

# The Moon as a Celestial Body and God in the Buddhist Worldview: From India to China

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**Abstract:** The Moon appears in the early Buddhist canon as a celestial body orbiting around Mount Meru while at the same time being a god (Candra or Soma). The Moon later appears in Abhidharma literature, in which it is described as a mobile residence for the lunar deities. Following the introduction of Mantrayāna practices into China, the Moon appears in maṇḍalas and other illustrated forms, yet these representations are not uniform. For instance, we see Candra as a driver of a chariot pulled by geese in one instance, and then elsewhere the Moon as a seated figure with a hare in hand. At the same time, esoteric interpretations apply symbolic and metaphorical meanings to the Moon, while astrology and the seven-day week understood the Moon in a whole other way. The Moon in the East Asian Buddhist worldview became a multifaceted figure simultaneously embodying different concepts from various time periods. This study primarily examines the transition of the Moon from the Āgamas to the early phase of Mantrayāna (Esoteric Buddhism) in China.

**Keywords:** Moon, Abhidharma, Āgamas, Cosmology, Candra

The Moon is a universal object in the ancient literatures of the world. The Moon has always been present within the Buddhist worldview, but its identity and functions are variable depending on the time period and context. This study demonstrates that the Moon as a deity and astral body underwent a number of transformations over time as it progressed from the early centuries of Buddhism in India. The evolution of the Moon in Chinese Buddhism, I argue, shows how various intellectual, cultural, and even artistic forces shaped the interpretation and representation of this astral body and deity.

### The Moon in Early Indic and Chinese Sources

The Moon was utilised in timekeeping in the earliest records of India. Pingree explains that the inscriptions of Aśoka in the mid-third century BCE—the earliest instance of writing in India—refer to three *ṛtus* (seasons), each which are comprised of four months (*cātummāsa*), as well as *nakṣatras*.<sup>1</sup> The *nakṣatras* (translated as lunar mansions or lunar stations) are constellations in relative proximity to the lunar orbit, either 28 or 27 in number. The Moon will transit through them over the course of the lunar revolution period of 27.32 days. The dimensions of the *nakṣatras* were originally measured with *muhūrtas* (the day is divided into 30 *muhūrtas*). Dimensions of the *nakṣatras* are given in the different recensions of the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*, which is a manual of divination and associated lore attached to an entirely unrelated Buddhist tale about the Buddha liberating his disciple Ānanda from captivity after a low-caste girl sought to marry him. As Zenba points out, Kṛttikā, which in ancient sources was listed as the first *nakṣatra*, is defined as 10 *muhūrtas* in the Sanskrit recension, whereas the Tibetan translation gives 30 *muhūrtas*. There are two Chinese translations of the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*: the *Modengjia jing* 摩登伽經 [Ch. *Mātañ-*

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<sup>1</sup> Pingree, 'A Note on the Calendars Used in Early Indian Inscriptions', 355–59.

*ga-sūtra*] and *Shetoujian Taizi ershiba xiu jing* 捨頭諫太子二十八宿經 [Sūtra of Prince Śārdūla and the Twenty-Eight Lunar Stations]. The former gives 12 *mubūrtas* and the latter gives 30 *mubūrtas* for Kṛttikā.<sup>2</sup> Other Indic sources also show that the *yogatārās* (stellar coordinates) can also differ.<sup>3</sup> The defined parameters and exact positions of the *nakṣatras* were clearly variable.

Another aspect of the ancient Indian calendar was the division of lunar phases into two parts or portions (*pakṣas*). These are the periods of lunar waning (*kṛṣṇa-pakṣa*) and waxing (*śukla-pakṣa*). Each *pakṣa* is comprised of 15 *tithis* ('lunar days'), thus both *pakṣas* together constitute one month of time.<sup>4</sup> The lunar phases could be used for symbolic purposes in Buddhist literature, which carried over into Chinese translation. For example, the *Da bore boluomiduo jing* 大般若波羅蜜多經 [Skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*], which was translated into Chinese by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) in 663, has the following line:

Also, it is like the Waxing Moon, in that there is increase day by day. The bodhisattvas practice profound *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of wisdom); it gradually increases from the first aspiration of mind until the realization of the sought after unexcelled perfect awakening. Also, it is like the Waning Moon, in that there is decrease day by day. The bodhisattvas practice profound *prajñāpāramitā*, and the afflictions and latent aspects [of afflictions] gradually decrease. 又如白月, 日日增長, 諸菩薩眾行深般若波羅蜜多, 從初發心乃至證得所求無上正等菩提漸漸增長。又如黑月, 日日減盡, 諸菩薩眾行深般若波羅蜜多, 煩惱隨眠漸漸減盡。<sup>5</sup>

Buddhism early on had its theories regarding the lunar phases. The *Chang Ahan jing* 長阿含經 [Skt. *Dīrghāgama*], translated by Bud-

<sup>2</sup> Zenba, 'Matōga gyō no tenmonrekisū ni tsuite', 174.

<sup>3</sup> Pingree and Morrissey, 'On the Identification of the Yogatārās of the Indian Nakṣatras', 99–119.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on *tithis*, see Yano, *Mikkyō senseijutsu*, 123–31.

