heavens into unequal portions, each associated with an asterism which gave its name to that division. Later on, the term *nakṣatra* came to be used with reference to a twenty-seven fold system of equal divisions of the ecliptic with no particular connections with actual asterisms; see Yano, Michio (2003: 378). The earlier version of the system has been thought by some to have suggestive parallels with the Chinese *xiù*, and similar problems have arisen in translation; in the notes to his translation of the *Sūryasiddhānta*, Ebenezer Burgess gave his opinion as follows (Burgess, Ebenezer (1858: 351-352)):

… by those who have treated of them, [the *nakṣatras*] have always been styled “houses of the moon,” “moon-stations,” “lunar asterisms,” and the like. Nevertheless, these designations seem to be founded only in carelessness, or in misapprehension. In the Sūrya-Siddhānta, certainly, there is no hint to be discovered of any particular connection between them and the moon, and for this reason we have been careful never to translate the term *nakṣatra* by any other word than simply “asterism.” Nor does the case appear to have been otherwise from the beginning. No one of the general names for the asterisms (*nakṣatra*, *bha*, *dhishnya*) means literally anything more than “star” or “constellation”,… .

Given such problems as these, as well as the changing reference of the term, some scholars in the field have felt it may be better not to translate at all, but simply retain *nakṣatra* in transliteration (Yano Michio, private communication, March 2011). The problem of whether or not to use the qualifier ‘lunar’ thus disappears. In the Chinese case, however, it seems unlikely that western scholars will agree to cease looking for translations of *xiù*.

Of the three great cultures whose systems of sky-division have often been discussed together, it is only in relation to the Arabic system, the youngest of the three, that discord about the use of the ‘lunar’ epithet... 

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1 Here and in other direct quotations from earlier sources I preserve the original romanisation while using modern forms in my own writing and in editorial insertions.
seems not to have arisen amongst western scholars—and this is presumably because the twenty-eight constellations used by the Arabs are called, quite unambiguously manāzil al-qamar which simply means ‘houses of the moon’. Rashid, Rushdi and Morelon, Régis (1996: 3); Ku-nitzsch, Paul (1991: 374). Indeed, although I cannot pursue the subject at length here, it seems possible that the Arabic term is the source of the confusion about whether the systems found in India and China (which undoubtedly predate the manāzil al-qamar but have the same or similar numbers of constellations) should also be called ‘lunar’. It is worth noting that shortly after the passage quoted above Ideler comments ‘Das arabische Mondherbergen manazil el-kamar ist ganz analog gebildet’ (‘The Arabic term ‘moon lodgings’ is formed in an completely analogous manner.’). The Arabic houses of the moon eventually became part of the vocabulary of medieval European astrology: see for example Grant, Edward (1974: 454).

Returning to the question of how to translate xiù, there is a clear division amongst western sinologists between what may be called (choosing one’s words carefully) ‘lunarists’ and ‘non-lunarists’. Lunarists of the last half-century include several prominent names, such as, in chronological order, Joseph Needham in Needham, Joseph and Wang, Ling (1959), Edward Schafer in Schafer, Edward H. (1977), and most recently Nathan Sivin in Sivin, Nathan (2009). In my own work, such as Cullen, Christopher (1996) I have tended to be non-lunar in my rendering of xiù. I can cite two major scholars as being of my persuasion, though I seek comparison with the eminence of neither: Henri Maspero in Maspero, Henri (1929), and Zhu Kezhen in Chu, Coching (Zhu Kezhen) (1947). How can we decide whom to follow?

One issue I would like to eliminate straight away: the argument has been made that the fact that there are 28 xiù, rather than some other number, points to their being inextricably associated with the moon—see for instance Needham, Joseph and Wang, Ling (1959: 239). As a result, it is implied, the xiù deserve to be labelled as ‘lunar’ in any translation. This argument is technically unconvincing, as well as bearing little relevance to the issue of translation of the word xiù as used in early Chinese astronomical literature.

