

Religious Anxiety and Political Interest in  
Western Han Omen Interpretation:  
The Case of the Han Wudi 漢武帝 Period (141-87 B.C.)\*

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Preliminary issues

The identification of auspicious signs or unlucky omens, together with attempts to understand – and ultimately control – them as elements of cosmic order, is a religious aspect of ancient Chinese culture known already from its earliest records, the inscriptions on turtle plastrons and bovid scapulas. The concern with omens, that is, cosmic phenomena that are interpreted as meaningful signs, is intimately related to prophetic texts, divination techniques, and sacrificial practice; reverberating in numerous pre-imperial texts of various genres, and pervading the political sphere, omen interpretation infuses traditional Chinese authority with religious significance. The range of cosmic signs is potentially open to unlimited accumulation; for early imperial times, the extensive omen catalog of Shen Yue's 沈約(441–513) *Songshu* 宋書 amply testifies to this development.<sup>1</sup> In Western Han times, omen interpretation was intimately related to historical learning: those who mastered the textual records of the past and could interpret the significance of historical events assumed the

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<sup>1</sup>See *Songshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2nd. ed. 1983) 27.759–29.878.

authority to explain present phenomena by relating them to earlier precedents. One might therefore want to assume that once a particular type of omen – say, the appearance of a comet – was defined as benign or calamitous, this meaning would have remained stable and consistently applicable to later events of the same type. However, Western Han sources suggest just the opposite: we witness how different opinions could in fact coexist side by side, and how interpretations changed over time.

Several important studies have been devoted to Western Han omen recording and interpretation, and particular emphasis has been laid on the fundamentally political character of these records.<sup>2</sup> Hans Bielenstein, who deserves credit for having developed earlier studies by Wolfram Eberhard and Homer H. Dubs towards a higher level of sophistication, concludes that the source of the portent reports were most probably the high court officials in the capital: "In practice calamities became portents only when they were memorialized as such, and it was for the officials to decide whether the Emperor should be informed or not."<sup>3</sup> Bielenstein further concludes that portents were identified and reported to convey indirect criticism to the emperor, and that their frequency depended not on the actual number of natural abnormalities or calamities but on the situation at court: rulers who accepted straightforward criticism from their officials were less likely to receive omen announcements, while those who could be remonstrated only indirectly faced a strong surge in such reports. Therefore, Bielenstein argues, the frequency of portent reports directly reflects the different Western Han reigns, and they by and large match what we know about these reigns from elsewhere. To arrive at a statistical

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<sup>2</sup>See Wolfram Eberhard, "Beiträge zur kosmologischen Spekulation in der Hanzeit," *Baessler-Archiv* 16: 1-100 (repr. in Wolfram Eberhard: *Sternkunde und Weltbild im alten China: Gesammelte Aufsätze von Wolfram Eberhard* [Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center, 1970]); Homer H. Dubs, *The History of the Former Han* (3 vols., Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1938-55), 3: 546-59 (see also the records of solar eclipses, appended to the individual chapters); Hans Bielenstein, "An Interpretation of the Portents in the Ts'ien-Han-Shu," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 22 (1950): 127-43; Wolfram Eberhard, "The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China," in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 33-70 (German version "Die politische Funktion der Astronomie und der Astronomen in der Han-Zeit," in *Sternkunde und Weltbild im alten China*, 249-74); Nathan Sivin, "Cosmos and Computation in Early Chinese Mathematical Astronomy," *T'oung Pao* 55 (1969): 1-73, esp. 52-64. Sivin raises some doubts about Eberhard's and Bielenstein's thesis that omen recording and interpretation was simply and entirely an act of political manipulation in Western Han times.

<sup>3</sup>Bielenstein, "An Interpretation of the Portents in the Ts'ien-Han-Shu", 141.

representation, Bielenstein relates the number of reported portents to the years of each ruler; the resulting quotient is thought of as representing the intensity of indirect criticism launched against a ruler. In this picture, the authority to report and interpret omens lies entirely in the hands of court officials, while the emperor appears in a passive and defensive position, once the cosmic disapproval of his rulership has been put to record.

One major phase during which we can identify a substantial proliferation of omens is the reign of Han Wudi 漢武帝 (141–87 B.C.). Intimately related to the emperor's reform and broad extension of the state sacrifices to cosmic deities, new signs were acknowledged and old ones re-defined, bespeaking not only a specific historical state of fluidity and uncertainty in reading the cosmos but also the potential to manipulate such reading for personal or political interests. One reason why the Wudi period appears particularly fruitful for an analysis of the patterns of Western Han omen interpretation is that already in its own times, and certainly in retrospective accounts dating from later decades, this era has been seen as highly ambiguous: while Wudi had led the Han empire to its zenith of geographical extension, martial power, and cultural splendor, his reign was also marked by the heavy burdens that these enormous tasks, especially military expansion, imposed on the people. In addition, the emperor himself was not only praised for his unparalleled achievements but also criticized for his inclinations to megalomania and superstition. Such diverging aspects of Han Wudi's reign were closely interrelated, and they all found expression in the interpretation of unusual cosmic signs. One and the same omen could appear as most auspicious to some, while it signalled imminent disaster to others.

In the following brief study of the omens that are reported for the reign of Han Wudi I will suggest that Bielenstein's widely adopted conclusion that in Western Han times, such signs were invariably presented – or made up – by court officials in order to subtly admonish their ruler is too simple and flawed by its mechanical and ahistorical nature. First, Bielenstein, like other scholars, has been concerned only with negative but not with auspicious omens;<sup>4</sup> yet only balancing the two will provide accurate figures of omen distribution and in addition will allow us to understand the relative weight of positive and negative signs during a given reign. Second, the overall quotient, resulting from the number of omen reports relative to the years of a ruler, must be differentiated

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. the first footnote in his article: "The auspicious omen forms a special category which is not discussed in the present study" (Bielenstein, "An Interpretation of the Portents in the Ts'ien-Han-Shu," 127). My following study will question precisely this point, arguing that omens cannot be ordered into neat categories, and that a fundamental ambiguity is in fact part of their very nature.

with respect to specific phases of an emperor's reign. This is particularly obvious in the case of Han Wudi who ruled for more than five decades during which we observe recognizable shifts in the practice and ideology of rulership. Third, when considering the individual omens that are recorded in our historical sources, we need to take into account the historical moment at which a particular omen definition was actually determined as being calamitous: as will be shown below, such interpretations often postdate by decades the reign during which the omen originally appeared; therefore, they cannot have been intended as admonishing the earlier ruler whom they might have concerned directly. These basic issues give rise to various questions to pursue: who were the officials who reported portents, and were they necessarily the same ones who would provide their interpretation? Can we identify contending forces at work? Are omens discussed instantaneously, or rather retrospectively? Who was the actual addressee of a particular omen record? In addition, one also should study the different ways in which emperors responded to omen reports in both political and religious practice; here, an important field to examine is the arena where emperors directly communicated with the cosmic forces, that is, the imperial state sacrifices.

#### The omens of the Han Wudi period

The basic sources for omen records that concern Han Wudi's reign are the following chapters of the *Hanshu* 漢書: the "Basic Annals" ("Ben ji" 本紀) of the individual rulers and the "Monographs" on astronomy ("Tian wen zhi" 天文志), the five phases ("Wu xing zhi" 五行志), and the suburban sacrifices ("Jiao si zhi" 郊祀志). In addition, the "Monograph on Ritual and Music" ("Li yue zhi" 禮樂志) notes a number of auspicious omens as occasions for state sacrificial hymns.<sup>5</sup> In particular the "Jiao si zhi," which previous studies on Han omens have tended to neglect, contains some of the most interesting information since it provides evidence that usually unlucky omens and even actual calamities could be effectively turned into auspicious signs. In this context of the state sacrifices to cosmic deities, the interplay of authority and anxiety – on both political and religious planes – in the interpretation of omens can be re-assessed. The following table comprises the years of the Wudi reign, lists the reported omens in chronological order, and notes the *Hanshu* chapters (and page numbers) where they are recorded:

Year (B.C)	Omen	Source
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<sup>5</sup>Such benign signs are also mentioned by the court panegyrists: see *Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 5th ed. 1987) 64A.2797-98 (the tripod of 116 B.C.), 64B.2814-16 (the unicorn of 123 B.C., together with a strange tree), and 57B.2608 (the unicorn).