<sup>5</sup> T no. 220, 7: 927a4–8.

dhayaśas (Fotuoyeshe 佛陀耶舍) and Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 in 412–413, gives the following explanation of the waxing period:

Furthermore, why does the moonlight gradually grow? There are also three causes-conditions that make the moonlight gradually grow. What are those three? 1. The Moon is in direct opposition [to the Sun], hence the moonlight grows. 2. The ministers of the lunar palace all wear dark clothing. On the fifteenth day [of the month] the lunar devas sit in one place and together enjoy merrymaking. The luminosity pervades [to the extent that it] suppresses the luminosity of [each of] the devas, hence the light becomes full. It is like how when a great torch is burnt among lamps, it suppresses the light of the lamps. The lunar devas are also like this, in that on the fifteenth day among the devas their individual lights are suppressed completely and the [collective] luminosity alone illuminates. The second cause-condition is also like this. 3. Although the solar devas have sixty rays of light illuminating the lunar palace, on the fifteenth day, the lunar devas can shine back the light, making it uncovered. This is the third cause-condition. There is no increase or decrease [in light] when the lunar palace is round and full. Furthermore, why does the Moon have a black shadow? It is because the shadow of the Jambū Tree is on the Moon that the Moon has a shadow. 復以何緣月光漸滿? 復有三因緣使月光漸滿. 何等為三? 一者月向正方, 是故月光滿. 二者月宮諸臣盡著青衣, 彼月天子以十五日處中而坐, 共相娛樂, 光明遍照, 遏諸天光, 故光普滿. 猶如眾燈燭中燃大炬火, 遏諸燈明, 彼月天子亦復如是, 以十五日在天眾中, 遏絕眾明, 其光獨照, 亦復如是, 是為二因緣. 三者日天子雖有六十光照於月宮, 十五日時月天子能以光明逆照, 使不掩翳, 是為三因緣, 月宮團滿無有損減. 復以何緣月有黑影? 以閻浮樹影在於月中, 故月有影.<sup>6</sup>

The reference to the Jambū Tree as the source of the ‘shadows’ on the Moon (i.e., the craters on the lunar surface) is noteworthy, since there is no reference to a hare. The lunar hare—the ‘hare-marked moon’—is seen in the *Mahābhārata* and other sources.<sup>7</sup> The *Dirghāgama*

<sup>6</sup> T no. 1, 1: 147b15–27.

perceives the shadow of a tree on the Moon, rather than a rabbit. The association between the hare and the Moon would become significant in later centuries, as we will see below.

Another important observation is that the *Dīrghāgama* uses the *amānta* system, since the fifteenth day of the month falls on the Full Moon, which would mean the first day would correspond to the New Moon. This is different from the *pūrṇimānta* system, in which the month starts from the Full Moon. There were multiple calendars in use in India during the general period in question (the turn of the Common Era), some of which evidently used Macedonian months. Pingree states, ‘Macedonian months, presumably *amānta* and probably originally equated with Babylonian months, occur in a Śaka inscription from Takṣaśilā dated in the year 78 and in six inscriptions from various sites dated from between the years 11 and 51 of Kaniṣka.’<sup>8</sup> It is possible that the calendrical model of the *Dīrghāgama* was derived from this earlier model of months.

The *Dīrghāgama* in the above citation seems to incorporate three separate explanations for the lunar phases. The second explanation suggests the collective brilliance of the inhabitants of the lunar palace produce the phenomenon of a Full Moon. The Moon, then, is imagined not as a single deity, but rather as a palace of many devas, complete with a bureaucracy. If we take all three explanations together, this scenario imagines that the beings on the Moon all come together regularly once a month and ‘shine back’ the light of the Moon, which produces the brilliance of the Full Moon, in contrast to other times, when the dark clothing of the ministers would apparently not allow for this.

When we turn to Vedic literature, the Moon is a deity known as Candra, Indu or Soma. Gansten notes, ‘Like Sūrya, he is one of the ancient Vedic divinities, but unlike the solar deity, he is not a very

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<sup>7</sup> Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, 456. Saurabh Sharma kindly pointed out to me that the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* of the *Śukla Yajurveda* (SB XI.I.5.3) also mentions a hare-marked moon (*śaśaścāndramasa iti candramā*). July 15, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Pingree, ‘A Note on the Calendars Used in Early Indian Inscriptions’, 357.

prominent one.<sup>9</sup> The situation is different in the *Dīrghāgama*, in which the Moon is conceived of as a palace populated by many devas and ministers. The *Dīrghāgama* reads as follows:

The Buddha said to the bhikṣus, ‘... The diameter of the lunar palace is forty-nine *yojanas*. ... The lunar palace is supported by five winds: the maintaining wind, the raising wind, the receptive wing, the turning wind, and the calibrating wind. The main palace in which the lunar deva stays is made of lapis lazuli, being sixteen *yojanas* in height. The hall has four gates and is surrounded by railings. The seat of the lunar deva is half a *yojana* in diameter and is made of the seven treasures; it is pure and soft, like the robe of a deva. The body of the lunar deva emits light and illuminates the hall of lapis lazuli. The light of the hall of lapis lazuli illuminates the lunar palace. The light of the lunar palace illuminates the world below in the four directions. The lifespan of the lunar deva is five-hundred years. The succession of the sons is uninterrupted. The palace remains undestroyed and lasts for one *kalpa*’. 佛告比丘：‘... 月宮殿縱廣四十九由旬 ... 其月宮殿為五風所持：一曰持風，二曰養風，三曰受風，四曰轉風，五曰調風。月天子所止正殿，琉璃所造，高十六由旬，殿有四門，周匝欄楯。月天子座縱廣半由旬，七寶所成，清淨柔軟，猶如天衣。月天子身放光明，照琉璃殿，琉璃殿光照于月宮，月宮光出照四天下。月天子壽天五百歲，子孫相承，無有異系。其宮不壞，終于一劫’。<sup>10</sup>

The Moon is a mobile palace flying through the sky in this description. The ‘winds’ which propel the palace are an element in the kinetic theory of classical Indian astronomy. The *Sūrya-siddhānta*, for example, reads, ‘A wind, moreover, called provector (*pravaha*) impels them [the planets] toward their own apices (*ucca*); being drawn away forward and backward, they proceed by a varying motion.’<sup>11</sup> In this way, the lunar palace exists in material space, rather than in an abstract realm.

