

The Connection between the Ancient Chinese Asterism System and the Chinese Feudal System: A Discussion Centering on the Three Enclosure, Four Symbols, and Twenty-Eight Constellations

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Abstract: The system of asterism in ancient China was inextricably linked with the feudal system. Starting from the origin, classification and naming methods of the asterism system, this paper illustrates the inner connection between the asterism system and the feudal system. From the philosophical perspective of "matter determines consciousness and consciousness reacts to matter", we analyze the constraints of the feudal system on the naming system of asterism and the profound influence of the system on the feudal system. The in-depth analysis of the relationship between the asterism system and the feudal system helps people to understand the ideas, beliefs and decisions under the feudal system in ancient China. The results of this paper will be useful for modern people to understand the ancient Chinese feudal system more comprehensively and critically, and will be of great value to the study of Chinese history.

Keywords: Celestial Official System; Feudal System; Three Enclosures; Four Symbols; Twenty-eight Constellations; Consciousness; Matter

1. Introduction

The ancient Chinese cosmological view has a long and storied history, with origins that can be traced back to the pre-Qin period. In the ancient Chinese view of the universe, the Celestial Official is one of the important components. China is a country with a long history and rich culture, and it has unique aspects in the development of science and technology. Among these, the observation and naming of celestial phenomena is an important part of ancient Chinese science. The ancestors used

celestial observations to identify and name different Celestial Officials and used them to predict astronomy, geography, and meteorology. This accumulated experience and knowledge have been passed down to the present day.

The feudal system was the main manifestation of the ancient Chinese political system, and the Celestial Official was closely related to the feudal system. In the feudal system, monarchs often used celestial phenomena to maintain their authority and ruling status. Therefore, the naming of the Celestial Officials occupied a pivotal position in the ancient Chinese political and cultural system, closely related to the bureaucratic system, official promotion, and imperial examinations. Exploring the connection between the ancient Chinese Celestial Official system and the Chinese feudal system has high historical value and practical significance. It can help us better understand ancient Chinese society and humanities, and carry forward the essence of ancient Chinese scientific and cultural heritage. This research has significant implications for the study of history, culture, and science. This article aims to further explore the internal connection between the Celestial Official system and the feudal system through discussions on the origin, classification, and naming methods of the ancient Chinese Celestial Official system.

2. Ancient Chinese Celestial Official System and Chinese Feudal System

The Chinese feudal system refers to a socio-political system that existed in China from the Zhou Dynasty. Under this system, the state was viewed as the private property of the ruler, based on the political system of the family and its descendants. In the feudal system, the

emperor was seen as the sacred monarch, the ruler of the nation, under whom local administrative regions and various public offices were established, managed by officials to handle regional affairs. Thus, systems such as the bureaucratic system, the examination system, and the feudal ritual system were established to maintain their ruling position. The structure of the Chinese feudal system consisted of multiple layers, including: the emperor, the bureaucratic class and families; peasants and landowners; craftsmen and merchants; scholars and cultural elites. In ancient China, the feudal system was closely related to the Celestial Official system, with the number and rank of Celestial Officials corresponding to the number and rank of official positions.^[1]



Figure 1. Suzhou Stone Astronomical Chart (Top North, Bottom South, Left East, Right West)

In ancient Chinese culture, Celestial Officials refer to groups of stars endowed with specific meanings. The core system within Celestial Officials is the Three Enclosures, the Four Symbols, and the Twenty-Eight Constellations, which are the three basic concepts of ancient Chinese astronomy. These concepts mainly describe the positions and movements of celestial bodies in the sky. The Three Enclosures refer to the Supreme Palace Enclosure, the Heavenly Market Enclosure, and the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, which are the three most important constellations in the sky. The Four Symbols are the Vermilion Bird, the Azure Dragon, the White Tiger, and the Black Tortoise, representing the southeast, northeast, southwest, and northwest directions, respectively. The Twenty-Eight Constellations

refer to twenty-eight sections of the sky, each corresponding to a specific constellation.