141		
140		
139	eclipse	本紀 (6.158), <sup>6</sup> 五行 (27C-B.1502)
	sun-like light at night	本紀 (6.158)
138	Yellow river flood	本紀 (6.158)
	famine	本紀 (6.158)
	comet	本紀 (6.158)
	eclipse	本紀 (6.159), 五行 (27C-B.1502)
	comet	天文 (26.1305)
	comet	天文 (26.1305)
137	blood-red wind	本紀 (6.159)
	drought	本紀 (6.159)
	comet	本紀 (6.159)
	earthquake	天文 (26.1305)
136	locusts	本紀 (6.159)
	eclipse	五行 (27C-B.1502)
135	Mars in unusual position	天文 (26.1305)
	fire in one of Gaozu's ancestral temples	本紀 (6.159), 五行 (27A.1331)
	fire in a hall of Gaozu's funerary park	本紀 (6.159), 五行 (27A.1331), 天文 (26.1305)
	comet	本紀 (6.160), 五行 (27C-B.1517)
	comet	五行 (27C-B.1517)
134	eclipse	本紀 (6.162), 五行 (27C-B.1502)
	eclipse	五行 (27C-B.1502)
	"nomadic star" appears	天文 (26.1305)
134/129	all stars are agitated	天文 (26.1306)
133		
132	Yellow River changes course	本紀 (6.163)
	Yellow River breaks dikes, flood	本紀 (6.163)
131	frost hail in summer, kills plants	本紀 (6.164), 五行 (27B-B.1426)
130	storm in fall, uproots trees	本紀 (6.164)
	grubs	本紀 (6.164), 五行 (27B-B.1435)
129	locusts	本紀 (6.166), 五行 (27B-B.1435)
	drought	本紀 (6.166), 五行 (27B-A.1392)
128		
127	eclipse	本紀 (6.170), 五行 (27C-B.1502)
126		

<sup>6</sup> *Hanshu* references are to chapters and pages in the *Zhonghua shuju* edition used throughout this paper.

125		
124	drought	本紀 (6.171), 五行 (27B-A.1392)
123	capture of the white unicorn	本紀 (6.174, 206), 郊祀 (25A.1219), 禮樂 (22.1068)
	eclipse	五行 (27C-B.1502)
	eclipse	五行 (27C-B.1502)
122	great snowfall, kills people	本紀 (6.174), 五行 (27B-C.1424)
	eclipse	本紀 (6.175)
121	birth of a horse in the Yuwu River	本紀 (6.176)
120	comet	本紀 (6.177)
	drought	五行 (27B-A.1392)
119	comet	本紀 (6.178), 五行 (27C-B.1517)
	comet	本紀 (6.178)
118-117	rain in winter, no ice	本紀 (6.179), 五行 (27B-B.1409)
117		
116	discovery of a tripod by the Fen River	本紀 (6.182)
115	great snowfall	本紀 (6.182), 五行 (27B-C.1424)
	flood	本紀 (6.182)
114	fire in funerary park	本紀 (6.183)
	snow in the summer <sup>7</sup>	本紀 (6.183), 五行 (27B-C.1424)
	famine	本紀 (6.183), 五行 (27B-C.1424)
113	discovery of a tripod by the Fen River	本紀 (6.184-85), 禮樂 (22.1064), 郊祀 (25A.1225)
	appearance of light by the Fen River	郊祀 (25A.1222)
	lights, yellow-white clouds descend	郊祀 (25A.1225)
	yellow clouds	郊祀 (25A.1225)
	birth of a horse in the Wowa River	本紀 (6.184-85), 禮樂 (22.1060)
112	twelve bright lights	本紀 (6.185)
	eclipse	本紀 (6.186), 五行 (27C-B.1503)
	toads and frogs fight	本紀 (6.186), 五行 (27B-B.1430)
	Venus in unusual move	天文 (26.1306)
	locusts	五行 (27B-B.1435)
	lights during sacrifices	郊祀 (25A.1231)
116/111	Mars in unusual position	天文 (26.1306)
110	capture of a rare deer	本紀 (6.190)
	invisible voices shout "Long life!"	本紀 (6.190), 郊祀 (25A.1234)
	comet appears twice	本紀 (6.192), 郊祀 (25A.1236),

<sup>7</sup>I follow Dubs' (2: 73, n.18.7) reasoning that the fall of "hail" as noted in the "Basic Annals" should be emended to "snow," as mentioned in the "Monograph on the Five Phases" and later sources.

	white clouds and lights after the <i>feng</i> and <i>shan</i> sacrifices	郊祀 (25A.1235-36)
	Star of Virtue appears	郊祀 (25A.1236)
109	numinous <i>zhi</i> grows in Ganquan	本紀 (6.193), 郊祀 (25B.1242), 禮樂(22.1065)
	light at repaired Yellow River dike	郊祀(25B.1242)
	drought	郊祀 (25A.1237)
	mountain fires	郊祀 (25B.1243)
	comet	天文 (26.1306)
108	drought	郊祀 (25B.1242)
107	drought	本紀 (6.195)
	eclipse	五行 (27C-B.1503)
107	lights at sacrificial sites	本紀(6.195)
	emperor shoots and captures an alligator	本紀 (6.196)
106		
105	precious objects appear, some of them turn into gold	本紀 (6.198)
	lights at Houtu altar	本紀 (6.198)
	drought	本紀 (6.199)
	locusts	本紀(6.199), 五行 (27B-B.1435)
104	Cypress Beam Terrace burns down	本紀 (6.199),五行 (27A.1334), 郊祀 (25B.1244)
	locusts	本紀 (6.200),五行 (27B-B.1435)
103	lights during sacrifices to Houtu	本紀 (6.200)
	locusts	本紀 (6.201)
102	locusts	五行 (27B-B.1435)
101	Heavenly Horses arrive	本紀(6.202), 禮樂 (22.1061)
104/101	comet	天文 (26.1306)
100	drought	五行 (27B-A.1392)
99		
98	drought	五行 (27B-A.1392)
97		
96	eclipse	五行 (27C-B.1503)
95	drought	本紀 (6.206)
94	capture of wild geese	本紀 (6.206),禮樂 (22.1069)
	invisible voices shout "Long life!"	本紀(6.207)
93	spirits seem to appear during a sacrifice	本紀 (6.207), 郊祀 (25B.1247)
	eclipse	五行 (27C-B.1503)
	snakes enter the city, kill other snakes	本紀(6.207),五行 (27C-A.1468)
92	eclipse	本紀 (6.207)

	drought	五行 (27B-A.1393)
91	storm	本紀 (6.208)
	earthquake	本紀 (6.209)
	melted iron flies up	五行 (27A.1334)
90	locusts	本紀 (6.210), 五行 (27B-B.1434)
89	meteorites	本紀 (6.210), 郊祀 (25B.1247), 五行 (27C-B.1521)
	locusts	五行 (27B-B.1434)
	eclipse	本紀 (6.210), 五行 (27C-B.1503)
88	light during sacrifice	本紀 (6.211)
	earthquake, surging springs	本紀 (6.211)
87		

The table shows interesting patterns in the distribution of omen records. Of altogether one hundred and seven omens, seventy-one are mentioned in only one place: thirty-five in the "Ben ji," sixteen in the "Wu xing zhi," ten in the "Tian wen zhi," and ten in the "Jiao si zhi." By far the most frequent parallels between omen reports in different chapters are those between the "Ben ji" and the "Wu xing zhi," numbering twenty-eight. Comparing the terse records of the "Ben ji" with their elaborate interpretations in the "Wu xing zhi," one is tempted to recognize a relation similar to that of the *Chunqiu* 春秋 and its commentaries, with the annalistic "Ben ji" modelled on the *Chunqiu*. Interestingly, Western Han omen interpretation is indeed intimately related to the three major *Chunqiu* traditions, as noted in the introductory remarks of the "Wu xing zhi" where the leading Western Han omen exegetes are listed, among them Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 179[?] - ca. 104[?]) as a *Gongyang* 公羊 scholar, Liu Xiang 劉向 (79-8 B.C.) as an expert on the *Guliang* 穀梁, and his son Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. A.D. 23) as commanding the *Zuo* 左 tradition.

At the same time, the "Ben ji" shares omens also with the "Jiao si zhi" (nine) and the "Li yue zhi" (six), while the "Wu xing zhi" is less broadly connected, sharing only three omens with the "Jiao si zhi" and one with the "Tian wen zhi." The most isolated omen information is contained in the "Tian wen zhi": of altogether eleven phenomena mentioned in this chapter, ten appear exclusively here, and only one is shared with both the "Wu xing zhi" and the "Ben ji." The "Li yue zhi," while mentioning no phenomenon exclusively, shares all of its six omens with the "Benji" and three of them furthermore with the "Jiao si zhi." The "Jiao si zhi" shares nine omens with the "Ben ji," three with the "Wu xing zhi," and three with the "Li yue zhi." To summarize the same information in reverse order, no contacts exist between the following chapters: "Wu xing zhi" and "Li yue zhi," "Tian wen zhi" and "Jiao si zhi," and "Tian wen zhi" and "Li yue zhi."



The distribution of omens through these chapters is disproportional in several respects. First, the majority of omens (seventy-one out of one hundred and seven) appears in the "Basic Annals" where the individual phenomena are indiscriminately listed without further judgements. Compared to the other chapters, the annalistic entries are presented as not being biased towards positive or negative portents; they provide the raw records which are then selectively exploited elsewhere. (Given that this "elsewhere" is still within the same *Hanshu*, we of course have to consider such a coherent structural pattern as the historian's conscious arrangement and rhetorical device.) The seeming neutrality of the omen records in the "Basic Annals" lets them appear particularly valuable as they furnish a relatively comprehensive collection of data against which the reliability of the apparently more tendentious records of the other chapters can be determined. On the other hand, and here I differ from earlier studies of Western Han portents, the indiscriminately assembled data of the "Basic Annals" do not grant insights into the interpretation of the individual omens and therefore do not allow any conclusions about the very function of omen reporting and recording.