<sup>9</sup> Gansten, ‘Navagrahas’, 648.

<sup>10</sup> T no. 1, 1: 146c28–147a10.

<sup>11</sup> See translation in Burgess, *Translation of the Sūrya-siddhānta*, 53.

The lunar devas are not entirely insignificant to the story of the Buddha's life. The lunar devas interact with the Buddha in one chapter of the *Samyuktāgama-sūtra* (*Za Aban jing* 雜阿含經). Guṇabhadra (Qiunabatuo 求那跋陀; 394–468) around 435–443. The corresponding *sutta* in the Pali canon is the *Candima-sutta* in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (2.9).<sup>12</sup>

Thus have I heard: at one time, the Buddha was staying at Jetavana Anāthapiṇḍada-ārāma in the country of Śrāvastī. At that time, the King of the Asuras, Rāhula, obstructed the lunar devas. At that time, the lunar devas were frightened and they came before the Buddha in veneration, prostrating their heads at the feet of the Buddha before retreating to one side. They spoke a verse in praise of the Buddha: ‘Now we respect the supremely awakened one, capable of casting off all obstacles. We have now met with anguish and thus have come to take refuge. We lunar devas take refuge in the Sugata. The Buddha pities the world. We beseech him to dispel away the asura’. At that time, the World Honoured One spoke a verse in reply, ‘Destroy the darkness and may light illuminate space. Now, *vairocana*, pure light manifest: Rāhu flee to space and quickly let go of the hare-semblance’.<sup>13</sup> The asura, Rāhu, released the Moon and returned. Filth flowed from his whole body, frightened and uneasy: his spirit was hazy and will disoriented, like a severely ill person. 如是我聞，一時，佛住舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園。爾時，羅喉羅阿修羅王障月天子。時，諸月天子悉皆恐怖，來詣佛所，稽首佛足，退住一面。說偈歎佛：‘今禮最勝覺，能脫一切障，我今遭苦惱，是故來歸依。我等月天子，歸依於善逝，佛哀愍世間，願解阿修羅’。爾時，世尊說偈答言：‘破壞諸闇冥，光明照虛空，今毘盧遮那，清淨光明顯，羅喉避虛空，速放飛兔像’。羅喉阿修羅，即捨月而還。舉體悉流污，戰怖不自安，神昏志迷亂，猶如重病人。<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a relevant study, see Waldschmidt, ‘Buddha Frees the Disc of the Moon (*Candrasūtra*)’, 179–83.

<sup>13</sup> Here, *vairocana* refers to the Sun, not to the later cosmic buddha. Monier-Williams: ‘coming from or belonging to the sun, solar.’ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 1025.

Rāhu then comments on the incantatory skills of Gautama, the Buddha:

At that time, there as an asura named \*Bandhi who saw Rāhu the asura quickly release and the Moon and return, and spoke a verse, ‘Rāhu the asura, why did you immediately release the Moon at once—filth flowing from your whole divine body, like a severely ill person?’ Rāhu the asura said with a verse in reply, ‘Gautama spoke an incantatory verse. Had I not quickly released the Moon, my head might have been split into seven parts and I would have been subject to torments on the brink of death’. 時，有阿修羅名曰婆稚，見羅睺羅阿修羅疾捨月還，便說偈言：‘羅睺阿修羅，捨月一何速，神體悉流汚，猶如重病人’。羅睺阿修羅說偈答言：‘瞿曇說呪偈，不速捨月者，或頭破七分，受諸隣死苦’。<sup>15</sup>

The Buddha in this story has the ability to aid astral beings and halt eclipses through banishing Rāhu. We might speculate that the underlying motive of the authors of this tale was to demonstrate the superior spiritual mastery of the Buddha, but this story demonstrates that astral deities were present from the early tradition of Buddhism onward. The Moon could be used for timekeeping and symbolic purposes, but at the same time Buddhists also viewed the Moon as a physical place housing devas.

This cosmological model was also outlined in Abhidharma literature, in particular the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* by Vasubandhu, which drew upon the worldview described in earlier Buddhist literature. The *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* offers further details on kinematic and kinetic theories connected to the Sun and the Moon (the other planets are not explicitly mentioned), all of which were translated into Chinese. Vasubandhu appears to have favored a physical explanation for the lunar phases, rather than resorting to explanations in which the gods resident on the Moon have a role in this

<sup>14</sup> T no. 99, 2: 155a7–21.

