

Book Review



Michio Yano. *Esoteric Buddhist Astrology: Japanese Sukuyōdō & Indian Astrology*.

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Esoteric Buddhist Astrology: Japanese Sukuyōdō & Indian Astrology (hereafter *Esoteric Buddhist Astrology*) is a translation of Yano Michio's 矢野道雄 Japanese work titled *Mikkyō senseijutsu: Sukuyōdō to Indo senseijutsu* 密教占星術: 宿曜道とインド占星術. The translation was produced by Bill M. Mak. This book was originally published in Japan in 1986 and became widely read, which prompted Yano to produce a revised version in 2013. The revised edition includes the content of the earlier work with some corrections, as well as additional appended notes.

Esoteric Buddhist Astrology provides a substantial overview of the introduction of foreign astrology and astronomy into medieval East Asia, with a particular focus on Japan. Buddhism was the primary—although not exclusive—intermediary for the transmission of such knowledge from the fourth to ninth centuries in China. This book also provides relevant discussions on precedents in Mesopotamia, India, and the Hellenistic world.

The two primary sources studied in this book are the *Xiuyao jing* 宿曜經 and the *Qiyao rangzai jue* 七曜攘災決, which are major works of astrology in Classical Chinese dating to the eighth and ninth centuries respectively. Yano exercises great philological rigour when dealing with these works, and in particular demonstrates that the former must be understood via two recensions: the Japanese line, which best reflects the original Chinese text. This line is traced back to the Japanese monks who returned with copies during the ninth century. The other recension is the mainland or continental line, which post-dates the Japanese line and shows many signs of revision having occurred on the Asian mainland at some later date. Yano also provides ample details concerning mathematical elements in the subject at hand. Scholars of Buddhism, astrology, and astronomy will therefore find something of value in this work.

I myself have often used Yano's book since 2014 when I commenced my dissertation research. Yano produced a valuable study on a topic that has been unfortunately neglected within Buddhist Studies and more broadly in Asian Studies. The translation of this classic study is therefore highly welcome. It must be stated, however, that much work has been done on the topic of Buddhist astrology and more broadly astrology in East Asia since 1986, and even after 2013, resulting in some things that will inevitably be reconsidered. The present review will discuss the important content of the book at hand while offering some corrections, in addition to introducing other relevant studies which readers might consult.

First, with respect to Mak's translation, I must declare that I was one of the proofreaders of the early drafts, but I was not responsible for final copyediting. The final draft, unfortunately, ought to have been more rigorously checked for errors before being sent to the printer.

For instance, on p. 3 we see traditional *jing* 經 and in fn. 2 the Japanese *kyō* 經 (the former is traditional or *fantizi* 繁體字, while the latter is a simplified form or *jōyō kanji* 常用漢字). On p. 27 we see *Zhenxing* 鎮星 (an ancient Chinese name for Saturn) romanized as *Zhuensing*. On p. 40, the reader is referred to fig. 25, but the referent is actually fig. 22(9) on p. 41. On p. 50, the character 軫 is romanized as *zhên*, but the diacritic is wrong. It is supposed to be *zhěn*. Elsewhere in the work, diacritical marks are not used. Mak translates *dan* 旦 as "midnight" on p. 56, but this character clearly refers to dawn. He translates the expression *tang yun* 唐云 as "known in the Tang [Period] as ..." (p. 94), but this refers to the Chinese language in contrast to any periodization (Chinese authors during the eighth century did not write about themselves being in the "Tang Period"). Another problematic translation is "luminary" for *yao* 曜 throughout the book. This is a literal translation of a term in Chinese that simply means planet, although it is not fatal to the translation. As a technical term, I think "planet" is more scholarly and precise.

Despite these errors, I would say that overall the quality of the translation into English from Japanese is generally acceptable, and Mak has indeed done a service by making Yano's classic study available in English for the first time.

Turning to the content of the work, Yano's work is excellent and clearly articulated, but here we might offer some critical remarks.