Another disproportion of the omen records concerns their chronology: while some chapters include incidents particularly from the early years of Wudi's reign, others are more focussed on the middle period, when the Western Han empire was on its height of power and cultural splendor. The differences among the various chapters in omen recording are mainly due to differences in the nature of these omens: auspicious signs, recorded in the "Ben ji," the "Li yue zhi," and the "Jiao si zhi," begin not before 123 B.C. and become recurrent and even dominant during the two decades between 113 and 93 B.C., that is, the times of intense ritual, especially sacrificial, activities. The significance of this finding will be discussed below.

We are fortunate to have omen records parallel to the "Basic Annals" that are not comprehensive but selective, and that are openly politically motivated. Moreover, the discussions in these chapters are not uniform but diverse and even antagonistic in both their selection and interpretation of omens. A parallel reading of the different records is informative on several planes: it reveals the different nature of omen records, the possible differences in their interpretation, and also the political and religious roles and interests of different individuals and groups in defining omens. It is in such a reading that we can reconstruct a historical development of omen interpretation in Western Han times, including chronological layers that also suggest conclusions on the heterogeneous nature of the materials assembled in the respective *Hanshu* chapters. Before comparing the parallel records of those omens that are mentioned in more than one chapter, I will briefly introduce the different kinds

of omen reports that surface in the "Tian wen zhi," the "Li yue zhi," and the "Jiao si zhi."

#### The omens in the "Tian wen zhi"

The eleven omens of the Han Wudi period registered in the "Monograph on Astronomy" include four appearances of comets, an earthquake, two unusual positions of Mars, a fire in Han Gaozu's 漢高祖 (r. 202-195 B.C.) funerary park, the appearance of a "nomadic star" (*ke xing* 客星), agitated stars, and an unusual movement of Venus. Both the fire and the earthquake – phenomena usually considered as unlucky omens in their own right – appear as portents of only secondary order since they are presented as results of preceding astral anomalies. For the Wudi period, the records of the "Tian wen zhi" represent an isolated set of events as they are, with the one exception of the fire in the funerary park, not treated anywhere else. Furthermore, they are interpreted in a specifically technical way, that is, by actual divination (*zhan* 占), apparently conducted by the respective ritual and astrological specialists at court. In one instance, the emperor is said to have consulted his astrologers:

During the era "Yuan guang" (134-129 B.C.), all the stars were agitated. The emperor asked the astrologers about this, and they responded: "When the stars are agitated, the people will be wearied." Afterwards, [the emperor] launched military expeditions against the barbarians of the four directions, and the [common people of the] hundred surnames were wearied by warfare.<sup>8</sup>

元光中，天星盡搖，上以問候星者。對曰：星搖者，民勞也。後伐四夷，百姓勞于兵革。

As can be seen from this case, the information presented on individual omens in the astronomical chapter is of a tripartite structure and composite nature: the text first records the omen, then cites the divination, and then adds one or more later events that are seen as the concrete fulfillment of what had been foretold in more general terms. This pattern applies to all astral events recorded in the "Tian wen zhi." While the divination seems to represent the immediate inquiry about an unusual phenomenon, the concluding statement for each entry was apparently supplied by a substantially later interpreting mind and editing hand – possibly the *Hanshu* compiler Ban Gu 班固 (32-92) himself, or one of his late Western Han sources.

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<sup>8</sup>*Hanshu* 26.1306.

The single omen in the “Tian wen zhi” that is shared with both the “Ben ji” and the “Wu xing zhi” is the fire in (one of?) the side-halls of Han Gaozu’s funerary park north of the capital Chang’an 長安. In the “Basic Annals,” this omen is followed by the remark that the emperor wore white mourning clothes for five days, and that in the following month the Grand Empress Dowager died.<sup>9</sup> The entry in the “Monograph on Astronomy” reads as follows:

In the sixth year (135 B.C.),<sup>10</sup> the Sparkling Deluder (Mars) rested in the Ghost carriage lunar mansion. The divination said: “This will cause fire to change, and there will be loss.” In this year, the funeral park of Gaozu was visited with fire. The Empress Dowager Dou died.<sup>11</sup>

六年，熒惑守輿鬼。占曰：爲火變，有喪。是歲高園有火災，竇太后崩。

Different from both the “Ben ji” and the “Wu xing zhi” records, the fire in the funeral park and the following death of the Grand Empress Dowager follow a prophecy on the movement of Mars, the fire planet. As such, the “Tian wen zhi” not only relates the fire and the death to one another but also integrates both events into a cosmic pattern where they appear to have been anticipated by a planet movement. The “Tian wen zhi” does not offer any political judgement on this cosmic event. The “Wu xing zhi” account of the same event reads differently. Here, as in the “Ben ji,” the fire in Gaozu’s funeral park is related to another fire in his temple in Liaodong 遼東,<sup>12</sup> and both incidents are discussed by Dong Zhongshu. After quoting a number of precedents from the *Chunqiu* that demonstrate the political significance of fire visitations as Heaven’s warnings, Dong argues that there actually should be no temple in Liaodong, and no funeral park beside the tomb mound. From here, he moves on into a more

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<sup>9</sup> *Hanshu* 6.159.

<sup>10</sup> The “sixth year” refers to the sixth year of the reign period “Jian yuan” 建元, the first of Wudi’s reign periods. However, this reign period is a retrospective designation; reign periods were not institutionalized until 113 B.C., see my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer: Literatur und Ritual in der politischen Repräsentation von der Han-Zeit bis zu den Sechs Dynastien* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997), 249.

<sup>11</sup> *Hanshu* 26.1305.

<sup>12</sup> After Gaozu’s death, sacrificial temples for him were established all over the empire, see *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 10th ed. 1987) 8.392, *Hanshu* 2.88. For a discussion of the Western Han imperial tombs and shrines see Michael Loewe, *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 267-99.

general discussion of the present era and encourages Wudi to monitor and punish those among the imperial relatives and officers who do not follow the way of morality. As scholars have shown, these suggestions were not of a general nature but directed at very specific political circumstances.<sup>13</sup> This omen interpretation is Dong's only transmitted one on a contemporary case and would have led to his execution, had not the emperor personally pardoned him;<sup>14</sup> it perfectly illustrates Dong's cosmological theories as he developed them in his three answers to imperial edicts.<sup>15</sup>

It is only in this passage from the "Wu xing zhi" that the two fires are presented as a warning from Heaven, and that its record and interpretation surfaces as an indirect political criticism directed at the emperor. Otherwise, there would be no particular reason to read this interpretation into the "Ben ji" and "Tian wen zhi" records. As mentioned before, the "Wu xing zhi" elaborates on only this single case (out of eleven) of the "Tian wen zhi"; it is thus clear that the "Wu xing zhi" is not intended to provide comprehensive discussion of all known omens but instead is compiled as a selection of paradigmatic cases. This partial nature of the "Wu xing zhi" will become more clear below, in the context of cases of contending opinions.

The omens noted in the "Tian wen zhi" do not necessarily address Han Wudi directly. In most cases, the situation to which an omen becomes retrospectively related is of military nature, concerning either the suppression of a revolt or a military campaign against another country. The major calamities are not experienced by the Han empire and its population but by a local prince or a foreign ruler. A good example is the appearance of a comet during the era "Tai chu" 太初 (104–101 B.C.); in this case, the interpretation is obtained not by divination but from an astrological manual:

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<sup>13</sup>See also Loewe, *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China*, 287; Sarah A. Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn, According to Tung Chung-shu* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 27-30; Gary Arbuckle, "Restoring Dong Zhongshu (BCE 195 - 115): An Experiment in Historical and Philosophical Reconstruction" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1991), 8-12.

<sup>14</sup>As Queen has noted, eighty-three omen interpretations by Dong are preserved in the "Wu xing zhi"; eighty-two of them are concerned with pre-imperial events; see Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon*, 128. While Dong is credited with a work entitled *Zaiyi zhi ji* 災異之記 (Records of Disasters and Anomalies), both *Shiji* and *Hanshu* note that because of the trial that followed his interpretation of the fire of 135 B.C., Dong "did not dare to discuss again disasters and anomalies" (*Shiji* 121.3128, *Hanshu* 56.2524).

<sup>15</sup>See *Hanshu* 56.2495-2523.