The core of the technical part of this argument seems to be that the moon has two natural cycles that are not far from 28 days in length:

(a) The sidereal month, the mean time taken for the moon to circuit the heavens from west to east and return to the same position relative to the stars. This period is about 27.33 days.

(b) The synodic month, the mean time taken for the moon to move from one conjunction with the sun to the next. Since the sun is also moving
Christopher Cullen: Translating *sukh/xiu and *lhah/she

from west to east, though slower than the moon, this period is a little longer than the sidereal month, at about 29.53 days.

According to Needham “The line of the mansions [xiù] was thus a graduated scale on which the motion of the moon could be measured, and probably their number was a compromise between the time-spans of its fundamental periods”. There are however obvious objections to this suggestion. Firstly, there is no evidence from the large number of relevant texts of early imperial date that the xiù were thought of as constituting a ‘graduated scale’ specially adapted for lunar motion in particular, any more than for other moving celestial bodies (see below for further discussion of this point). Secondly, even if the moon had a natural cycle of precisely 28 days, which it does not, the fact that the xiù are grossly unequal in width (ranging, as already mentioned from over thirty to as few as two or three degrees), makes it very unlikely that the number of xiù can have been chosen on the basis that the moon spent one day of a supposed 28-day cycle in each xiù. Some xiù would have been crossed in a few hours, some in between two and three days. This point, together with succinct criticisms of several other attempts to account for the features of the system of the xiù on the basis of hypotheses about its original purpose, is well put in Wu Shouxian 吳守賢 and Quan Hejun 全和鈞 (2008: 46).

More to the point, however, we are talking about how to translate the word xiù as used in early Chinese technical literature about the heavens to label the system of asterisms and corresponding celestial divisions under discussion. To do that in an evidence-based way, we do not make guesses about the remote origins of the system, but examine instead the usages of the word at the time the texts were written. Conjectures about why the precise number of xiù is what it is are not relevant to such a discussion—especially since the early texts we shall review give no evidence that any of their writers were aware of ideas such as that put forward above.

Firstly, let us look at the word in question from the philological point of view. The character 宿 does in fact stand for two words in standard modern Chinese, which we may romanise as xiù and sù. The first is the reading that refers to the celestial entities we are discussing (although as we shall see that is not its only sense), while the second has such senses as ‘to stay overnight, lodge overnight’. But if we are to ask how the character was read and understood in the period from which come the texts that interest us, a modern dictionary is no safe guide. We must turn instead to reference works that reconstruct ancient forms and usages, such as the recent work of Schuessler, which aims to record and justify those aspects of what he calls ‘Old Chinese’ (the language of texts and documents from c. 1250 BCE to the Han period) on which experts are in con-
Using Schuessler’s transcription, the two words 宿 and 休 written with the character 宿 in modern Chinese correspond to Old Chinese reconstructed forms as follows (Schuessler, Axel (2007: 483)):

宿: *suk
休: *sukh

Significantly, the second word is related to the first, according to Schuessler, in that *sukh is an ‘exopassive’ form of *suk; as he points out, such a formation may be a remnant of an early inflection. An ‘exopassive’ of a transitive verb, according to Schuessler, may be a noun meaning “the thing that has been verb-ed”, so that since *suk means ‘to lodge’, *sukh means ‘what is lodged in’—or, we may say, ‘a lodge’ (Schuessler, Axel (2007: 45)). It is fairly easy to find unambiguous ancient examples from texts that enable us to distinguish these two different words written with the same character, and as we shall see neither word has an essentially astronomical connection:

宿於莒郊。Zuǒ zuàn zhù shū  左传注疏, Duke Xiāng 23rd year, 35, 607a

He lodged in (*suk) the outskirts of Jǔ.