<sup>15</sup> T no. 99, 2: 155a22–29. Vepacitti is the name of the asura in Pali. See Waldschmidt, ‘Buddha Frees the Disc of the Moon (*Candrasūtra*)’, 182.



phenomenon (although Vasubandhu also believed that the Moon was still inhabited). For instance, the translation of the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) offers the following explanation of the New Moon:

Why is there a void visible on the lunar disc between the end of the *kr̥ṣṇa-pakṣa* [waning period] and the beginning of the *śukla-pakṣa* [waxing period]? The nominal (*prājñaptika*) explanation is as follows. When the lunar palace has moved into the proximity of the solar disc, of the solar disc, the Moon is enveloped in the luminosity of the solar disc. The other side develops a shadow which naturally covers the lunar disc, making it so that at that time one sees it not full. Earlier masters explained that the void appears because the degrees of movement of the solar and lunar discs are different. 何故月輪於黑半末白半初位見有缺耶？世施設中作如是釋：以月宮殿行近日輪，月被日輪光所侵照，餘邊發影自覆月輪，令於爾時見不圓滿。先舊師釋：由日月輪行度不同現有圓缺。<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that Abhidharma inherited the earlier model in which the Sun and Moon are physical discs or palaces, rather than being divinities themselves, strictly speaking. The lunar and solar models of the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, like the Āgamas, are relatively simple and do not necessitate—or point to—knowledge of advanced astronomy or even spherical earth cosmology. The Sun and Moon revolve around Mount Meru and above the Four Continents (Jambūdvīpa, Pūrvavideha, Avaragodānīya, and Uttarakuru) in the classical Buddhist view of the world.<sup>17</sup> Indian mathematical astronomy, explained in treatises such as the *Sūrya-siddhānta*, does not appear to have influenced Buddhist cosmology until much later on in history. The *Kālacakra* from the early eleventh century is one of the rare Buddhist works from India to incorporate scientific astronomy and mathematics.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> T no. 1558, 29: 59b13–17.

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of Buddhist cosmology, see Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology*.

<sup>18</sup> For a relevant discussion, see Newman, *The Outer Wheel of Time: Vajrayāna Buddhist Cosmology in the Kālacakra Tantra*.

## The Moon in Chinese Divination and Astronomy

The above Buddhist views of the Moon ought to be compared to autochthonous Chinese understandings to illustrate their differences. Chinese astral divination arose entirely separate from Indian systems. The Moon and the other planets were generally conceived of as insentient material forces, although they could signal developments on earth and the state attempted to prognosticate future events, based on planetary configurations and anomalous phenomena, in particular comets. The *Hanshu* 漢書 [History of the Han Dynasty], compiled in the first century, has a section dealing with astronomy, which by extension also addresses celestial omens. The following is stated with regard to the Moon:

When the Moon eclipses any of the five planets, that country will definitely fall: with Jupiter there will be famine, with Mars there will be chaos, with Saturn there will be murder, with Venus there will be war with border countries, and with Mercury there will be chaos through women. If the Moon eclipses in the [constellation called] Great Horn, the king shall loathe this. 凡月食五星，其國必亡：歲以飢，熒惑以亂，填以殺，太白疆國以戰，辰以女亂。月食大角，王者惡之。<sup>19</sup>

The autochthonous system of celestial omenology in China was chiefly concerned with the affairs of state and it did not extend to individuals. Another source from a later century which provides a major overview of Chinese metaphysics, which also extends to planetary lore, is the *Wuxing dayi* 五行大義 [Great Meaning of the Five Elements]. This is a compilation of theories and lore related to the five elements (*wuxing* 五行) compiled by Xiao Ji 蕭吉 (c. 530–610).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Hanshu* 26.1286. As the accompanying commentary (cited in the Zhonghua Shuju edition) notes, ‘that country’ refers to the region assigned to the area of space where this eclipse takes place. This is the ancient *fenye* 分野 (‘field allocation’) system.

<sup>20</sup> For a relevant study of this text and its author, see Nakamura, ‘Shūkitsu to *Gogyōtaigi*’, 26–42.

This text refers to the imagined toad and hare on the Moon: ‘Inside is the toad and hare: *yin* and *yang* both residing and mutually dependent’ (中有蟾蜍與兔者, 陰陽兩居相附).<sup>21</sup> Like in India, China also conceived of a hare in its lunar pareidolia, but this appears to have been separately developed from the identical Indian perception.

While the Āgamas surveyed above do not depict a subordinate relationship between the Sun and the Moon (Sūrya and Candra), Xiao Ji conceived of the Sun and the Moon like a lord to a minister:

The Moon is the essence of *yin*. Its form itself is without luminosity, for it depends upon the Sun illuminating it for light, like a minister who has no prestige himself: his prestige is attained through borrowing the prestige of a lord. The Moon in the beginning [of the month] does not directly face the Sun, hence it is without luminosity [at the New Moon]. The gibbous Moon is half [lit], then it is fully illuminated when it directly faces the Sun [at the Full Moon]. After the sixteenth day [of the month], it gradually diminishes, as it also gradually is no longer facing the Sun. 月為陰精, 體自無光, 藉日照之乃明, 猶如臣自無威, 假君之勢, 乃成其威. 月初未政對日, 故無光, 缺月半而與日相對故光滿, 十六日已後漸缺, 亦漸不對日也.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, Xiao Ji is utilising figurative imagery to describe the relationship of the Moon to the Sun, but this is different from implying that the Moon possesses some type of divine intelligence or persona, which is unlike the Indic model described above, in which the Moon hosts numerous deities.