During the "Tai chu" era, a comet passed through Twinkling Indicator.<sup>16</sup> The commentary [on the star manual] says: "When a comet rests in Twinkling Indicator, the Man and Yi barbarians will experience uproar, and the people will kill their ruler." Afterwards, the Han armies attacked Dayuan and beheaded their ruler. Twinkling Indicator is [in charge] of the areas of the remote barbarians.<sup>17</sup>

太初仲，星孛于招搖。(星)傳曰：客星守招搖，蠻夷有亂，民死君。其後漢兵擊大宛，斬其王。招搖，遠夷之分。

The different interpretations all share the same structure of omen observation, explanation (usually by divination, but I have deliberately also quoted the only two cases of consultation with an expert and of reference to an astrological manual, respectively), and retrospective interpretation. It is furthermore obvious that the phenomena of a particular planet's movement or even of a comet are not in themselves evidence of calamities experienced by the Chinese people. Taken from a higher cosmic perspective, these omens may announce disaster not to the Han but, on the contrary, to the foreign objects of Han military expansion. Even a comet, generally considered to be highly inauspicious, is therefore not intrinsically portentous for the Han but may actually predict a military victory and consolidation. There is hence little evidence to support the hypothesis that every unusual astral event was identified – along the lines of Dong Zhongshu's famous three statements – as a warning from heaven, addressed to the emperor during whose reign it appeared. Furthermore, the omen recordings in the "Tian wen zhi" cannot be read as any kind of systematic criticism, formulated by the officials and directed towards the emperor, since the few omens in the "Tian wen zhi" are at utter discord with the actual events of Wudi's reign. Six of the eleven recorded unusual astral phenomena date from the first decade of Wudi's reign when the young emperor – still in his teens and early twenties – had barely taken any political or military initiative on his own but ruled under the control of the Empress Dowager. After this initial period of the Wudi reign, the "Tian wen zhi" preserves astral omens only for the reign periods "Yuan ding" 元鼎 (116–111 B.C.), "Yuan feng" 元封 (110–105 B.C.), and "Tai chu" (the case cited above).

Of these, the single interpretation inauspicious from a Han perspective is related to the move of Venus into the heavenly area corresponding to the Central Asian state of Ferghana (Dayuan) 大宛 in 112 B.C. In the concluding

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<sup>16</sup>Zhaoyao is probably  $\gamma$  Bootis, close to Ursa Major; see my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, 215.

<sup>17</sup>*Hanshu* 26.1306.

interpretation of an unknown later date, this omen announced the loss of many horses during the military campaigns against Ferghana between 104 and 101 B.C.<sup>18</sup> Not only are omen and event separated by eight to eleven years; the campaign of 101 B.C. also resulted in obtaining the rare and therefore grandly celebrated "heavenly horses" (*tianma* 天馬) after the fall of Ferghana. This expedition, leading Han troops deep into Central Asia and finally securing the Han dominance over vast regions west of the empire, was the most ambitious and costly expedition throughout the four hundred years of the Western and Eastern Han if we follow the numbers given in our sources: having set out with 180,000 conscripts (and perhaps an additional 60,000 troops), 100,000 oxen, 30,000 horses and several ten thousand donkeys and camels, the victorious general Li Guangli 李廣利 (fl. 104-100 B.C.) returned to Chang'an with only about 10,000 men and 1,000 horses.<sup>19</sup> Even before it had started, this campaign had been debated at court; and critics in later generations regarded the Ferghana expedition as one of the prime excesses of Han Wudi's expansionism. One might therefore consider that the political interpretation of the move of Venus in 112 B.C. could have been conceived still during Wudi's reign although it was apparently not prominently voiced. Some decades later, now as an element in the retrospective criticism of Wudi's policies, this interpretation was elevated to represent mainstream political convictions.

#### The omens in the "Li yue zhi"

The omens recorded in the "Monograph on Ritual and Music" are without exception auspicious and recorded only as occasions on which state sacrificial songs were composed. These omens include the following:

- the capture of a white unicorn at the sacrificial center of Yong 雍 in 123/122 B.C.
- the discovery of a tripod at the sacrificial site of Fenyin 汾陰 in 113 B.C.<sup>20</sup>
- the birth of a horse in the Wowa 渥洼 river in 113 B.C.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>*Hanshu* 26.1306.

<sup>19</sup>See *Hanshu* 6.202, 61.2700, *Shiji* 123.3176; Michael Loewe, "The Campaigns of Han Wu-ti," in *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, ed. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass. 1974), 92-99, 117.

<sup>20</sup>In the "Li yue zhi," the date is mistakenly given as equivalent to 112 B.C.; see my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, 249.

<sup>21</sup>Misdated in the "Li yue zhi" into the year 120 B.C.; see my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, 229.

- the growth of a numinous *zhi* 芝 plant at the sacrificial center of Ganquan 甘泉 109 B.C.
- the arrival of the heavenly horses from Ferghana in 101 B.C.
- the capture of red wild geese in Donghai 東海 in 94 B.C.

The "Li yue zhi" does not indicate who was responsible for recognizing these auspicious events; it only mentions them in appendices to the text of individual hymns that were performed during the cosmic state sacrifices to the powers of heaven and earth. The notes on the respective omens all follow the same terse form:

Composed [on the occasion when] in the third year of the era "Tai shi" (96-93 B.C.), the emperor favored Donghai with a visit and captured red geese.<sup>22</sup>

太始三年行幸東海獲赤鴈作。

Such a note is appended to each respective sacrificial hymn that announces and praises a particular omen towards the spirits. A comparison of these notes with their counterparts in the "Basic Annals" and the "Monograph on Suburban Sacrifices" can show that two of the dates given in the "Monograph on Ritual and Music" are flawed;<sup>23</sup> we also do not know when and by whom these brief notes were actually appended to the songs proper. To understand these omens and their circumstances better, it is therefore safer to turn to parallel passages that mention the same events. Here, it turns out that they were indeed recognized entirely under imperial control: the growth of the *zhi* grass, the capture of the unicorn, the birth of the horse in the Wowa River, and the discovery of the tripod are all acknowledged in imperial edicts.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, all omens were presented not only during the cosmic sacrifices at the Taiyi 太一 (Grand Unity) altar in Ganquan, some 110 kilometers northwest of Chang'an<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Hanshu* 22.1069.

<sup>23</sup> For a full discussion of these problems, see my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, 179-85.

<sup>24</sup> See *Hanshu* 6.185, 193, 206.

<sup>25</sup> On the history of Ganquan as a sacrificial site in Western Han times, see Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China, 104 BC to AD 9* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), 169-81.

but also in the imperial ancestral temple<sup>26</sup> and thus were employed to extoll the imperial rule and its legitimation towards both cosmic and ancestral powers.

The most complex case of an omen celebration is that of the white unicorn (*lin* 麟), captured in 123/122 B.C. when the emperor visited the sacrificial center at Yong about 130 kilometers west of Chang'an. According to the "Li yue zhi," the following sacrificial hymn was composed on this occasion:<sup>27</sup>

Presenting a sacrifice to the peak of Mount Long	朝隴首
We gaze towards the western crest:	覽西垠
A burnt offering under thunder and lightning <sup>28</sup>	雷電峯
We have caught the white unicorn!	獲白麟
Here it has five toes,	爰五趾
Manifesting the power of yellow!	顯黃德
We designed strategies against the bestial and cruel –	圖匈虜
The Xunyu are exterminated! <sup>29</sup>	熏鬻殛
Having eradicated the wiliness	闢流離
And suppressed the calamities,	迎不詳
We regale the envoys of the hundred spirits –	賓百僚
Mountain and river gods are feasted.	山河饗
They rest and turn the poles –	掩回輳
With manes waving long, their steeds dash off!	鬣長馳
They rise to the Master of Rain <sup>30</sup>	騰雨師

<sup>26</sup>For evidence that the omens, together with the hymns composed for their celebration, were presented not only at the cosmic sacrifices but also in the imperial ancestral temple, see *Shiji* 12.464-65, *Hanshu* 6.206, 25A.1219, and Ban Gu's preface to his "Liang du fu" 兩都賦 (Rhapsody on the Two Capitals) in *Liu chen zhu Wen xuan* 六臣注文選 (*Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊 ed.) 1.2a. See also my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, 174-75.

<sup>27</sup>*Hanshu* 22.1068.

<sup>28</sup>According to *Shiji* 12.457-58, 28.1387 and *Hanshu* 25A.1219 the unicorn was burnt (with the rising smoke going up to the heavenly powers) at the altars of the five thearchs (*wu di* 五帝) in the old ritual centre of Yong. The above-mentioned edict of 95 B.C., however, states that the unicorn was presented in the ancestral temple; see *Hanshu* 6.206.

<sup>29</sup>Xunyu 熏鬻 is a different term for the Xiongnu 匈奴; see the commentary in *Hanshu* 22.1068.