The Three Enclosures represent the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, the Supreme Palace Enclosure, and the Heavenly Market Enclosure, named by early Chinese astronomers. The Purple Forbidden Enclosure, being the central one of the Three Enclosures, symbolizes the center of the nation's power (see Figure 1, the central small circle in the Suzhou Stone Astronomical Chart represents the Purple Forbidden Enclosure). According to the "Step Heaven Song," the Purple Forbidden Enclosure contains nearly a hundred stars, with the most important being the central Purple Star, which is now the Polaris, representing the position of the Celestial Emperor. Surrounding the Purple Star, dozens of stars have been named, such as Superior Governor, Junior Governor, Superior Assistant, Junior Assistant, Superior Guardian, Junior Guardian, and Junior Chancellor. These names can all find corresponding positions in the imperial palace, most of which are positions close to the emperor. The Supreme Palace Enclosure is also a part of traditional Chinese astronomy, similar to the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, and is one of the three great enclosures. "Supreme" implies extreme importance; "Palace" here implies something very delicate and detailed; "Enclosure" implies a wall or a circle formed by walls, which can be interpreted as "an extremely important and minutely detailed circle in the sky." In the night sky, the Supreme Palace Enclosure envelops the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, slightly off to the upper left side of it (see Figure 1, in the Suzhou Stone Astronomical Chart, the northeast direction of the Purple Forbidden Enclosure represents the Supreme Palace Enclosure). Therefore, the name Supreme Palace Enclosure signifies the handling of important minutiae and also represents the importance of the heavenly secrets and human affairs. The Supreme Palace Enclosure has fewer stars than the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, comprising only twenty-one stars, but it also holds an extremely important position. The names of the stars in the Supreme Palace Enclosure are also carefully chosen, all being names of officials in the court, such as the Three Councillors, the Nine Ministers, the Five Seigniors, etc. Lastly, the lowest of the Three

Enclosures, the Heavenly Market Enclosure, symbolizes the market in the sky. In the sky, the Heavenly Market Enclosure also envelops the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, slightly off to the lower left side of it (see Figure 1, in the Suzhou Stone Astronomical Chart, the southeast direction of the Purple Forbidden Enclosure represents the Heavenly Market Enclosure [2]). The naming of the Celestial Officials in the Heavenly Market Enclosure includes: Market Tower, Chariot Shops, Butcher Shops, etc. [3]

The Twenty-Eight Constellations are another concept in astronomy used to describe the positions and movements of celestial bodies. Each mansion occupies a certain space in the sky. These constellations are located within the zodiacal belt of the sky, a wide region encircling Earth, roughly coinciding with the path of the Sun. The constellations were divided and named by ancient Chinese astronomers and diviners based on their observations of the movements, appearances, and disappearances of stars within the zodiacal belt. They constitute twenty-eight regions into which the sky is divided, each region corresponding to a specific constellation. These twenty-eight constellations are further grouped into four groups, forming the seven constellations of the Azure Dragon of the East, the seven constellations of the Black Tortoise of the North, the seven constellations of the White Tiger of the West, and the seven constellations of the Vermilion Bird of the South. These four regions, demarcated by mythological creatures, make up the Four Symbols that have been transmitted through a thousand years. These constellations hold important reference value for astronomers in the study of astronomical phenomena. Within the feudal system, the Twenty-Eight Constellations were used to measure time and schedule various activities, serving as an important calendar system and divination tool. They were often associated with official positions, titles, ritual systems, agricultural seasons, farming tools, and folk customs, becoming significant cultural symbols in feudal society. [4]

In summary, the Three Enclosures, Four Symbols, and Twenty-Eight Constellations are fundamental concepts in ancient Chinese astronomy. They are not only related to celestial phenomena but also endowed with

profound cultural connotations. The formation and transmission of these concepts reflect not only the development of ancient Chinese astronomy but also the diversity and deep traditions of ancient culture.

3. The Relationship between the Ancient Chinese Celestial Official System and the Feudal System

The Celestial Official system is a reflection of humanity's cognition and understanding of the universe and natural phenomena, belonging to the realm of ideology. As a form of social and historical configuration, the feudal system touches on material aspects in its politics, economy, culture, and more. In the field of philosophy, matter and consciousness have always been significant issues. Matter refers to the objectively existing material world, while consciousness is the subjective realm of mental phenomena. "Matter determines consciousness, and consciousness reacts back upon matter" is a classic philosophical relation; they are two interconnected and interacting aspects. The material conditions of human life influence and shape human thought and consciousness, which in turn can react upon and change the social environment and material living conditions. The interplay and mutual constraints between the Celestial Official system and the feudal system reflect this philosophical view of the determination of consciousness by material conditions and vice versa.