The Chinese lore concerning the Moon co-existed alongside Buddhist cosmology. We could imagine that literate monastics, particularly those from literati backgrounds, would have been well aware of both conceptions of the Moon. Knowledge and understanding of the Moon continued to evolve over time and this process accelerated around the early eighth century when new ideas—scientific, astrological and religious—were increasingly translated into Chinese.

<sup>21</sup> *Xuxiu siku quanshu* vol. 1060: 248b17–18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 249a3–6.

One major instance of new lunar theories being introduced was the translation of Indian astronomy into Chinese during the early to mid-Tang (seventh to eighth centuries). The most prominent extant example of Indian astronomy in Chinese is the *Jiuzhi li* 九執曆, which was translated in the year 718 by Gautama Siddhārtha (Qutan Xida 瞿曇悉達; d.u.), although some elements of the text reflect adaptation to the Chinese locality. The title of this work is tentatively reconstructed into Sanskrit as *\*Navagraha-karaṇa*, although this is not entirely certain. Yabuuchi notes that this work is primarily based on the *Pañcasiddhāntikā* (ca 550) by the astronomer Varāhamihira.<sup>23</sup>

One of the important astronomical concepts connected to the Moon described in the *Navagraha-karaṇa* is the lunar apogee, called *gao yue* 高月 ('high moon') in the translation, which itself is from *candra-ucca* in Sanskrit.<sup>24</sup> The lunar apogee from a geocentric perspective is the point along the lunar orbit in which the apparent velocity of the Moon is slowest. This point moves over time: the apogee precesses in approximately 8.85 years (the modern understanding is that the apogee is the point along the elliptical orbit of the Moon that is farthest from the Earth). This concept of the apogee in *this* form is unattested in Chinese astronomy from earlier periods, although as Niu Weixing recently pointed out, Jia Kui 賈逵 (30–101) was aware that every month the Moon would pass through the fastest point along its orbit for three degrees, which is a reference to the lunar perigee. Niu confirms that the first evidence of the apogee in China is, in fact, found in the *Navagraha-karaṇa*. This type of astronomical knowledge fostered further reshaping of perspectives on the Moon in China. Yixing's calendar, the *Dayan li* 大衍曆 (in official use between 729–761), in its table of divergent lunar movements (*yueli biao* 月離表) starts from the position of the apogee, rather than the perigee (the latter was the traditional starting point), a change that Niu attributes to foreign influence in Chinese astronomy at the time.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Yabuuchi, *Zuitō rekihō shi no kenkyū Zōtei*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Niu, 'Zhongguo gudai tenwenxue zhong de yueliang yuandidian', 350, 354.

Another important element of lunar theory that is explained in the *Navagraha-karana* is the ascending node of the Moon, which is explained under the heading ‘Section on Calculating the Asura’ (‘Tui Axiu zhang’ 推阿脩章). Interestingly, the sub-commentary to this includes reference to Chinese materials.

In former times it was translated as wind, or it was translated as eclipse deity.<sup>26</sup> In Sanskrit it is called Rāhu. What it is called in the scriptures of Śākya [Buddhism] is Rāhu the Asura King. This is the Ministerial Spirit.<sup>27</sup> Also, the *River Diagram* states that the Moon will eclipse when the umbra meets with the Moon, and that a star will disappear when the umbra meets with the star. Again, we consider this to be a strange spirit. Also, the planets transit through the lunar mansions in forward motion. The asura transits through the lunar mansions in retrograde motion. There will be an eclipse when it occults the Sun and Moon. 承前或譯為風，或澤為蝕神，梵之曰呼為羅喉，釋典所云，羅喉阿脩王，即此臣靈也。又《河圖》云：暗虛值月則月蝕，值星則星亡。亦謂此怪靈也。又諸曜則巡宿順行，其阿脩則巡宿逆轉。掩蔽日月以亦交蝕。<sup>28</sup>

Rāhu is equated to an umbra, but whether the latter was treated as ascending node is uncertain (and, in my estimation, unlikely). Gautama Siddhārtha drew parallels between Indian and Chinese lores, but the concept of the lunar node as presented here was evidently new to China. The period of the retrogression of the lunar node is given as 6,794 days. This value and the associated vocabulary do not appear evident in earlier astronomical literature in Chinese. Based on this, it would seem that both the lunar apogee and ascending node as astronomical concepts—in particular, ones whose movements could

<sup>26</sup> I suspect *feng* 風 (‘wind’) is likely a scribal error. Read *ze* 澤 (‘marsh’) as *yi* 譯 (‘translate’).

<sup>27</sup> *Chen ling* 臣靈 appears to refer to a specific deity, although I am uncertain of its origin.

<sup>28</sup> SKQS 807: 938a15–b1. Cf. Yabuuchi, *Zuitō rekihō shi no kenkyū Zōtei*, 26. My translation differs from Yabuuchi’s.

be calculated—were first introduced into China around the year 718 from Indian intermediaries. As we will see below, the lunar apogee and node both came to have important functions within Chinese horoscopy several decades later.

The *Navagraha-karaṇa* also contains one of the earliest datable references to the seven-day week (Saturday, Sunday, Monday, etc.) in China, called the ‘sequence of corresponding days of the seven planets’ (*qiyao zhiri ci* 七曜直日次). Details on the significance of the days, however, is omitted. The text reads, ‘The application of the seven weekdays is described separately in divination works’ (其七曜直用事法別具本占).<sup>29</sup> This concept of the seven-day week was new to the Chinese, but already deeply familiar to the Indians and other peoples from abroad living in China. Each of the planets ruled over one of the seven days. Detailed lore in Chinese about what the weekdays signified appears to have come somewhat later, but nevertheless we can observe in the year 718 the concept at least translated into Chinese.