<sup>30</sup>The Master of Rain (*yushi* 雨師) is a well-attested heavenly deity that received burnt offerings; see *Shiji* 28.1375, *Hanshu* 25A.1206-7, and *Zhouli zhushu* 周禮注疏 (*Shisan jing zhushu fu jiaokan ji* ed.) 18.119a. According to *Han Fei zi* 韓非子 (*Sibu congkan* ed.) 3.3a, the Master of Rain had also sprinkled the path when the Yellow Thearch summoned the



Who sprinkles both sides of the path!	洒路陂
Meteorites fall down,	流星隕
Stimulating these benign winds!	感惟風
The spirits gallop over clouds leading home –	繡歸雲
Soothing Our deep emotions!	撫懷心

This song – number seventeen among the “Nineteen Songs for the Suburban Sacrifices” (“Jiao si ge” 郊祀歌) that in Han Wudi’s reign were presented to the cosmic spirits – skillfully interweaves the auspicious appearance of a unicorn with multiple layers of meaning: first, there is the precedent for the unicorn in the *Chunqiu*; second, Han Wudi’s military campaigns against the Xiongnu were conducted in the western regions, deep into Central Asia; third, in the new system of cosmic sacrifices, omens played a prominent role both as benign messages received from the spirits and as offerings that were in turn given to them; fourth, the omen and its sacrifice are related to the new dynastic patron power of “earth” (*tu de* 土德) that was defined in the calendar reform of 105 B.C. The hymn celebrates the emperor’s rule and its military achievements on a cosmic scale, and it also eulogizes the very sacrificial act in which it was presented. In this context, the descriptions of atmospherical phenomena of thunder, lightning, rain, meteorites, and winds that accompany the sacrificial act are self-referential expressions: being itself part of the sacrifice, the hymn instantaneously confirms the ritual success by noting the auspicious response from the spirits. Assuming that the hymn was composed in advance for the actual sacrifice during which it was presented, mention of these responses was not descriptive – it was prescriptive since it determined the response from the spirits, and it was performative in the sense that the actuality of these phenomena rested entirely in the presentation of the hymn itself. As can be demonstrated through ritual texts of various genres (stone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, hymnic songs, prayers), this element of textual self-reference is a defining aspect of early Chinese ritualism, and it occurs in other hymns of the “Jiao si ge” as well.<sup>31</sup>

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spirits on Mount Tai. With the Yellow Thearch being a model for Han Wudi’s concept of cosmic rulership, this reference was very likely intended in the present hymn.

<sup>31</sup>See my *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch’in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000), 140-47, and my “*Shi jing* Songs as Performance Texts: A Case Study of ‘Chu ci’ (Thorny Caltrop),” forthcoming in *Early China* 25 (2000). For other examples in the “Jiao si ge,” see *Hanshu* 22.1052, 1057-58, 1061-63, and 1066; for annotated translations and an analysis of these songs, see my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*.

With respect to Western Han omen interpretation, the hymn is remarkable in several points. First, the positive mention of meteorites may suggest an early and apparently not yet fully systematized stage of omen interpretation: in all later accounts that are preserved in the "Monograph on Astronomy" and the "Monograph on the Five Phases," meteors (*liu xing* 流星) and meteorites (*[liu] xing yun* [流]星隕) are understood as portents of imminent disaster. As will be shown below, a positive interpretation of meteorites occurs again in the "Jiao si zhi," probably suggesting that these records predate the later Western Han categorization of portents. The present hymn is also of interest for its interpretation of the unicorn (*lin* 麟).<sup>32</sup> A common stock in later omenology,<sup>33</sup> this fabulous animal had entered Chinese political mythology through the final sentence of the *Chunqiu*:

In the 14th year (of Duke Ai, 481 B.C.), in spring, hunters in the west captured a unicorn.<sup>34</sup>

十四年，春，西狩獲麟。

The *Gongyang* 公羊 commentary, authoritative during Wudi's reign and taught, among others, by Dong Zhongshu, explicates this brief note as follows:

"The *lin* is a benevolent beast. It comes in the times of a [virtuous] king. In times without a [virtuous] king it does not come [...]"<sup>35</sup>

麟者，仁獸也。有王者則至。無王者則不至。

As an auspicious sign, the appearance of the *lin* was long established by the time of Han Wudi; and the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 that is attributed to

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<sup>32</sup> The *lin* is in several sources – though not always – described as having one horn, hence the translation "unicorn"; however, this should not suggest any mythological relation to the unicorn of medieval European texts.

<sup>33</sup> For the years 76 to 88 alone, fifty-one appearances of a *lin* are noted in historical sources; see Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 91.

<sup>34</sup> *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 (*Shisan jing zhushu fu jiaokan ji* ed.) 59.470b-471a.

<sup>35</sup> *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan zhushu* 春秋公羊注疏 (*Shisan jing zhushu fu jiaokan ji* ed.) 28.158c-159a.

Dong Zhongshu – if we leave aside the questionable authenticity of some of its parts<sup>36</sup> – is in full accord with the political Zeitgeist of Wudi's reign when it mentions the unicorn four times: the *Huainan zi* 淮南子 notes the unicorn's appearance (or nonarrival) seven times, always as an expression of cosmic and political harmony (or discord). Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179-117 B.C.) not only mentions the appearance of the *lin* in 123/122 B.C. in one of the eulogies appended to his death-bed text “Feng shan wen” 封禪文 (“The *feng* and *shan* sacrifices”)<sup>37</sup> but in his “Shang lin fu” 上林賦 (“Rhapsody on the imperial park”) also lists the animal among those that populated the imperial hunting park.<sup>38</sup> The *Sanfu huangtu* 三輔黃圖 mentions a “Unicorn Pavilion” (*qilin ge* 麒麟閣) within the emperor's “Everlasting Palace” (*weiyang gong* 未央宮).<sup>39</sup> Already in 134 B.C., Han Wudi himself had mentioned the *lin* in his famous “Edict to the capable and good” (“Zhao xian liang” 詔賢良):

“The Zhou kings Cheng and Kang had established the punishments but had not employed them; their virtuous power reached even to birds and beasts, their moral instruction extended to the four seas. ... Unicorns and phoenixes were in the suburbs and marshes, the [Yellow] river and the Luo [river] brought forth the chart and the writing.”<sup>40</sup>

周之成康，刑錯不用，德及鳥獸，教通四海。。。。麟鳳在郊藪，河洛出圖書。

The *Chunqiu* account had mentioned that the unicorn was captured “in the west”, namely, of the old state of Lu 魯. Throughout the subsequent references to this event in various pre-imperial and early imperial writings, the notion of “the west” was not imbued with any particular significance. It is only in the text and context of the present hymn that “the west” gains new attention – and a new meaning: the *lin* was now captured not in the west of Lu but west of the Han capital Chang'an, concretely, in the sacrificial center of Yong that had been inherited from the Qin. At the same time, it is only with the present hymn that the unicorn is described as “white,” that is, being of the cosmological color associated with the western astronomical direction. By contrast, later accounts

<sup>36</sup>See Gary Arbuckle, “Restoring Dong Zhongshu.”

<sup>37</sup>See *Liu chen zhu Wen xuan* 48.8a.

<sup>38</sup>*Liu chen zhu Wen xuan* 8.7a.

<sup>39</sup>*Sanfu huangtu* (*Sibu congkan* ed.) 2.3a.

<sup>40</sup>*Hanshu* 6.160. All great panegyrists of Han times, mostly in their *fu*, further employed and popularized the image of the unicorn and made it a central *topos* of political rhetoric.

of the *lin* describe the animal invariably as "yellow."<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the color yellow is already invoked by the number five for the unicorn's toes – both the color and the number are cosmologically related to the "power" of earth. This unambiguous reference to the calendar reform of 105 B.C. in fact casts doubt on the reported composition date of 123/122 B.C. for the hymn in its present form; either the whole song was composed later, or these references were added some time after 105 B.C. in order to give the capture of the unicorn a prophetic dimension. In any case, both "white" and "yellow" play their particular roles in the cosmological interpretation of the omen: yellow referring to Han Wudi's rule, white referring to his non-Chinese subjects in the west. One may wonder whether it was again a particular understanding of the *Gongyang* commentary that provided the precedent for this understanding: according to the *Gongyang zhuan*, the *lin* captured in 481 B.C. was "not a beast from the middle states" (*fei zhongguo zhi shou ye* 非中國之獸也).<sup>42</sup>

It is therefore clear that the capture of the unicorn was celebrated as a supreme symbol of the Han Chinese conquest of the neighboring western regions. The pass of Mt. Long 隴 was the western gate from which in 138 B.C. the Han envoy Zhang Qian 張騫 (died 113 B.C.) had set off for Central Asia to find new allies against the permanent threat of the *Xiongnu*. Although his mission did not succeed in its initial goals, the information Zhang brought back on his return in 126 B.C. conveyed for the first time concrete knowledge of the "western regions" (*xiyu* 西域) and was therefore invaluable for the subsequent military expansion into Central Asia. Moreover, the hymnic reference to the subjugation of the *Xiongnu* even furnishes the concrete object of Han Wudi's enormous campaigns that after 124 B.C. more than once involved troops of more than 100,000 men.<sup>43</sup> As such, the *lin* is situated precisely on the same plane as the "heavenly horses" from Ferghana that were also eulogized in a separate hymn during the state sacrifices, representing cosmological and mythological dimensions with the military conquest of the West.<sup>44</sup> Remarkably in the context of Western Han omen interpretation, the *lin* may also have shared with the

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<sup>41</sup>See, e.g., *Songshu* 28.791.