凡 国野之道十里有廬, 廬有飲食三十里有宿。Zhou lǐ zhù shū 周禮注疏, 13, 205b

On the roads through the open country of a state, there is a cabin every 10 li; a cabin has drink and food. There is a lodge (*sukh) every 30 li; a lodge has a road house.

Both the works quoted here are cited from the edition of Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1972 reprint of original of 1815). *Suk and *sukh, it is worth stressing, appear in these examples as ordinary, non-technical words. There is obviously no motivation to add the word ‘lunar’ in any translation into English. Since we shall shortly be looking at the use of both *suk and *sukh in a technical celestial context in early imperial times, it is important to stress that the ordinary use of both words continued into that period. All that is necessary to show that is to search the text of the Shǐ jì 史記.

This massive work was completed by the man who held the office of Grand Clerk (Tài shǐ 太史) under Emperor Wǔ 武: see Sima Qian 司馬遷 (completed c. 90 BC, punctuated edition 1959). Since the office of its author gave him responsibility for all celestial reckoning and divination, his usage will particularly important for the technical part of our enquiry. But most of his book uses ordinary language to record terrestrial events, for example:
Christopher Cullen: Translating 宿 *sukh/xiu and 舍 *lhah/she

宿留海上: Shi ji, 28, 1397
[The Emperor] delayed and lodged by the sea.

用事泰山，諸侯有朝宿地 Shi ji, 28, 1398
[When the Emperor] had business at Mount Tai, the feudal lords had their territories for court lodges [nearby].

But what happens when we review texts from Han times showing these two words in contexts connected with the heavens? We may as well start with an example from close to the beginning of the Christian era, in which both words occur:

所謂宿者日月五星之所宿也。Liù Xiāng 刘向,
Shuō Yuàn 説苑 18, 2a biàn wéi 辨物; Sì kù quán shù 四庫全書 edition

What are called ‘lodges’ are what the sun, moon and Five Stars (sc. ‘planets’) lodge in.

The word represented by the first 宿 is obviously the noun *sukh, and that represented by the second must be the verb *suk (since it is preceded by suǒ 所, which is likely to be followed by a verb). It is clear that for Liù Xiāng any of the seven moving heavenly body he names could ‘lodge’ *suk in a ‘lodge’ *sukh. The words here demand nothing more than their ordinary senses in translation, although clearly the ‘lodges’ in which the heavenly bodies ‘lodge’ are positions amongst the stars rather than way-stations by a terrestrial roadside. There is certainly no need to bring in the moon. Of course the moon can ‘lodge’ in a celestial ‘lodge’—but so can the sun and the planets, as the following examples from the Shi ji 史記 show.

昨暮月不宿乎 Shi ji, 67, 2216

[Confucius said] ‘Yesterday evening, did the moon not lodge in [the lodge] Net?’

以某星及日所宿，加以日時，用命其國也 Shi ji, 27, 1331

Based on what it [a solar eclipse] indicates, together with where the sun lodges, and adding in the time of day, these serve to designate the state [affected].

莊生閒時入見楚王，言「某星宿某，此則害於楚 Shi ji, 41, 1754
Zhuāng Shēng went in to see the King of Chū at a moment of leisure, and said ‘Such and such a star [i.e. planet] is lodging in such and such [a constellation], and this means harm for Chū.’

Once again we see that the sun, moon and planets are on equal terms so far as ‘lodging’ in a ‘lodge’ is concerned. Without citing every occurrence of 宿, I can say that if there is an example of Hàn usage of either of the two words this character can signify that justifies marking a general association with the moon in translation, I have not met it. And when this character does occur in a celestial context, whether it is to be read as *sukh or *suk, there is no reason to think that a reader of the period from which would have found these usages any more technical than the words ‘lodges’ or ‘to lodge’ appear to a modern English reader. There are of course several other examples of ordinary words that are given a metaphorical application to the heavens; perhaps the most obvious example is the common expression 日 有 食 之, *rì yǒu shí zhī* ‘the sun had something that ate it’, meaning that it was eclipsed.