The historical figure of foremost importance discussed in Yano's book is the monk Amoghavajra or Bukong 不空 (705–774). Yano (pp. 9–10) suggests that "Amoghavajra taught the text [*Xiuyao jing*] orally to a certain audience based on his knowledge of Indian astrology. At that time, the language would have been partly Sanskrit and partly Chinese." I am of the opinion, however, that Amoghavajra and his team compiled the *Xiuyao jing* from disparate sources.

My reasoning for this is that the astrology of the text is clearly non-Buddhist and pieced together from diverse sources.¹ There also already existed texts on “Brahmanical” (i.e., Indian) astrology that had been translated during the preceding Sui dynasty (581–618), including one title that might have been the famous and quite lengthy *Gārgya-jyotiṣa*.² The diverse range of practices covered by *Xiuyao jing*, and the absence of any other astrological work attributed to Amoghavajra in Buddhist catalogs, also leads me to think that Amoghavajra did not possess sufficient expertise in astrology so as to be able to orally teach this entire work.

Yano provides a comprehensive overview of the astrological content of the *Xiuyao jing*. One interesting astrological technique found therein described by Yano (pp. 74–77) is the “Secret Nakṣatras of the Three Nines” (*san jiu mi xiu* 三九秘宿). As he points out, the technical terms in this doctrine could be found in the *Brhadvyātrā* and Purāṇic literature. Recent work has identified these terms in Siddham (Sanskrit) and Chinese characters within a document titled *Goma rodan yō* 護摩爐壇樣, which is of Chinese origin, but was brought to Japan in 839.³ This document is important in the history of East Asian astrology, and we are only beginning to excavate it. There are indeed works from China and Japan, ranging in period from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries, that we can utilize as a corpus of texts for the purposes of researching the development of astrology in East Asia. Yano’s book provides a good foundation in this direction.

Further discussion of Amoghavajra’s Buddhist background and also the reasons underlying the advent of “Esoteric Buddhist astrology” in China would have been desirable, but this is not a fatal flaw in the book. For instance, one text of importance that antedates the *Xiuyao jing*, but is not discussed by Yano, is the commentary on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi*, an important and early text on Mantrayāna or Esoteric Buddhism. The commentary, titled *Dari jing shu* 大日經疏, was penned by the Chinese monk Yixing 一行 (673–727) based in large part upon the oral testimony of the Indian monk Śubhakarasiṃha 善無畏 (637–735). The commentary explains the astrological factors that must be taken into consideration when determining an auspicious time to produce the *maṇḍala* or sacred ritual space, which includes factors such as *pakṣas*, *tithis*,

- 1 Jeffrey Kotyk, “Can Monks Practice Astrology? Astrology and the Vinaya in China,” in *Rules of Engagement: Medieval Traditions of Buddhist Monastic Regulation*, ed. Susan Andrews, Jinhua Chen, and Cuilan Liu (Bochum: projekt verlag, 2017), 509–513.
- 2 Kotyk, “Buddhist Astrology and Astral Magic in the Tang Dynasty” (doctoral dissertation, Leiden University, 2017), 66–67.
- 3 Jeffrey Kotyk, “The Sinicization of Indo-Iranian Astrology in Medieval China,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 282 (2018): 14–15.

nakṣatras, twelve zodiac signs, thirty *muhūrtas*, and the seven-day week. This discussion includes some discussion of calendrical science within a Chinese context, which no doubt stems from Yixing's hand. This material is valuable in discussing the evolution of foreign astrology in China, but it also helps to explain why Amoghavajra produced the *Xiuyao jing*. Specifically, there was a need for such a manual of authoritative Buddhist astrology, since the commentary to the *Vairocanaḥhisambodhi* only gave an overview of Indian astrology without furnishing sufficient details.⁴

Esoteric Buddhist Astrology discusses the astrology and scientific astronomy of the *Qiyao rangzai jue*. His explanations are clear and accurate, and he has done a great service in unpacking astronomical concepts that many in Asian Studies might find unfamiliar. Several of his important findings—such as identifying Ketu in this text as the lunar apogee—were presented in an earlier paper in English, which is an important read for anyone researching astrology in East Asia.⁵ One should also consult the studies of Yabuuchi Kiyoshi 藪内清 (see bibliography), a historian of science, since they deal with works such as the *Qiyao rangzai jue* and preceded Yano's book.