Aside from the Gautamas, some other Indian figures from around this time introduced astronomical knowledge and also divinatory lore related to the Moon. Even before the Gautamas were active in Chinese astronomy, a major text on Indian astrology was translated into Chinese from Sanskrit. The *Suishu* 隋書, the official history of the Sui dynasty compiled in the early Tang between the years 636–656, lists three texts which dealt with ‘astronomy of Brahmins’ (*Poluomen tianwen* 婆羅門天文), although none of these extant. One of these was titled *Poluomen Jiejia xianren tianwen shuo* 婆羅門竭伽仙人天文說 [Astronomical Teachings of Brahmin Sage \*Garga], translated into thirty fascicles. As Kawai and Kōzen note, the name *Jiejia* 竭伽 appears to have been a transliteration of Gārgya or Garga.<sup>30</sup> It is plausible that the text was a full translation of the *Gārgya-jyotiṣa* (\**Garga-saṃhitā*), which was a significant treatise dealing with Indian astrology from an early period.<sup>31</sup> Although no identifiable fragments

<sup>29</sup> SKQS 807: 934b6–7. See also translation and commentary in Yabuuchi, *Zōtei Zuitō rekibō shi no kenkyū*, 7–8. Translation here is mine.

<sup>30</sup> Kawai and Kōzen, *Zui sho keisekishi shōkō*, 603–604. *Sui shu* 34.1019.

of this translation exist, we can certainly assume the work dealt with lunar astrology.

We can, however, point to some extracts of astral omenology from Indian sources in Chinese translation. The *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 [Old Book of Tang], which is the official dynastic history of the Tang dynasty finished in 945 by Liu Xu 劉昫 (887–946), includes some discussion of the Indian or Sino-Indian astronomers who worked at the court, including the Gautama and Kāśyapa families, who appear to have been contemporaries. Therein we see a ‘Indian method of Kāśyapa Xiaowei, etc.’, (迦葉孝威等天竺法) which is a formula for calculating the extent of an eclipse with reference to the distance of the Sun and the Moon to a lunar node. The citation continues and explains some omens of which one ought to be aware in order to foresee an eclipse, so that the king might make preparations. The following guidelines are given:

When the Moon is about to eclipse, first the Moon’s form will shake, as if in a frightened condition. The hare of the Moon and the Moon colour of the periphery will turn yellow, as if in a melancholic state. There will be a perpetual halo around it. When the Moon first appears [New Moon], its luminosity will not flourish, or it will be extremely faint. When the Sun is about to eclipse, first the Sun’s form will shake, extremely, as if in a frightened state, or its light will become quite faint and not awesome, or it shall become wretched. When the Sun and Moon eclipse, first simultaneously their luminosity shall drop away, or at dawn or dusk, there will arise a red colour, like a fire, and gold, silver, pearls, and treasures shall lose their lustre. 月欲有蝕, 先月形搖振, 狀若驚懼, 月兔及側月色黃如有憂狀。自常暈, 月初生時, 光不顯盛, 或極細微。日欲有蝕, 先日形搖振, 極如驚懼狀, 或光色微昧, 不赫盛, 或黎慘。日月蝕先同候光隕墜, 或旦暮際有赤色起如火燒, 金銀珠玉諸寶失光。<sup>32</sup>

The compiler of this section of the Tang history also remarks,

<sup>31</sup> Kotyk, ‘Kanjiken no bungaku ni okeru saihō-senseijutsu’, 105.

<sup>32</sup> *Jiu Tang shu* 33.1205.

‘These are somewhat different from the formula models of China and from the outside they are similar to each other as general models’ (此等與中國法數稍殊, 自外梗概相似也). In light of the fact that this material on Indian omens is cited in the dynastic history, we can imagine that during the Tang, anomalies and omens would have been interpreted not only via canonical Chinese lore, but also Indian lore to some extent.

The translation of the *Navagraha-karaṇa* and other materials facilitated new ideas about the Moon in terms of astronomy, astrology and omenology. The Moon became an extremely multifaceted object. Those familiar with astronomy, even some basic knowledge, would have been aware of the complexities of lunar phases and the Moon’s orbit, but at the same time learned Buddhists in China would have understood the different Chinese and Buddhist interpretations of the Moon and even the theoretical physical composition of it. The subsequent introduction of Buddhist Mantrayāna furthered these developments along and added further conceptualization and symbolism to the pool of lunar lore.

### The Moon and Mantrayāna

The advent of Mantrayāna and its translation into Chinese offered new lunar lore to the Chinese Buddhist worldview. One of the key texts in this regard was the *Vairocanābhisambodhi*. Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏; 637–735) and the Chinese monk Yixing 一行 (673–727) translated the *Vairocanābhisambodhi* (abbreviated in Chinese as *Dari jing* 大日經) in the year 724. Yixing then compiled a commentary to the text, evidently based upon explanations from Śubhakarasiṃha, titled *Dari jing shu* 大日經疏 [Commentary the *Vairocanābhisambodhi*].