I have already noted that shè 宿 is, as Gaubil pointed out, often used in a similar way to *xiù 宿— at times it seems to be a simple equivalent. I have tried to find some difference in the usages of the two words in connection with the heavens, but I cannot detect any clear pattern. Unlike 宿, shè has only one reading relevant to us, for which Schuessler reconstructs Old Chinese *lhah*, but its range of meanings includes those of both the words represented by 宿— ‘to lodge in’ or ‘a lodging place’. There is no trace of any remains of inflexion to differentiate the two senses, as there seems to have been with 宿. In what follows, I use the translation of ‘to abide in’ for shè as a verb, and ‘abode’ when it is a noun, in order to distinguish it from 宿.

For a start, we can easily evidence shè in the two senses given here, from early texts such as these two passages from the Zuò zhūzuàn:

閏月，良夫與大子入，舍於孔氏之外圃 Zuò zhūzuàn zhù shū 左傳注疏, Duke Ai 哀 15th year, 59, 1036a

In the intercalary month, Liang Fu and the Crown Prince went in, and abode in the outer garden of Kong Shi.

吳人藩衛之舍 Zuò zhūzuàn zhù shù 左傳注疏, Duke Ai 哀 12th year, 59, 1026b

The men of Wu fenced in the abode of the Marquis of Wei.
But our interest here is in shè in a celestial context. If we look for shè in one early Western Han text, the Huái nán zǐ, 淮南子, we can find (apart from ordinary terrestrial uses of the term) both of the celestial usages seen with *sukh/*suk:

其雄為歲星 斗 牛

Its male counterpart is the Year Star [Jupiter]; [which in that year] abides in Dipper and Ox.

*(Huái nán zǐ chapter 3, Chen Yiping 陈一平 (1994: 137))*

日為之反 三舍

The sun turned back three abodes for him.

*(Huái nán zǐ chapter 6, Chen Yiping 陈一平 (1994: 289))*

The same text can however switch between *sukh* and舍: chapter 3 of Huái nán zǐ, in which the heavens are discussed, has six examples of the use of *sukh* to represent the word 'a lodge' such as, for instance:

故十有二岁而行二十八宿。

So in twelve years [Jupiter] moves through 28 lodges.

*(Huái nán zǐ chapter 3, Chen Yiping 陈一平 (1994: 137))*

Here it is clear that *sukh* and舍 serve the same semantic purpose, although Huái nán zǐ, uses the latter about twice as often as the former. Both *sukh* and舍 are found in the Wǔ xīng zhān 五星占 manuscript on planetary divination excavated from a tomb closed in 168 BCE; undamaged sections of the document show two examples of the former and four of the latter—see the text in Liu Lexian 刘乐贤 (2004). We have already seen three examples of *sukh* used in a verbal sense from Shi jì see above), but further examples from the Shi jì monograph on celestial divination (Tiān guān shū 天官書, ‘Monograph on the celestial offices’) are not hard to find:

月蝕歲星，其居地，饑若亡 (Shi jì 27, 1332)

If the moon eclipses Jupiter, then the territory they lodge in will suffer famine or be destroyed.

It is also used in that monograph as a noun:

天則有列宿，地則有州域 (Shi jì 27, 1342)
In heaven there are the lodges in order, and on earth there are the provinces and regions.

We also have in the same text an example of both verbal and noun use of *shè*/*luah* in one sentence, as in the example for *宿* in the *Shuō yuàn* cited above:

\[
\text{五} \text{星} \text{皆} \text{从} \text{辰} \text{星} \text{而} \text{聚} \text{于} \text{一} \text{舍}, \text{其} \text{所} \text{舍} \text{之} \text{国} \text{可以} \text{法} \text{致} \text{天} \text{下} (\text{Shǐ} \text{ji}, 27, 1328)
\]

When the Five Planets follow Mercury to gather in one abode, then the state in [the celestial region corresponding to] which they abide may take control of the Empire by stratagem.