There are some problematic elements in Yano's study on the *Qiyao rangzai jue* in *Esoteric Buddhist Astrology*. Yano makes contradictory statements regarding the origin of the text at hand. Yano explains on p. 123 that this text “may be described as an amalgamation of Indian astrology and Chinese astronomy.” However, on p. 152, he writes, “The two books *Qiyao rangzai jue* and Futian li, which were probably of Central Asian origin, found a common home in the Japanese astrological school of Sukuyōdō.” The original Japanese in Yano's book (p. 197) gives *seiiki kigen* 西域起源, which indeed approximates what we call Central Asia in English, but the *Qiyao rangzai jue* most certainly was produced in China, since the ephemerides utilize Chinese observational astronomy. The text does, however, utilize material that had been translated into Chinese from Indian and Iranian sources, and it even states as much. For instance, in its explanation of the lunar nodes (Rāhu and Ketu), the text mentions a certain Indian figure named Popi Mobu 婆毘磨步, which appears to be garbled or a scribal error. It seems that the original name was Popiyan 婆毗衍 (Bhāvya?), who is credited with a title *Jiu yaoxing luo licheng li* 九曜星羅立成歷 (*Ephemerides for the Nine Planets and Rāhu*), which is listed in the

4 Jeffrey Kotyk, “Early Tantric Hemerology in Chinese Buddhism: Timing of Rituals According to Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing,” *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 13 (2018): 1–29.

5 Yano Michio, “The *Chi'yao jang-tsai-chueh* and its Ephemerides,” *Centaurus* 29, no. 1 (1986): 28–35.

Song-era *Tong zhi* 通志.⁶ The *Qiyao rangzai jue* was, in fact, pieced together from multiple components, but only some of these parts were foreign materials in Chinese translation. It is important to resolve any ambiguity regarding the origin of this work, since it represents a critical phase in the history of Chinese astronomy when the lunar nodes were becoming thoroughly understood and analyzed through foreign source materials.

Esoteric Buddhist Astrology does not focus on the astral magic that we see in the *Qiyao rangzai jue*, which is a deficiency given that the book concerns Esoteric Buddhism. Such magic and its accompanying iconography are important elements in the history of astrology, since such magic was arguably a response to unfavorable prognostications, while at the same time interest in astral magic only fostered greater skill in horoscopy and the astronomical techniques required to cast horoscopes. There is a fragmentary manual of Daoist astral magic titled *Chengxing lingtai miyao jing* 秤星靈臺祕要經, written within a few decades after 894–898 (the Qianning 乾寧 era), that shares many parallels with the *Qiyao rangzai jue*. This Daoist work also cites a certain *Jiuzhi-jing* 九執經 (**Navagraha-sūtra*), which would have been a source text that the author of the Buddhist *Qiyao rangzai jue* also utilized.⁷ This point highlights the need to consult a diverse range of sources from different textual corpuses, a task that is rendered easier through the mass digitization of Classical Chinese texts. It is also necessary to recognize that Buddhists and Daoists were both interested in the same types of astrology and astral magic.