<sup>42</sup>*Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan zhushu* 28.158b. Such an understanding would, however, run against the traditional commentaries on this passage; these simply assert that the *lin* was indeed not alien to the Chinese lands but that its appearance had become uncommon during the Eastern Zhou times of political instability and cultural decline.

<sup>43</sup>See the tabular survey in Michael Loewe, "The Campaigns of Han Wu-ti," 112-18.

<sup>44</sup>The hymn is the second of two pieces that are listed under the title "heavenly horses" among the "Jiao si ge"; see *Hanshu* 22.1060-61. For a translation and analysis of the two *tianma* hymns and their (dubious) shorter counterparts in *Shiji* 24.1178, see my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, 227-40.

*tianma* a certain dimension of ambiguity, in particular as being related to the same context of military expansion: when the *lin* arrived in 481 B.C., the *Gongyang* commentary notes Confucius weeping and lamenting “How could it come! How could it come!” – the numinous beast had indeed appeared in times when a sagely ruler was sorely missed.

The official recognition of the *lin* and the *tianma* in Wudi’s own was seemingly unbothered by such ambiguities, given that the sacrificial hymns reflect the imperial *definition* of the auspicious nature of these omens – or perhaps it was precisely the political anxieties arising from these equivocal signs that prompted an imperial exegesis not just in plain political deliberation but *within the state sacrifices*, defining and defending in religious terms not only the two omens but thereby also a disputed imperial policy? While the hymns celebrate Wudi’s military expansion, the above-mentioned retrospective note in the “Tian wen zhi” relates the Ferghana campaign to an unlucky sign and directly criticizes the expansionist policy for the hardships it imposed on the ordinary Chinese people. As such, the “Tian wen zhi” interpretation – perhaps reflecting an originally suppressed dissent – reverses the earlier accounts of the sacrificial hymns. Certainly, this reinterpretation becomes particularly meaningful within the later criticism of the Wudi era that gained full force around 30 B.C.;<sup>45</sup> and not surprisingly, it is then when Han Wudi’s hymns on auspicious omens became openly criticized as inappropriate for a ruler’s state sacrifices.<sup>46</sup>

To summarize: the hymnic celebration of auspicious omens in the “Li yue zhi” furnishes authentic accounts of omen interpretation from the era of Han Wudi, exalting the emperor’s achievements towards the cosmic and ancestral spirits, and transforming earlier events – like the capture of the *lin* in the *Chunqiu* – into powerful precedents that granted political legitimacy for current needs. The officially sponsored *Gongyang* scholarship played its particular,

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<sup>45</sup>See Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, 154-92. In this later context belongs also the critical account of the *tianma* hymns in the – certainly not authentic – “Book on Music” (“Yue shu” 樂書); see my “A Note on the Authenticity and Ideology of *Shih-chi* 24, ‘The Book on Music,’” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119.4 (1999): 673-77. As noted above, these observations should not preclude that similarly critical positions were present already during Wudi’s times; but they surface much more freely and prominently in late Western Han times.

<sup>46</sup>This criticism appears not only in the corrupt *Shiji* “Book on Music” but also in the later accounts of *Wenxin diaolong* (see Zhan Ying 詹瑛, *Wenxin diaolong yizheng* 文心雕龍義證 [Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1989]) 7.235, *Songshu* 19.550, or *Suishu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 3rd ed. 1987) 13.286. Removed at the latest by Eastern Han times, hymns of this type never again entered the repertoire of Chinese state sacrifices.

though perhaps not unambiguous, role in this politically motivated process: in a kind of typological pattern, Wudi's capture of the unicorn in the precinct of the imperial ritual center of Yong appears as the ultimate counterpart to the events of 481 B.C.

The omens in the "Jiao si zhi" and their parallels in the "Ben ji" and "Wu xing zhi"

The omens recorded in the "Jiao si zhi" are intimately related to the imperial state sacrifices at the suburban altars. They register the cosmic responses to, and appreciation of, the imperial rule in general and to the emperor's sacrificial efforts in particular. As such, they are concentrated around the years 113 through 109 B.C., that is, the period during which Han Wudi established his new system of sacrifices to cosmic deities: the worship of Lord Earth (Houtu 后土) in Fenyin (lit. "South of the Fen River," 114 B.C.) and of Grand Unity (Taiyi) in Ganquan ("Sweet Springs," 113 B.C.), the performance of the *feng* 封 and *shan* 禪 sacrifices at Mt. Tai (110 B.C.), and the erection of the Hall of Light (*mingtang* 明堂) nearby (109 or 106 B.C.).<sup>47</sup> Most of these omens are instantaneous confirmations of ritual success: the emperor performs a sacrifice, and the cosmic spirits respond immediately or shortly after, usually through the appearance of numinous lights and clouds. In addition to these responses, the "Jiao si zhi" also notes several of the omens celebrated in the sacrificial hymns and hence represented at the suburban sacrifices: the capture of the white unicorn, the discovery of the tripod, and the growth of the *zhi* grass. Moreover, we read about invisible voices, shouting "Long Life!" (110 B.C.) towards the emperor, and about spirits that seemed to appear at a sacrifice (93 B.C.). All such phenomena are highly auspicious, and for the years from 113 through 109 B.C., they by far outnumber any unlucky or ambiguous signs. While most of them plainly contribute to imperial splendor, legitimation, and delight, the most interesting group of omens recorded in the "Jiao si zhi" comprises the following phenomena that in general would be classified as at least ambiguous, if not downright fateful:

— a comet appearing twice in 110 B.C.

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<sup>47</sup>The sources are contradictory as to the actual date for the erection of the Hall of Light, see Mikami Jun 三上順, "Meido to iegata haniwa (ge)" 明堂と家形埴輪(下), *Toho shukyo* 東方宗教 28 (1966): 36-37. For a chronological survey of Wudi's state sacrificial system, see Edmund Burke Holladay Ord, "State Sacrifices in the Former Han Dynasty According to the Official Histories" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1967), 224-65. See also Lester James Bilsky, *The State Religion of Ancient China* (Taipei: The Chinese Association for Folklore, 1975), 2: 287-330.

- a drought in 109 B.C.
- a drought in 108 B.C.
- the fire of the Cypress Beam (Boliang 柏梁) Terrace in 104 B.C.
- the fall of meteorites in 89 B.C.

A comparison of their records in the various chapters of the *Hanshu* yields the same coherent picture that we have already encountered with the omens recorded in the "Li yue zhi": a positive early interpretation, coterminous with the events proper, is reversed retrospectively into a sign of impending disaster. The comet of 110 B.C. is noted in three sources: the "Basic Annals," the "Monograph on the Five Phases," and the "Monograph on Suburban Sacrifices." The "Basic Annals" includes the following account:

In the fall, there was a comet passing through the Eastern Well lunar mansion and again through the Three Platforms. Hong, the Prince of Qi, died.<sup>48</sup>

秋，有星孛于東井，又孛于三台。齊王閔薨。

The "Monograph on the Five Phases" provides the following information:

In the first year of the era "Yuan feng," in the fifth month, there was a comet passing through the Eastern Well and again through the Three Platforms. Afterwards, Jiang Chong staged a rebellion, and the capital was in confusion. This illustrates that the Eastern Well and the Three Platforms possess efficacy over the territory of Qin.<sup>49</sup>

元封元年五月，星孛于東井，又孛于三台。其後江充作亂，東師紛然。此明東井，三台爲秦地效也。

Finally, the "Monograph on Suburban Sacrifices" notes the following:

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<sup>48</sup> *Hanshu* 6.192. The six stars belonging to the "Three Platforms" are  $\iota$ ,  $k$ ,  $l$ ,  $\mu$ ,  $\nu$ , and  $\chi$  Ursae Majoris, see Ho Peng Yoke, *The Astronomical Chapters of the Chin-shu* (Paris: Mouton, 1966), 80. For the brief biography of Liu Hong 劉閔 (d. 110 B.C.), one of Emperor Wu's sons, see *Hanshu* 63.2749. It is not clear whether the second sentence regarding Liu Hong's death is meant to be read in conjunction with the comet or just as a separate annalistic entry.

<sup>49</sup> *Hanshu* 27C-B.1517. Jiang Chong's "rebellion" refers to the much later case of witchcraft in 91 B.C.; for the full context, see Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict*, 37-90. The old "territory of Qin" includes the site of the Western Han capital Chang'an.