3.1 Material Determines Consciousness – The Determining Role of the Feudal System on the Celestial Official System

Sima Qian once said in the "Records of the Grand Historian": "Officials are derived from the Celestial Officials. The constellations have their hierarchies, just like the ranks of officials, thus they are called the Celestial Officials." [5] The Celestial Official system was largely determined by the structure, names, and statuses within the feudal system. The ancestors constructed a virtual world in the sky, forming a "unity of heaven and man."

On a macro level, the names and positions of the Celestial Official system were determined by the class structure under the feudal system. For example, the Purple Forbidden Enclosure at the very center of the northern sky symbolizes the central position and power of

the imperial palace because, in the structure of the feudal system, the emperor is the absolute core. Consequently, the ancestors designated the most central position in the sky as the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, corresponding to the center of the feudal system—the imperial palace. The Supreme Palace Enclosure, which is offset from the center, symbolizes the imperial court. "The Great Tang Dynasty Beginning Era Astrological Manual," Volume 64, Section 46, describes the function of the Supreme Palace Enclosure as follows: "The Supreme Palace is where authority and governance reside. The Supreme Palace represents the heavenly court, administering justice and rewards, overseeing promotions and the conferment of virtue, the stars receiving mandates, the deities in charge of specific duties, resolving emotions and investigating doubts."^[6] This indicates that the Supreme Palace Enclosure represented the enforcement area of the heavenly imperial city created by the ancestors, the court surrounding and assisting the emperor. The ancestors placed the Supreme Palace Enclosure in a non-central position to reflect its lower status than the Purple Forbidden Enclosure—the symbol of the imperial palace. The Heavenly Market Enclosure, which is also not in the central position, symbolizes the common people and citizens. As the name suggests, the Heavenly Market Enclosure represents the market in the sky, symbolizing the Chinese market and, by extension, the Chinese populace, because the common people are the main characters in the market. The Heavenly Market Enclosure is likewise offset from the center, affirming that the ancient Chinese Celestial Official system was determined by the structure of the feudal system because, in the Feudalism of China, the status of the populace is below that of the imperial palace; therefore, the Heavenly Market Enclosure can only be around the Purple Forbidden Enclosure. By dividing the sky into regions of different positions, the ancestors correlated the hierarchical structure of the feudal system with the correct or otherwise positions in the celestial regions. To sum up, from a macro perspective, the establishment of the names and positions in the Celestial Official system was determined by the class structure under the feudal system. On a micro level, the name of each Celestial

Official was determined by the names of positions within different classes under the feudal system.

The Purple Forbidden Enclosure was significantly influenced by the positions in the imperial palace within the Chinese feudal system. As recorded in the "Step Heaven Song," "In the central of the North Pole lies the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, with the five stars of the North Pole in it. The Emperor's seat is the second star, the third star is where the children reside. The first is called the Crown Prince, the fourth is the imperial harem, and the fifth is the Heavenly Pivot."^[3] It is evident that the names of the Celestial Officials within the Purple Forbidden Enclosure, such as the North Pole five stars, the Emperor, and the children, symbolize the most central figures in the imperial palace. The Celestial Officials of the Purple Forbidden Enclosure are divided into left and right sections. The left Enclosure has eight stars, namely the Left Pivot, Superior Governor, Junior Governor, Superior Assistant, Junior Assistant, Superior Guard, Junior Guard, and Junior Chancellor; the right Enclosure has seven stars, which are the Right Pivot, Junior Commander, Superior Counselor, Junior Counselor, Superior Guard, Junior Guard, and Superior Chancellor. The feudal system determined the naming and status of the Purple Forbidden Enclosure. The eight stars of the left Enclosure were determined by the names of the Left Prime Minister, Superior Prime Minister, Junior Prime Minister, Superior Assistant Minister, Junior Assistant Minister, Superior Guard, Junior Guard, and Junior Prime Minister, while the seven stars of the right Enclosure were determined by the names of the Right Prime Minister, Junior Judge, Superior Tutor, Junior Tutor, West Superior Guard, West Junior Guard, and Superior Chancellor.^[7]