Moving on, it must be noted that the use of the term Sukuyōdō 宿曜道 is problematic at times in Yano's study. There is a modern tendency in Japan to conflate the *Xiuyao jing* (Jpn. *Sukuyō kyō*) with Sukuyōdō. It is assumed that Sukuyōdō must be based upon the *Sukuyō kyō* (the Japanese rendering of *Xiuyao jing*), which was brought to Japan by Kūkai 空海 (774–835) in 806. It is often thought in the popular imagination that Sukuyōdō commences with Kūkai, the founder of Japanese Shingon. Sukuyōdō, however, actually refers to a lineage of Japanese Buddhist astrologer monks that appear starting around the late tenth century. These monks hailed from various lineages, including but certainly not limited to Shingon. The first Sukuyōshi 宿曜師 listed in the *Nichū reki* 二中歴 from the Kamakura era is Hōzō 法藏 (905–969). The Japanese author Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (c.973–c.1014) in her novel *Genji monogatari*

6 Kotyk, "The Sinicization of Indo-Iranian Astrology in Medieval China," 72.

7 See my study on astrological iconography in Tang Chinese sources. Jeffrey Kotyk, "Astrological Iconography of Planetary Deities in Tang China: Near Eastern and Indian Icons in Chinese Buddhism," *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 30 (2017): 33–88. For icons in Japanese use, see Takeda Kazuaki, *Hoshi mandara no kenkyū* 星曼荼羅の研究 (Kyōto: Hōzōkan, 1995).

源氏物語 (*Tale of Genji*) mentions Sukuyō in chapters one and fourteen, which marks one of the earliest datable references to Sukuyō in popular literature, close to two centuries after Kūkai's death. To suggest that Kūkai was the founder of Sukuyōdō is anachronistic, and moreover not supported by the historical record, since medieval Japanese records identified Hōzō as the founder. Momo Hiroyuki 桃裕行, in fact, already explained in 1975 that Sukuyōdō actually relied primarily upon the *Duli yusi jing* 都利聿斯經, a manual of horosocopy translated into Chinese around the year 800, rather than the *Xiuyao jing*.⁸

The popular association of Sukuyōdō with Kūkai actually develops during the modern period, a time when the *Xiuyao jing* was being studied outside ecclesiastical contexts. Wakita Bunshō in 1897 produced a typeset edition of the Japanese recension of the *Xiuyao jing* in two volumes, titled *Sukuyō kyō shukusatsu* 宿曜經縮刷. Wakahara Keigyō 若原敬經 in 1908 produced the *Shukuyōgyō uranai shinden* 宿曜經占真傳, which is the *Xiuyao jing* with accompanying annotation and commentary in Japanese. The Japanese Buddhist canon, *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, which was compiled between 1924–1934, includes the mainland recension of the *Xiuyao jing* as text #1299. It appears that the popularized modern “Sukuyō” as a community of practitioners, which also identifies itself as Sukuyōdō, started with Komine Yumiko, who wrote a manual of astrology based on the *Xiuyao jing*, titled *Sukuyō kyō nijūshichi suku senseihō* 宿曜經二十七宿占星法 in 1982. Subsequent decades saw numerous titles that often emphasize the role of Kūkai in bringing the *Xiuyao jing* to Japan (see Haneda and Uezumi as recent examples). Further research on the popular astrology community of “Sukuyōdō” is necessary at present, especially given its prominence on the Japanese marketplace. There are dozens of book titles available on the subject, as well as numerous websites.

With respect to academic studies of the medieval lineage of Sukuyōdō, those in Japanese include excellent papers and monographs by Momo, Yamashita, Toda, Ujiro, and Akazawa (see bibliography below). My own study on Sukuyōdō digests the findings of these scholars and builds upon them.⁹ Buhrman produced a dissertation on the topics of astronomy and astrology in medieval Japan.¹⁰

8 Momo Hiroyuki 桃裕行, “Sukuyōdō to sukuyō kanmon” 宿曜道と宿曜勘文, *Risshō shigaku* 立正史學 39 (1975): 1, 17.

9 Jeffrey Kotyk, “Japanese Buddhist Astrology and Astral Magic: Mikkyō and Sukuyōdō,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 45, no. 1 (2018): 37–86.

10 Kristina M. Buhrman, “The Stars and the State: Astronomy, Astrology, and the Politics of Natural Knowledge in Early Medieval Japan,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 2012).