In the fall, there was a comet passing through the Eastern Well. After more than ten days, there was a comet passing through the Three Platforms. The observer of the ethers, Wang Shuo, explained: "Watching out, we saw the Quelling Star (Saturn) alone coming out like a gourd and after just a moment returning [into invisibility] again." Those in charge all said: "Your Majesty has established the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices of the Han Dynasty, and this is Heaven requiting you with the Star of Virtue."<sup>50</sup>

其秋，有星孛于東井。後十餘日，有星孛于三台。望氣王朔言：候獨見填星出如瓜，食頃，復入。有司皆曰：陛下建漢家封禪，天其報德星云。

The three records differ clearly: while the "Wu xing zhi" and perhaps also the "Ben ji" retrospectively present the comet as an indicator of imminent harm, Wudi's own ritual specialists claim to have instead identified a most auspicious sign, the Star of Virtue (*dexing* 德星) which probably is not a star but a rare cosmic light also known as *jingxing* 景星.<sup>51</sup>

Turning to the droughts of 109 and 108 B.C., we meet a similar surprise. There can be little doubt about the unlucky nature of the many droughts that are recorded in both the "Ben ji" and the "Wu xing zhi." For unknown reasons, the droughts of 109 and 108 B.C., however, are mentioned only in the "Jiao si zhi." While the text does not elaborate on the first one, the explanation of the drought of 108 B.C. reads as follows:

In the following year, [the Han] attacked Korea. In the summer, there was a drought. Gongsun Qing said: "When the Yellow Thearch performed the *feng* sacrifice, Heaven caused a drought and kept the *feng* mound dry for three years." The emperor thereupon issued an edict saying: "When Heaven causes the drought, is its meaning to keep the *feng* mound dry? May all under heaven be ordered to respectfully sacrifice to the Numinous Star."<sup>52</sup>

其明年，伐朝鮮。夏，旱。公孫卿曰：黃帝時封則天旱，乾封三年。上乃下詔：天旱，意乾封乎？其令天下尊祠靈星焉。

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<sup>50</sup> *Hanshu* 25A.1236.

<sup>51</sup> For a full discussion of this problematic issue, see my *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, 251.

<sup>52</sup> *Hanshu* 25B.1242. The "Numinous Star" is the Star of the Heavenly Fields (*tiantian xing* 天田星), representing agricultural blessings, see *Hanshu* 25A.1211-12.



The fire visitation of the Cypress Beam Terrace is again reported in the "Ben ji," the "Wu xing zhi," and the "Jiao si zhi." The "Ben ji" simply notes the incident without any further comment.<sup>53</sup> The "Wu xing zhi" provides the following interpretation:

In the first year of the era "Tai chu," in the eleventh month, on the day *yiyou*, the Cypress Beam Terrace in the Everlasting Palace was visited with a disaster. Before this, a great wind had developed from its chamber, and Xiahou Shichang had prognosticated the day of the visitation. Afterwards, there was the incident of Jiang Chong charging the Wei heir apparent with witchcraft.<sup>54</sup>

太初元年十一月乙酉，未央宮柏梁臺災。先是，大風發其屋，夏侯始昌先言其災曰。後有江充巫蠱衛太子事。

By contrast, the "Jiao si zhi" contains the following account:

The emperor returned [from Bohai 渤海] and because of the Cypress Beam fire he received the amount of [tribute goods from the assembled emissaries at Ganquan].<sup>55</sup> Gongsun Qing said: "When the Yellow Thearch completed the Azure Numen Terrace, it burnt down after twelve days. The thearch then ruled from the Bright Court; the Bright Court is Sweet Springs." Many of the masters of techniques said that among the thearchs and kings of old were those who had their capital in Sweet Springs. Thereafter, the emperor again held audience with the feudal lords at Sweet Springs, and he built lodges for the feudal lords at Sweet Springs.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Hanshu* 6.199.

<sup>54</sup> *Hanshu* 27A.1334. This again refers to the case of 91 B.C.; see above. Xiahou Shichang 夏侯始昌 (dates unknown), an erudite from the old state of Lu 魯, was an expert in the five canons (*wu jing* 五經) and particularly specialized in teaching the *Documents* and the Qi 齊 version of the *Songs*; see *Hanshu* 75.3154 where his prognostication of the Cypress Beam Terrace is noted.

<sup>55</sup> For the understanding of this very terse passage see *Hanshu buzhu* 漢書補注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983) 25B.4a·b.

<sup>56</sup> *Hanshu* 25B.1244-45.

上還，以柏梁災故，受計甘泉。公孫卿曰：黃帝就青靈臺，十二日燒，黃帝乃治明庭。明庭，甘泉也。方士多言古帝王有都甘泉者。其後天子又朝諸侯甘泉，其泉作諸侯邸。

The “twelve days” Gongsun Qing mentions here are not arbitrarily chosen: the Cypress Beam Terrace had been built in 115 B.C., and the fire of 104 B.C. occurred precisely in the twelfth year after the initial construction.<sup>57</sup> Here, as in the interpretation of the appearance of the tripod in 113 B.C.,<sup>58</sup> Gongsun, one of the leading *fangshi* 方士 from Qi at the imperial court, equates Han Wudi’s reign with the era of the Yellow Thearch by means of calendrical calculations. It is noteworthy that Gongsun relates the fire to the ritual center at Sweet Springs where Wudi just three years before had established the new sacrifices to Grand Unity and the Five Thearchs (*wu di* 五帝). The construction of the Ganquan altar followed a cosmological design proposed by another *fangshi*, Miu Ji 繆忌; not surprisingly, it was strongly criticized several decades later by Kuang Heng 匡衡 (chancellor 36–30 B.C.) in his attack on the remains of Han Wudi’s ritual system.<sup>59</sup>

The last of potentially inauspicious omens that is recorded in the “Jiao si zhi” for the reign of Wudi dates from 89 B.C.: the fall of meteorites in the old ritual center in the west, Yong. As usual, the “Ben ji” only records and dates the event, noting that its sound was “heard over a distance of four hundred *li*.”<sup>60</sup> The “Wu xing zhi” only slightly expands this account:

Under Wudi, in the fourth year of the era “Zheng he” (92-89 B.C), in the second month, on the day *dingyou*, there were two stones falling down in Yong; the sky was clear without clouds, and the sound was heard over a distance of four hundred *li*.<sup>61</sup>

武帝征和四年二月丁酉，隕石雍，二，天晏亡雲，聲聞四百里。

The “Jiao si zhi” goes far beyond these sober accounts:

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<sup>57</sup>See *Hanshu* 6.182.

<sup>58</sup>See *Hanshu* 25A.1227-28, *Shiji* 12.467, 28.1393.

<sup>59</sup>See Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, 154-92; for a translation and analysis of the memorial criticizing the altar, see my “Ritual, Text, and the Formation of the Canon: Historical Transitions of *wen* in Early China,” forthcoming in *T'oung Pao* 87 (2001).

<sup>60</sup>*Hanshu* 6.210.

<sup>61</sup>*Hanshu* 27C-B.1521.

Five years later, the emperor again performed the *feng* sacrifice at Mt. Tai. He traveled eastwards to Donglai 東萊 and gazed over the great sea below. In this year, in Yong county there were three sounds like thunder while the sky was without clouds; there was something resembling an azure-yellow rainbow vapor, and it was as if flying birds gathered south of Yuyang Palace. The sound could be heard over a distance of four hundred *li*. There were two stones falling down, black like moles. Officials in charge considered them to be auspicious omens that should be presented in the ancestral temple.<sup>62</sup>

後五年，上復修封於泰山。東游東萊，臨大海。是歲，雍縣無雲如雷者三，或如虹氣蒼黃，若飛鳥集棧陽宮南，聲聞四百里。隕石二，黑如黧，有司以爲美祥，以薦宗廟。

Contrary to its usual pattern of other omen passages, the “Jiao si zhi” here does not include direct speech from the original context, yet it still reports the reaction to the fall of the meteorites: they were boldly defined as auspicious signs (*mei xiang* 美祥) and presented in the ancestral temple. One may speculate how this account is related to neighboring passages in the same chapter where Ban Gu seems to portrait the emperor as being hopelessly lost to the manipulation of the *fangshi* at court; the presentation of the stones in the ancestral temple sounds almost ironical. However, the very unusual definition of meteorites as auspicious signs has its parallel in the above-quoted imperial hymn celebrating the capture of the unicorn. The “Tian wen zhi” – while silent on the event of 89 B.C. – presents a series of accounts on meteorites under the later Western Han emperors,<sup>63</sup> and in every single case the meteorites are highly calamitous portents; the same is true for the “Wu xing zhi.”<sup>64</sup> Jing Fang 京房 77-37 B.C.), when reciting to his own ruler Han Yuandi 漢元帝 (r. 49-33 B.C.) the calamities that had recently occurred, mentions the fall of stones in one breath with earthquakes.<sup>65</sup> The same understanding of this omen can be found in the *Qian Han ji* 前漢紀, which even in its preface mentions meteorites as unlucky signs.<sup>66</sup> This Eastern Han work parallels the “Wu xing zhi” in

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<sup>62</sup> *Hanshu* 25B.1247.

<sup>63</sup> *Hanshu* 26.1307-11.

<sup>64</sup> *Hanshu* 27C-C.1508-11.

<sup>65</sup> *Hanshu* 75.3162.

<sup>66</sup> *Qian Han ji* 前漢紀 (*Sibu congkan* ed.) 1.1a.

mentioning the event of 89 B.C. but refraining from any hint at the purportedly auspicious nature of these meteorites.<sup>67</sup>

### Conclusions

The omen accounts of the Wudi era suggest several conclusions on the historical changes in omen interpretation during the Western Han as well as on the nature and perspective of the different *Hanshu* chapters involved. As the widely diverging omen interpretations make clear, we are dealing with several identifiable voices from different times – voices that cannot be integrated into one synchronic layer of political debate. Instead, we need to reconstruct not only different ideological positions from different phases of the dynasty but also different audiences for the different interpretations.