The Supreme Palace Enclosure was largely determined by the names of court positions within the Chinese feudal system. "The Great Tang Dynasty Beginning Era Astrological Manual," Volume 64, Section 46, describes the Supreme Palace Enclosure as follows: "The Supreme Palace's western fence holds authority and executes the disobedient. The eastern fence holds beauty and resists the marquis and kings. The Supreme Palace is where authority and governance reside. The

Supreme Palace represents the heavenly court, administering justice and rewards, overseeing promotions and the conferment of virtue, the stars receiving mandates, the deities in charge of specific duties, resolving emotions and investigating doubts. The two stars of the southern fence, the eastern star represents the left law enforcer, the image of the court judge; the western star is the right law enforcer, the image of the imperial censor. The law enforcers' role is to identify and accuse the cunning, the two stars guard the southern gate, the east of the left law enforcer is the east gate, and the west of the right law enforcer is the west right gate."^[6] In ancient times, a specific area was designated in the sky to build the highest administrative institution of the heavenly court—the Supreme Palace Enclosure, for handling governance and affairs. The composition of people in this part of the sky included civil and military officials who governed the world, wise men and experts who expressed profound opinions, and deities leading the rise and fall of all things in nature. In the Supreme Palace Enclosure, the "Step Heaven Song" records the naming of its Celestial Officials as Nine Ministers, Princes, and Five Emperors. ^[3] From these celestial names, it is apparent that the Supreme Palace Enclosure reflected the court's civil and military officials under the feudal system. In the naming process, even the names of positions were directly used, such as the Three Councillors and Nine Ministers. Clearly, the naming of these Celestial Officials was still based on the official position system of the feudal empire.

The Heavenly Market Enclosure was significantly influenced by the names of the common people within the Chinese feudal system. In the Heavenly Market Enclosure, the "Step Heaven Song" records the names of its Celestial Officials as the Black Market, Chariot Shops, Butcher Shops, etc.^[3] As the name of the Heavenly Market Enclosure suggests, it can be understood as a market in the sky. The feudal system determined the naming and status of the Heavenly Market Enclosure, with most of the names of its Celestial Officials related to the market and common people.

In summary, although the stars in the sky have existed for billions of years, the ancestors' naming of the Celestial Officials was based on

the structural names under the feudal system, projecting an "imperial city" in the sky. The hierarchical order within the Celestial Official system reflects the socio-historical and cultural information it contains. The naming of Celestial Officials not only reveals the correspondence between ancient constellations and earthly official positions but also mirrors the official model and system of the feudal empire. This hierarchical order was established within the feudal socio-political system, reflecting the social class differentiation and power structure of the time. The existing material—political structure—greatly influenced and restricted the consciousness of the Chinese under the feudal system regarding the sky—the Celestial Official naming system. This formed a true "unity of heaven and man."

3.2 Consciousness Reacts Back Upon Matter – The Influence of the Celestial Official System on the Chinese Feudal System

The naming, movements, and changes of the Celestial Official system had a profound impact on the state of the imperial court, emperor's decisions, official status, and the lives of the common people under the Chinese feudal system.

In ancient China, the formation and development of the Celestial Official system involved people's consciousness, cultural traditions, and social systems, and also had a profound impact on the feudal system. Ancient Chinese people, through long-term astronomical observations, identified and named different Celestial Officials, creating a rich Celestial Official system. In feudal society, monarchs often used celestial and astral phenomena to maintain their authority and ruling status, and the Celestial Official system provided a theoretical foundation and support for administrative management within the feudal system. Emperors throughout the ages used celestial phenomena to predict natural and man-made disasters, and to substantiate their legitimate status and governance capabilities. Moreover, numerous officials would change their judgments based on astral phenomena, while the lives of the common people were also influenced by predictions based on these phenomena.

The Celestial Official system had a significant

impact on the decisions of emperors under the Chinese feudal system. It was recorded in Volume 30 of the "Book of Han," the "Treatise on Arts and Writings," that: "Astronomy, which sequences the twenty-eight constellations and the movements of the five planets and the sun and moon, records omens of good and bad fortune, and is what the sage kings can use to assist governance."^[8] This indicates that astronomy was used to predict the omens of good or bad fortune, and emperors could refer to it for governing. This record shows that the movements of the Celestial Officials already had a considerable impact on ideology and decision-making. The emperor could influence changes in national policy through variations observed in the Celestial Officials. Based on the Celestial Official system formed by the feudal system, it, in turn, affected the content and implementation of national policies.