With respect to the aforementioned *Duli yusi jing*, Yano (pp. 119–121) suggested that this work, which is only extant in fragments, was a translation of Ptolemy, but Mak demonstrated that this hypothesis must be reconsidered, in light of the fact that the evidence points to the material at hand being connected to Dorotheus of Sidon.¹¹ My dissertation built atop Mak's study and pointed out further parallels between fragments Dorotheus in the Daoist *Lingtai jing* 靈臺經.¹² Further discussion concerning Dorothean horoscopy in East Asia is found in my paper in *Sino-Platonic Papers*.¹³

Another important text covered in Yano's study (pp. 20–21) is the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*. The earliest Chinese translation of this text is by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護, titled *Shetoujian Taizi ershiba xiu jing* 舍頭諫太子二十八宿經 (T 1301), which was translated between 307–313 (the Yongjia 永嘉 era). The later translation was titled **Mātāṅga-sūtra* or *Modengjia jing* 摩登伽經 (T 1300), which was likely produced by Guṇabhadra 求那跋陀羅 (394–468) of the Liu-Song period (420–479). Yano, however, states that the *Modengjia jing* was translated by Zhu Lüyan 竺律炎 and Zhi Qian 支謙 during the Wu period between 222–280, which is a traditional attribution and one found in the Taishō canon. Hayashiya in 1945 contested this attribution and dating, pointing out that the translation style of the Chinese postdates the era of the eminent translator monk Kumārajīva (344–413), arguing for a date around the late fifth century.¹⁴ I agree with this, and additional evidence from catalogs confirms that Guṇabhadra was the likely translator.¹⁵ Recent research on this text in Sanskrit extends to a valuable fragmentary manuscript from Central Asia dating from around the fourth century, now held at the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SI 1942).¹⁶

The long history of Indian astrology is a topic that is enjoying increasing attention since Yano produced his study. I would point scholars to the studies of Martin Gansten (see bibliography) for a solid overview. A recent critical

11 Bill M. Mak, "Yusi Jing: A Treatise of 'Western' Astral Science in Chinese and Its Versified Version *Xitian yusi jing*," *SCIAMVS* 15 (2014): 105–169.

12 Kotyk, "Buddhist Astrology and Astral Magic in the Tang Dynasty," 124–139.

13 Kotyk, "The Sinicization of Indo-Iranian Astrology in Medieval China," 30–50.

14 Hayashiya Tomojiro 林屋友次郎, *Iyaku kyōrui no kenkyū* 異譯經類の研究 (Tōkyō: Tōyō Bunko, 1945), 541.

15 Jeffrey Kotyk, "Iranian Elements in Late-Tang Buddhist Astrology," *Asia Major* 30, no. 1 (2017): 28.

16 Miyazaki Tensho et al., "The *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* from Central Asia," in *The St. Petersburg Sanskrit Fragments (StPSF): Buddhist Manuscripts from Central Asia*, ed. Seishi Karashima and Margarita I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, vol. 1 (Tōkyō: Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences; International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2015).

development was Mak's reconsideration of the dating of the *Yavanajātaka*, a major work blending Hellenistic and Indian astrological elements. Yano briefly refers to this important study (pp. 42–43). Until recently it was widely held on the basis of Pingree's conclusions that in the year 149/150, an Alexandrian text on Hellenistic astrology, which was composed in Egypt sometime shortly after 100 CE, was translated into Sanskrit prose by a certain Yavaneśvara in western India. This was later apparently preserved as the *Yavanajātaka*, composed by Rāja Sphujidhvaja in 269–270 during the Reign of Rudrasena II (r. c. 255–276). Mak disputed this based upon manuscript evidence, which is something in 2013 that Yano notes. Mak suggests the *Yavanajātaka* "is dated some time after 22 CE and could be as late as the early seventh century ..." ¹⁷