The direct quotations from the “Monograph on Suburban Sacrifices” as well as the hymnic eulogies preserved in the “*Li yue zhi*” seem to come directly from Wudi’s time, while their surrounding, and often critical, narratives represent the retrospective voice of the historian. It is only very early in Wudi’s reign that a scholar like Dong Zhongshu offers his interpretation of an unlucky portent; and from precisely the same time – 134 B.C. – dates the emperor’s only edict in which he acknowledges the possibility of receiving both good and bad omens, and in which he asks his ministers for advise to guide him to sagacity.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps because of the trial that followed his interpretation of the fires of 135 B.C. and that almost led to his execution, Dong Zhongshu’s position at the imperial court appears to have been quite different from that of the later omen experts Jing Fang or Liu Xiang, although we may assume that some of the retrospective “*Wu xing zhi*” interpretations reflect authentic but originally suppressed views from the Wudi period itself.

Mainly through his ritual activities – the reforms of the state sacrificial system, the invention of reign devices, the change of the cosmic patron phase for the dynasty, etc. – Han Wudi had assumed the role of a cosmic emperor who modeled himself on the now preeminent figure of the Yellow Thearch. The *fangshi* who by the time of the sacrificial reforms dominated the discussion of ritual matters at the imperial court strengthened their position by furnishing information about unusual events that were without exception defined as auspicious. Although the emperor was at times skeptical and even sent out spies to inquire about the facts of particular cases, his ultimate determination to see even ambiguous signs established as benign bespeaks both his authority and anxiety: the authority of a monarch who had led the Han dynasty to the height

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<sup>67</sup> *Qian Han ji* 15.7a-b.

<sup>68</sup> *Hanshu* 6.160-61 In this edict, Han Wudi mentions the proliferation of good and the absence of bad omens in the ages of the sage rulers antiquity.

of its power and who was – compared to any of his successors – apparently much less vulnerable to criticism from his officials, and his anxiety to make manifest the cosmic support upon which his political legitimacy was now based. Unusual events rarely went unnoticed; with or without precedent, they were either defined (or redefined), and they were celebrated and presented to the spirits in the state sacrifices. Of the altogether eleven edicts or proclamations Han Wudi issued on omens, eight date from the most intensive phase of ritual reforms and activities between 113 and 103 B.C. All of the emperor's statements are celebratory, acknowledging the omens as cosmic responses to successful sacrifices; almost all of these omens are therefore spatially related to the sacrificial sites.<sup>69</sup>

Wudi's political sovereignty and apparent control over the interpretation of omens was beyond the reach of the Western Han emperors who followed him. Instead, court officials versed in historical precedents and cosmological systems turned into authorities on omen interpretation and were thus acknowledged as political thinkers who could judge a ruler's performance and legitimation. Although authority in omen interpretation rested to some extent in divination and prognostication techniques, it was fundamentally grounded in the ability to draw on precedents from the past in order to furnish explanations for the present. Like the *Gongyang* scholar Dong Zhongshu several decades earlier, all the major interpreters of omens were now, first and foremost, learned historical scholars and cosmological thinkers versed in the traditional canon: later Western Han omen experts like Jing Fang, Xiahou Sheng 夏侯勝 (fl. 70 B.C.), Liu Xiang, Gu Yong 谷永 (d. 8 B.C.), Li Xun 李尋 (fl. 5 B.C.), Sui Meng 眭孟 (i.e., Sui Hong 弘, fl. 78 B.C.) or Liu Xin whose opinions are cited in the "Wu xing zhi" were without exception accomplished scholars of the *Chunqiu*, the *Shu* 書 or the *Yi* 易. Their works on omen interpretation are, accordingly, listed as affiliated with the respective canons in the *Hanshu* "Monograph on Arts and Letters" ("Yi wen zhi" 藝文志); the "Wu xing zhi" is believed to include substantial parts of these otherwise lost writings. The exegesis of the canon and its accompanying

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<sup>69</sup> These official statements comprise the following: in 113 B.C., acknowledging the discovery of the tripod and the water birth of a horse (*Hanshu* 6.185); in 110 B.C., acknowledging the capture of a rare deer (6.190); in the same year, acknowledging lights, voices, and other favors (6.191); in 109 B.C., acknowledging the growth of the numinous *zhi* grass in Ganquan (6.193); in 107 B.C., acknowledging nightly flames of light (6.195); in 106, 105, and 103 B.C., acknowledging various auspicious responses to the sacrifices (6.196, 198, 200). In addition, an edict of 95 B.C. retrospectively celebrates the capture of the unicorn and of the heavenly horses, both coming from the west (6.206). The last official statement on an omen dates from 88 B.C. when the emperor again acknowledged cosmic lights during the sacrifices (6.211).

traditions,<sup>70</sup> already officially institutionalized and promoted in Qin times and later revitalized under Han Wudi, had gradually turned into one of the sharpest weapons of political criticism in the hands of the scholarly elite vis-à-vis the emperor himself.

From this perspective we can reconsider the significance of the "Wu xing zhi" as a composite work that assembles the omen discussions of scholars who – with the exception of Dong Zhongshu – were active during the latter decades of the Western Han dynasty when omenology had become firmly rooted in textual authority. The "Wu xing zhi" includes interpretations of omens both past and present: phenomena occurring in the days of Jing Fang, Liu Xiang, Liu Xin, and others quoted in the "Wu xing zhi" were interpreted and presented as direct interventions into contemporary political practice, while portents of the past, including those of the Han Wudi period, were (re)constructed in order to generate historical paradigms that were again meant to serve as standards for the present. As the above-cited examples illustrate, these retrospective interpretations, together with their counterparts in the "Tian wen zhi," were both predisposed and selective: the interpretations in the "Wu xing zhi" include only those portents that could be exploited for political criticism; apparently, the scholars represented here had no interest in auspicious omens of the past, except to revise them into unlucky signs. From interpretations like those of the comet of 110 and the Cypress Beam Terrace fire of 104 B.C. – both of which were now related to the witchcraft incident of 91 B.C. – it is evident that Han Wudi was not the actual addressee of the political message. As in the case of retrospective *Chunqiu* interpretation, the judgement of the past was meaningful as a warning to the present; and the two men who are most often quoted in the "Wu xing zhi" – Jing Fang and Liu Xiang – addressed their interpretations *about* events from the Wudi era as precedents for the understanding of current phenomena *towards* their own rulers. In Liu Xiang's case, we are explicitly informed that he composed his collection of omens in direct response to, and as a warning against, the rising power of the Wang 王 clan at court.<sup>71</sup>

While Han Wudi had boldly defined his own cosmic position and all omens that could be exploited to bolster it, his successors had simply to live with, and struggle with, the notions of *wu xing* 五行 correlative cosmology and its close-meshed web of historical precedents and paradigms: unable to control

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<sup>70</sup>These traditions included a broad range of apocryphal texts that were also marshalled in omen interpretations. Even *fangshi* like Gongsun Qing had frequently referred to old writings, albeit to those purportedly going back to the Yellow Thearch. It seems difficult to draw sharp distinctions between the different textual traditions that in fact may all have grown out of and around the state-sponsored canon.

<sup>71</sup>*Hanshu* 36.1949-50.

politically the new group of textual specialists well-versed in the canon, they were gradually transformed from subjects into objects of omen interpretation, i.e., as they appear in the studies by Eberhard and Bielenstein (who have, however, anachronistically projected this situation of the mid-first century B.C. back into all earlier Western Han reigns). As a result, an emperor like Han Chengdi 成帝 (r. 32-7 B.C.) who reigned vis-à-vis a group of powerful scholars capable of marshalling authoritative texts on any political and ritual question, saw himself forced to issue edict after edict acknowledging and bewailing the lack of virtue that had been relentlessly proven by the continuously swelling stream of omen observations. If this is more than just a reflection of a new imperial rhetoric – a question that needs more research – it indicates a substantial shift in the power balance between the emperor and his officials. Nevertheless, ample recognition of positive omens in the decades after Wudi, expressed richly in a series of celebratory imperial reign devices, shows that omenology also continued to be marshalled in support of the ruler.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, the retrospective “Wu xing zhi” records for the Wudi period served yet another purpose. Transforming originally positive omen readings into negative ones, Liu Xiang and his contemporaries – among them Chengdi’s powerful chancellor Kuang Heng – contributed to the overall reconstruction of Western Han ritual and political culture and the promotion of a new classicism. As the official omenology under Wudi had been intimately related to his notion of cosmic rulership, to the construction of a new set of cosmic state sacrifices, and to the legitimation of military expansionism, its mid-first century B.C. revision was only part of a broader “rectification” of political ideology and practice.

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<sup>72</sup>See Michael Loewe, *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China*, 139. More research, however, is necessary here; I hope to follow up with a separate study of later Western Han omens.

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