Another text that uses both *xiù* and *shè* is the *Zhōu bì 周髀*. This is not an easy text to date (see Cullen, Christopher (1996: 148-156)), though it probably took shape by the early Eastern Han at the latest. I mention it here only because although it uses *xiù* in its normal, general sense, it only uses *shè* in a sequence of calculations about how far the moon falls short of its ‘former abode’ *gù shè 故舍* after certain cyclical calendrical periods have elapsed: Cullen, Christopher (1996: 197-200). It seems possible, though there is no way of proving it, that this feature of a very well-known astronomical text (traditionally supposed to have been of great antiquity) may have given Gaubil his idea that *shè* was particularly linked with the moon—a belief for which there seems to be no other evidence.

By the time we move into the Eastern Han, there are signs that the use of *舍* was giving place to *宿* in technical contexts referring to the heavens. In the following example Wáng Chóng 王充 still associates the two terms:

\[
\text{又} \text{以} \text{二} \text{十八} \text{星} \text{效} \text{之}, \text{二} \text{十八} \text{宿} \text{为} \text{日} \text{月} \text{舍}, \text{其} \text{地} \text{有} \text{邮亭} \text{为} \text{长吏} \text{廨}, \text{邮亭著} \text{地} \text{亦} \text{如} \text{星} \text{舍} \text{著} \text{天} \text{也} . \quad (\text{Lùn héng 論衡 chapter 11, section 31, Yang Baozhong 楊寶忠 (1999: 353)})
\]

Taking the twenty-eight *xiù* as a comparison, the twenty-eight *xiù* are the *shè* of the sun and moon, just on earth there are post-stations that serve as the offices of local administrators. The post-stations are laid out on earth, while on the other hand the stellar *shè* are laid out on heaven.

It does seem however that for Wáng Chóng *shè* is a common word from the terrestrial world used to explain what the *xiù* means in a celestial context, rather than simply an alternative term referring to the heavens.
In the technical monographs of the 后汉书 后, which frequently quote from Eastern 漢 documents, 吳 does not appear at all in a celestial context. Indeed, in the whole of the text I find only a single example, which is not from one of the monographs:

歲星不吳 Fishing. (Hou Han shu, 30a, 1044)

Jupiter did not abide in [the lodges] Base and Chamber.

Since the letter from which this sentence is taken, and which is quoted in the text of this chapter, was purportedly composed about 20 AD, it seems that this example is more likely to have reflected the usage of the first half of the dynasty.

To sum up the situation, it seems that we can reasonably adopt the following positions:

1. The two words represented by the character 宿, *suk/sù and *sukh/xiù, are well attested from ancient texts with the common meanings ‘to lodge in’ and ‘lodging place / a lodge’ respectively. In the context of references to a system for mapping the motion of the sun, moon and planets, the common English meanings can reasonably be used as translations without modification, though of course with the consciousness that the application is metaphorical.

2. The word 舍 *lhah/she is attested from texts of the same period as including the same meanings as both 宿 *suk/sù and 宿 *sukh/xiù. Since it is however a different word, then in order to give the non-sinological reader warning of this it seems advisable to use different English words to render it, rather than simple repeating ‘to lodge’ and ‘a lodge’. I suggest that one might use ‘to abide and ‘an abode’—but of course other choices are possible, such as ‘to dwell’ or ‘a dwelling’.

3. The instances of 宿 *suk/sù, 宿 *sukh/xiù and 舍 *lhah/she in technical literature of the early imperial age do not indicate that any of these terms have a specifically lunar reference, or are thought by anybody writing in that period to have such a reference. There is therefore no reason to continue using such terms as ‘lunar lodges’ or ‘lunar mansions’ as translations for these words, and since such translations inevitably give the reader a false impression that there is reason to claim a lunar connection, they should be discontinued.
References