Yano's study points out the Sogdian and Persian loanwords in the *Xiuyao jing* (p. 80), and parallels with Iranian names of the Twelve Places in the *Qiyao rangzai jue* (p. 36). These point to Iranian elements in East Asian astrology. The existence of such elements is becoming increasingly recognized as a result of recent research, especially my own work and that of Mak.¹⁸ Research into Iranian astrology itself is a painstaking process, given the paucity of primary sources in Middle Persian. One of the chief sources available to us which conveys information is the Zoroastrian *Bundahišn*. The first study on this topic was done by MacKenzie.¹⁹ Further research was recently done by Raffaelli.²⁰ The role of astrology within ancient Iranian society is surveyed by Panaino, one of the foremost authorities in Iranian Studies today.²¹ These studies are indispensable when excavating horoscopic literature in Chinese.

Yano provides a basic overview of the origins of horoscopy (pp. 28–45). The origin and development of horoscopy during Antiquity has become a rapidly developing field of inquiry, thanks to the study and translation of texts not only from Greek, but also Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit, and Persian. Tester produced an

17 Bill M. Mak, "The Date and Nature of Sphujidhvaja's *Yavanajātaka* Reconsidered in the Light of Some Newly Discovered Materials," *History of Science in South Asia* 1 (2013): 17. For Pingree's conclusions, see David Pingree, *The "Yavanajātaka" of Sphujidhvaja* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

18 Bill M. Mak, "The Transmission of Astral Science from India to East Asia: The Central Asian Connection," *Historia Scientiarum* 24, no. 2 (2015): 59–75; Kotyk, "Iranian Elements in Late-Tang Buddhist Astrology," 25–58.

19 D. N. MacKenzie, "Zoroastrian Astrology in the *Bundahišn*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 27, no. 3 (1964): 511–529.

20 Enrico G. Raffaelli, "Astrology and Religion in the Zoroastrian Pahlavi Texts," *Journal Asiatique* 305, no. 2 (2017): 171–190.

21 Antonio Panaino, "Cosmologies and Astrology," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Strausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 235–257.

earlier but quite reliable introduction to the history of horoscopy.²² Another dated but still worthwhile read is Pingree's *From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bīkāner*.²³ The journal *Culture and Cosmos* has published ground-breaking studies, some of which are relevant to the story of astrology in Asia. These studies by Bezza and Hand are especially useful.²⁴ A recent and arguably the most comprehensive study of Hellenistic astrology to date was produced by Greenbaum.²⁵

A reading of these studies on Indian, Iranian, and Hellenistic traditions is critical to understanding how astrology developed across Asia over the centuries before the advent of Buddhist astrology in Japan. During the medieval period in Japan we see a union of horoscopy, Indian *nakṣatra* astrology, and Chinese hemerology.

In my opinion, going forward from here, astrology must be treated in the same manner we study individual religions, with its own rich history, divergent schools, complex doctrines, disparate legacies, notable figures, and modern misunderstandings. Yano's study functions as one work of several forming a modern corpus of secondary literature that discusses the instructive role of astrology in East Asia. We can only hope that Yano will write further studies and that other scholars will also make valuable contributions. Our position is becoming more and more favorable, in that we might utilize primary and secondary sources covering different cultures and time periods. This will only aid in charting out the history of astrology and its impact on premodern societies, East and West. Comparing textual materials will not only shed light upon hitherto unrecognized lines of knowledge transmission throughout the centuries, but also demonstrate that astrology—and more specifically horoscopy—was a sort of common practice found throughout the world over the past two millennia, which highlights rich and consistent interactions between cultures. Yano's classic study facilitates this progress.

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22 Stanley Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, MA: Boydell Press, 1987).

23 David Pingree, *From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bīkāner* (Rome: Ist. Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1997).

24 Giuseppe Bezza, "The Development of an Astrological Term—from Greek *haireisis* to Arabic *hayyiz*," *Culture and Cosmos* 11, no. 1–2 (2007): 229–260; Robert Hand, "Signs as Houses (Places) in Ancient Astrology," *Culture and Cosmos* 11, no. 1–2 (2007): 135–162.

25 Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum, *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology: Origins and Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

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