Furthermore, the Celestial Official system also had a significant impact on the decisions and statuses of court officials under the Chinese feudal system. Li Deyu, in his writing "Petition Prompted by the Change of Stars," mentioned, "Recently, seeing Yinghuo (Scintillating Star) proceeding in its direct motion, pressing close to the position of the Prime Minister on the sky, I truly fear divine retribution, bringing personal disaster. In the seventh year of the Wude era, Yinghuo (Scintillating Star) invaded the position of the Left Law-Enforcer on the sky, and Xiao Yu, the Right Manager, resigned; in the fifteenth year of the Zhenguan era, Yinghuo (Scintillating Star) invaded the position of the Prime Minister on the sky, and Gao Shilian, the Left Manager, resigned. There are many such examples in the national history. I, a minister of slight merit and humble ability, unworthy of the prime minister's position, should I presumptuously accept the favor and kindness... I prostrate in hope of Your Holy Compassion, as I am the sole pillar of my family in the realm, with a hundred mouths young and naive, all looking up to me for protection, and the worship of our family's lineage rests upon me. I thus request exemption from the public office and retreat to private life. I hope to live quietly, content like Emperor Yao, and to not feel shame in comparison to the Prime Ministers of the Han

dynasty. I plead for Your Imperial Grace not to be so pressing."^[9] This passage directly reflects how the material social reality under the Chinese feudal system was influenced by the Celestial Official system. Li Deyu, because of seeing Yinghuo (Scintillating Star)—which is Mars in current astronomy—approaching the Prime Minister's area on the sky, was deeply worried and ultimately resigned from his office. His concern stemmed from historical instances where officials resigned when Yinghuo approached the Prime Minister's position. Driven by belief in astral omens, Li Deyu ultimately chose to step down. After Li Deyu's resignation, not only did he find himself in dire straits, but it also affected those around him to a certain extent. This could have led other officials to make similar choices based on like astrological beliefs, thereby affecting the entire political and social environment. Such influence was especially prominent in the feudal bureaucratic society of the time, reflecting how consciousness and beliefs could, to some extent, react upon material life and social practices.

The Celestial Official system also had an important impact on the lives of the common people. The "Book of Han, Treatise on Astronomy" records: "When two of the five planets, Sui (Year Star) converge with Tian (Coverage Star), it is an omen of internal turmoil; when it (Sui Star) converge with the Chen (Time Star), it signifies plots and changes of position; convergence with Yinghuo (Scintillating Star) indicates famine or drought; with the white planet, it indicates gatherings of mourning or floods. When the white planet is in the south and the year star in the north, it is called 'Mumu,' indicating an abundant harvest. When the white planet is in the north and the year star in the south, the harvest can be either good or poor."^[10] This implies that the Celestial Official system had a significant impact on the lives of the common people, as they would adjust their daily life and productive activities based on predictions made from the trajectories of the Celestial Officials' movements. Such influence was far from minor, even directly related to matters of life and death. Therefore, the Celestial Official system also had a decisive impact on the lives of the common people.

In conclusion, the Celestial Official system had a profound impact on ideology and decision-making within the feudal system. In ancient China, celestial phenomena held significant symbolic meaning and were one of the emblems of authority and rule within the feudal system. The Celestial Official system played an irreplaceable role in the political and administrative management of the feudal state. It became an important element of feudal ideology, showcasing the authority and noble status of the rulers while also emphasizing the obligations and responsibilities between the sovereign and the subjects. The Celestial Official system gradually became an eternal rule of the highest order, strengthening identification with the feudal system by maintaining a connection with the natural order of heaven and earth.

4. Conclusion

This paper starts with the origin, classification, and naming methods of the Celestial Official system, elucidating its intrinsic connection with the feudal system, and analyzes the impact of the Celestial Official system on the Chinese feudal system. The Celestial Official system was largely determined by the structure, names, and statuses within the feudal system, projecting an "imperial city" in the sky. In turn, the Celestial Official system profoundly influenced the structure of the imperial court, emperor's decisions, and official statuses under the Chinese feudal system. The two influenced and constrained each other, echoing the philosophical viewpoint that "matter determines consciousness, and consciousness reacts upon matter."

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