

Sun, Moon & Universe

Decoding Celestial Symbols from Ancient China

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

The two oldest Chinese models of the Universe were known respectively as *kāi tiān* (开天 'heaven as cover') and *hūn tiān* (昏天 'complete heaven'). In the first, Heaven (along with its stars, sun and moon) was understood to be covering Earth like an umbrella. Earth was believed to be flat (or perhaps slightly domed) and rotating under its heavenly cover once daily around an imaginary axis. Hence, the sun and moon were thought to be always present, just moving in and out of mankind's vision.

This theory was eventually abandoned (although many Chinese believed the world was flat well into the 17th century) in favour of the *hūn tiān* theory that described Earth as an 'egg yolk' floating inside a spherical 'egg shell' Heaven. This theory had the advantage of positioning the sun, moon and stars *around* the Earth, appearing and disappearing as the Earth (or heavens) rotated.

The Chinese then divided this celestial sphere (starting from the north celestial pole) into 28 unequal segments known as *xiù* (宿), usually translated as 'lodges' or 'lunar mansions'. (Think of an orange consisting of 28 segments of different thicknesses.) From here on, the topic of ancient Chinese astronomical systems becomes almost impossibly murky. What remains of interest is the important role both the sun and the moon held in Chinese imagery and cosmogony (the study of the origin and evolution of the Universe).

The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) has a Qianlong-period emperor's robe (currently in storage) with the 12 imperial symbols of authority including a red circle with a three-legged bird (symbolising the sun) on the wearer's left shoulder, and a white circle with a rabbit (symbolising the moon) on the right. Ravens (attached to the story of archer Hòu Yì who shoots down 9 of the ten ravens/suns) and roosters (the sole bird in the Chinese lunar calendar)

both became associated with the sun in Chinese art during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE—220 CE), while rabbits became associated with the moon. The sun and moon were common motifs in Han art, often represented by a disc and a crescent (just as they still are on the finials of Tibetan *chorten* or stupas) or in more anthropomorphic forms. These human-like representations may well have evolved from Fuxi

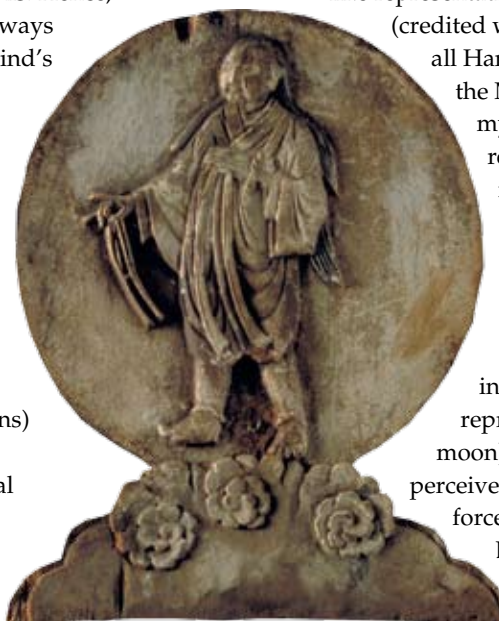
(credited with being the original ancestor of all Han Chinese) and Nuwa (his wife and the Mother of All Mankind in Chinese mythology) who, when shown together, represent the first couple. A tomb rubbing of the intertwined figures in the Szechuan Provincial Museum shows Nuwa supporting the moon (with a hare) in her right hand and Fuxi holding the sun (with a bird) in his left.

Two wooden plaques on display in ACM depict anthropomorphic representations of *yin* (representing the moon) and *yang* (representing the sun), perceived by Daoists as 'primordial cosmic forces.' These plaques are from the Liao Dynasty (907—1125 CE) and were probably part of a stellar tomb configuration. I recently saw another anthropomorphic *yin-yang* (almost the mirror image of the one at ACM) in the Balinyouqi Museum in Inner Mongolia. The ceilings of ancient tombs were often decorated with representations of the 28 lunar mansions and symbols of the sun and moon.

On the same trip, I also found a painting of a three-legged raven (with a rooster-like tail) excavated from a Xixia tomb. How interesting that two non-Chinese tribes of the steppe adopted these very Chinese symbols, enshrining them with their dead so they would be properly oriented in the afterlife.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch is a frequent FOM lecturer and has just returned from leading the FOM Silk Road trip.

Photos courtesy of the author, unless otherwise noted



Yang zodiac sign, wood, N. China, ACM Collection



L: Queen Mother of West with hare and toad in the moon; R: King Father of East with bird in sun, Beilin Museum, Xi'an



Xixia three-legged bird on plank



Liao Dynasty wooden tomb carving, Balinyouqi Museum, Inner Mongolia