The *Vairocanābhisambodhi* can use the Moon as a simile, but it also had a deified form of the Moon. With respect to the former, we see statements like this:

Next, Lord of Mysteries, just as the moon rises with the result that it shines upon clear water and manifests a reflected image of the moon,



so too should the *vidyādhara* thus explain the likening of mantras to the moon in the water. 復次祕密主，如因月出故照於淨水而現月影像，如是真言水月喻，彼持明者當如是說。<sup>33</sup>

The Moon as Candra is also regarded as a deity, hence a mantra for the Moon is also given in the *Vairocanābhisambodhi*:

The mantra of the Moon deva: *namaḥ samantabuddhānāṃ candrāya svāhā*. 月天真言曰：南麼三曼多勃駄喃一戰捺羅引二合也二娑訶三。<sup>34</sup>

The contents of the *Vairocanābhisambodhi* were elaborated upon extensively in the subsequently compiled commentary. The Moon is utilised throughout the commentary for providing similes. For instance:

One should know that the practitioner at this stage is the same as great awakening. They acquire the name *buddha* due to their self-realization of mind, but it is not ultimate profound awakening, the stage of the great *muni* (sage). It is like the pure Moon: although its body neither increases nor decreases, its light gradually increases until the fifteenth day, when it can then move the tide of the great sea. 當知行人則是位同大覺也。以其自覺心故，便得佛名，然非究竟妙覺大牟尼位。猶如淨月雖體無增減，然亦明漸漸增，乃至第十五日，方能動大海潮也。<sup>35</sup>

The Moon is also employed in various visualization practices of the *Vairocanābhisambodhi*, as explained in the commentary, such as when visualizing the syllable *ra* transformed into *raṃ* within the Moon. The lunar disc is also a component in some visualizations.<sup>36</sup> The commentary also provides an overview of astrology, primarily for the purposes of timing rituals, and discusses in brief the *nakṣatras* and

<sup>33</sup> T no. 848, 18: 3c28–4a1. English translation by Giebel. See Giebel, *The Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> T no. 848, 18: 15b8–9. Cf. Giebel, *The Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> T no. 1796, 39: 590b17–21.

<sup>36</sup> T no. 1796, 39: 707b26–27. Read a 阿 as *luo* 囉. T no. 1796, 39: 688c21–22.

*pakṣas*, among other features of astrology and timekeeping. Yixing also inserted some of his own lunar theory regarding how to definitively align the New Moon and Full Moon with the first and fifteenth days of the month, rather than relying on averages which result in the assigned day being ahead or behind the New Moon or Full Moon.<sup>37</sup>

Following this section, this is further discussion that delves into the symbolic meaning of the astrological material outlined earlier. This sort of hermeneutic (i.e., exoteric and esoteric) is a characteristic feature of the commentary. Similes are drawn between the Moon and the Buddhist path. For example:

‘To determine the day’: the Sun symbolizes the body of the main object of veneration, while the Moon symbolizes cultivating practice of yoga (*\*yogācāra*). The practice is the Moon as meditative concentration: sometimes it increases in light, sometimes it becomes fainter; sometimes it is too fast in movement, sometimes it is too slow in movement; sometimes it passes the Middle Path, sometimes it does not reach the Middle Path, leading to the timing of spiritual faculties also expanding and contracting, like how one can get to certain conditions based on constant principles, whereas at a certain time one should build them. However, there is shifts in perceptual objects. Sometimes they mature before one gets to a time and place. Sometimes they mature when having gotten to this time and place. These shifting circumstances should be well understood, thus it speaks of determining the day. 定日者，日喻本尊身，月喻修習瑜伽行。以行者定心之月，或時增明或時微昧，或發行太速或發行太遲，或過於中道或不及中道，致使機悟之時亦有盈縮，如循照常理可至某緣，某時中宜應建立，然有緣境遷移，或未到時處而熟，或過此時處乃熟，如是變通皆應善知，故云定日也。<sup>38</sup>

This is presumably Śubhakarasiṃha’s voice. It is explained that just as the Moon changes in position and luminosity, so too are experiences

<sup>37</sup> See translation and discussion of this section in Kotyk, ‘Early Tantric Hierarchy in Chinese Buddhism’, 1–29.

<sup>38</sup> T no. 1796, 39: 618b24–c1.

also subject to shifting circumstances. The practitioner is also compared to an astrologer who examines the Moon as it transits through the lunar mansions (*nakṣatras*), as follows:

Just as the Moon transits through twenty-seven *nakṣatras*, and the *nakṣatras* through which it transits differ in being good or bad, so too do the divinations based on worldly observations of the Moon. For instance, Pūrvāṣāḍhā is good winds; when the Moon moves into Pūrvāṣāḍhā, winds arise. Rohiṇī is good rains; when the Moon moves into Rohiṇī, rains fall. The acts of bodhi (*\*bodhicaryā*) are also so. Powers differ in connection to conditions and according to actions. Subduing and reception, as well as practices of quiescence, and the exercise of skilful means accordingly shift. The ācārya who deeply examines inner faculties and outer conditions will clearly understand this matter. It is called well observing the *nakṣatra* alignment. 如月行經二十七宿，以所經之宿好惡不同故，令世間候月之占亦復隨異。如箕星好風，月行入箕則風起，畢星好雨，月行入畢則雨降，菩提行亦爾，遇緣對境勢力不同，令折伏攝受及寂行所施方便隨轉。若阿闍梨能深察根緣，曉知是事，名為善觀宿直也。<sup>39</sup>

The idea here is that the bodhisattva foresees and adapts to circumstances based on shifting factors, just as the astrologer foresees wind and rain, and advises accordingly, based on the position of the Moon relative to the *nakṣatras*. The mundane utility of astrology in the commentary is never rejected, but an additional ‘esoteric’ interpretation is applied to a mundane science, in which the science is reenvisioned in a form that serves the Buddhist project.

