

# Reminiscing the Tung Shu

Chinese emperors & farmers long looked to this ancient predictor

By El Chen

The Chinese Lunar New Year marks the beginning of a new calendar year for all Chinese people. Also known as the *Spring Festival*, it is the time of year when Chinese families gather for a reunion.

Symbolism is the hallmark of this festivity. Every object, shape, colour, word and number considered symbolically inauspicious (by sight or sound) is strictly taboo. The number 4, which is a homophone for 'death', is not uttered. Black and white colours are shunned. By contrast, auspicious symbols are abundantly displayed: red scrolls printed with propitious sayings. Something long regarded as indispensable in Chinese homes, but now almost redundant in Singapore, is the annual purchase and display of the Chinese Almanac, more commonly known as the *Tung Shu*.

The *Tung Shu*, or more particularly, the section containing the lunar calendar, is believed to have originated some 4,000 years ago, in the time of the Yellow Emperor, whose influences on ancient Chinese civilisation were extensive. For instance, *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*, the oldest extant classic of Chinese traditional medicine, contains references to him. According to the *Book of History*, one of the five Chinese Classics that ancient Confucian scholars had to ruminate on in preparation for the Imperial Examinations, the lunar calendar was first published in 2256 BCE during the reign of the virtuous Emperor Yao. Proponents of Daoism take a different view, however. They claim an earlier date of origin and give credit to Fu Xi, one of the Three Pure Ones (the three main Daoist deities produced by the *yin* and *yang*).

No matter when the *Tung Shu* was first created, for thousands of years since the fall of the Shang Dynasty (circa 1600 – 1046 BCE), Chinese emperors legitimised their right to rule based on the ideology of the Mandate of Heaven. Consequently, every Chinese emperor was perceived as the proverbial Son of Heaven. In a predominantly agrarian society that depended on good crops, the emperor's sacred duty was to intercede with Heaven on behalf of his subjects. The calendar was diligently compiled by his astrologers, who studied the positions of the sun and moon as well as the movements of the stars and constellations. Based on their



observations, they constructed yearly calendars containing esoteric interpretations of the lunar year, including a selection of auspicious and inauspicious dates.

As a repository of invaluable data about the weather and natural forces, the calendar became highly revered by the masses, who affectionately referred to it as the *Farmer's Calendar*. Early on, it acquired the preface of a yearly *Spring Ox Chart* with an illustration of a young cowherd leading his bovine helper. By looking at the picture, illiterate peasants could decipher some basic weather forecasts for the year ahead. For example, if the cowherd wore shoes, plenty of rain was expected. If he had bare feet, then it would likely be a dry year. If he wore his straw hat, it would be a very sunny year, but if his hat hung down his back it would be a cool year.

Much of the *Tung Shu's* 'mojo' is enshrined in Chinese tradition. It is considered to be a spiritually powerful object and owning a copy is believed to bring blessings and good fortune. Despite the abrupt end to royal patronage in 1911, the *Tung Shu* continues to retain its relevance to the Chinese masses.

In the '60s and '70s, the *Tung Shu* was still displayed above the doorways of many Chinese homes in Singapore. On the eve of the Lunar New Year, the old *Tung Shu* would be taken down and incinerated to release its powers back to Heaven and the new one would be hung – a tradition that has been gradually disappearing since the '80s, kept alive only by the older generation. The *Tung Shu* includes chapters on how to pray for good fortune and how to interpret dreams, divinations, fortune-telling, Confucian ideology, geomancy, physiognomy, palmistry, 100 Chinese surnames... There is even a section on the oft-cited *24 Canons of Filial Piety*, complete with illustrations.

In Singapore, look for this extraordinary tome in any Chinese incense shop.

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