The *Vairocanābbhisambodhi* is accompanied by a maṇḍala, which in Chinese is called *Taizang mantuluo* 胎藏曼荼羅, i.e., the Womb Matrix [Skt. *\*Garbhakośa-maṇḍala*, *\*Garbhadhātu-maṇḍala*]. The outer ring of deities of maṇḍala primarily incorporates heterodox (non-Buddhist) deities, which includes astral deities such as the twelve zodiac signs, nine planets (*navagraha*), and twenty-eight lunar mansions. The planets and lunar mansions are depicted in anthro-

<sup>39</sup> T no. 1796, 39: 618c8–14.

pomorphic forms. The commentary instructs that ‘to the south of the western gate, position the lunar deva opposite the solar deva. [The lunar deva] rides in a chariot [pulled by] white geese, and to the flanks are the deities of the twenty-seven *nakṣatras* and twelve zodiac palaces as entourage’ (西門之南，與日天相對應置月天，乘白鵝車。於其左右置廿七宿十二宮神等，以為眷屬).<sup>40</sup> The position of the Moon directly opposite to the Sun hints at the astronomical fact that the Moon is only a Full Moon when it is positioned opposite to the Sun.

There are several East Asian recensions of the maṇḍala of the *Vairocanābhisambodhi*, all of which are preserved in Japan in the Mikkyō lineages. The most notable example is the *Genzu mandara* 現圖曼荼羅, which is traced back to the maṇḍala brought to Japan by Kūkai 空海 (774–835) in 806. The original icons, however, can differ from what we see in this version. The original icons of the *Vairocanābhisambodhi*—or the oldest extant versions—are preserved in a collection of illustrations titled *Taizō zuzō* 胎藏圖象 [Icons of the Womb Matrix]. The postscript of this document relates that the monk Enchin 圓珍 (814–891) of Tendai had recopied these figures at Qinglongsi 青龍寺 in Chang’an in the year 855. The next copy of this was created in 1181. Another copy was created in 1194, hence the extant *Taizō zuzō* is the third copy of the original document brought by Enchin. The icons of the *Taizō zuzō* are arguably the closest versions to the original set drawn under Śubhakarasiṃha’s direction around the year 724.<sup>41</sup> The *Taizō zuzō* is reproduced in the modern *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō zuzō* 大正新修大藏經圖像 [Buddhist Canon Compiled during the Taishō Era (1912–1926): Iconographical Section], which are the supplementary—largely but not exclusively iconographical—volumes of the larger Taishō canon. The Moon in the *Taizō zuzō* is depicted as rising in a chariot pulled by seven geese. In his right hand is a lotus, and the left a crescent-shaped sceptre, atop which is a hare (Figure 1).

There are other variations on the lunar icon in other iconographical sets connected to the *Vairocanābhisambodhi*. The *Taishō*

<sup>40</sup> T no. 1796, 39: 634c12–14.

<sup>41</sup> Drawings of the *Taizō zuzō* are viewable on e-Museum Japan website.



FIG. 1 Moon Deva / Candra (*yue tianzi* 月天子). Adapted from TZ, vol. 2, 277.

*zuzō* provides the more commonly employed icons (Figure 2). Alongside the lunar deva, who rides in a chariot, but in this case pulled by three geese, we also see his consort. This would indicate that the tradition connected to the *Vairocanābbhisambodhi* also envisioned female divinities (*devī*) inhabiting the Moon, although the earlier literature surveyed above does not explicitly mention the existence of female entities on the Moon (or the Sun for that matter). This set of icons also includes a *Yueyao* 月曜, in which a masculine form holds



FIG. 2 Moon consort [313] (*Yue tian fei* 月天妃), Moon deva [312] (*Yue tianzi* 月天子) and Moon [286] (*Yue yao* 月曜) in *Daibi taizō dai mandara* 大悲胎藏大曼荼羅. TZ vol. 1: 783, 789.

a crescent disc in which rests a hare. This appears to be the Moon, but how this differs from *Yue tianzi* 月天子 is uncertain. The former is adjacent to Saturn, so we might speculate that this is the personi-

fiction of Monday, whereas the latter is the traditional god of the Moon, i.e., Candra.

Although the Moon was perceived as a deity earlier in Buddhism, the planets as a group of deities *in practice* entered the Chinese pantheon from around this time, which in the Buddhist context was framed as nine planets (Skt. *navagraha*): the seven visible planets in addition to Rāhu and Ketu. The planets were assigned seed syllables, like all the other figures in the maṇḍala.<sup>42</sup>

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### Abbreviations

- SKQS*     *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書  
*T*         *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. See Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.  
*TZ*         *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō zuzō* 大正新修大藏經圖像. See Takakusu and Ono, eds.

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<sup>42</sup> These seed syllables, as they were preserved in Japan, are given in Somekawa, *Mandara zuten*.

- Da bore boluomiduo jing* 大般若波羅蜜多經 [Skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*]. Translated by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) in 663. 600 *juan*. *T* no. 220.
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