A Study of the Constellation Map Mural from
the Western Han Tomb at Yintun, Luoyang

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Key words: Western Han  constellation map  tomb mural

The late Western Han painted tomb in Yintun 尹屯, Luoyang 洛阳, was excavated in 2003. On the domed ceiling of the central tomb chamber is a celestial painting with star orbs (Figs. 1 and 2), human figures, animals, and buildings. It is an intuitive expression of the astronomical significance of various constellations (known as star officials) and their humanistic connotations; as such, it reflects cultural concepts that are ancient and distinctive.

The apex of the domed ceiling of the central chamber is demarcated by red lines into an eastern and a western section with a depiction of the sun and moon in each section respectively. Inside the moon is the Toad, inside the sun must have been the Vermillion Bird; similar themes are found in many constellation maps in tombs. Below the apex of the dome, constellations are distributed throughout the four ceiling slopes mainly according to the ancient astronomical system of the Five Palaces. Red lines define four domains of east, south, west, north, and within each domain are further subdivisions demarcated by red lines. Each of the east and west slope is split into two smaller domains by red lines, the south slope subdivided into five smaller domains, the north into four. The designer of the constellation map used the north side of the east slope to symbolize the central domain of the celestial North Pole that corresponds to the Central Palace 中宫 in the ancient astronomical system. As a matter of fact, the position of the celestial North Pole would not have corresponded to the apex of the ceiling. In the Luoyang area, the corresponding position of the celestial North Pole is not the apex of the ceiling but it would be 35 degrees from the north horizon as seen by the naked eye. Other domains throughout the four slopes symbolize the four celestial palaces of the east, south, west and north and the presiding twenty-eight lunar mansions. Each Palace varies in width, and constellations under different celestial Palaces are sometimes repeated, suggesting that the four Palaces are meant to be only symbolic references to their actual locations. This constellation map is designed in accordance with the horizontal format (Mercator’s Projection) of star mapping; clouds fill the spaces between constellations, and stars within each constellation are linked by straight lines. Similar themes and representational methods can be found in constellation maps of ancient tomb chambers from the same or slightly later periods. The closest ex-
ample is the Han tomb mural of a constellation map from the Xi’an Jiaotong University (Fig. 3).

Two constellations are depicted in the Central Palace. In the lower area a man is shown riding a boar with two heads, one head facing north and the other head facing south; they are symbols of the Celestial Theocrat and the Big Dipper respectively. We have pointed out elsewhere that the ancient people harbored a very deep-rooted concept of the boar as a symbol of the Big Dipper. Since the Neolithic times in China, ritual implements have used the boar as the main decor; as such, they are all following this tradition. The two-headed boar undoubtedly exemplifies the characteristic circumpolar movement of the Big Dipper and its demarcation of the four seasons; it also signifies the female and male duality of the Big Dipper. Similar images can be found in the jade ritual implement with a two-headed boar from the Hongshan Culture, in the Neolithic jade ritual implement with a two-headed boar from Lingjiatan, Hanshan, Anhui. It is apparent that they all have symbolic references to the Big Dipper. In the Western Han tomb mural of Bu Qianqiu, Luoyang, there is a clearly legible painting of a pig-faced monster on the ladder-shaped downward bracket arm in the middle of the main wall of the rear chamber. The pig’s head is adorned with three stars on the forehead, and to the left and right is a depiction of the Blue Dragon and White Tiger respectively; the meaning of this is the same as that expressed in the Yintun constellation map. This provides ample evidence that the ancient analogy between the boar and the Big Dipper was still fresh in the minds of the Han Dynasty ancients.

Above the Big Dipper are eight stars linked together like a circular ring while two stars to the south are not linked. This must be representing the constellation Guan Suo (Linked Rope). Guan Suo originally has nine stars. The chapter of “Tianguan Shu” in Shi Ji (Record of the Historian: Chapter of Celestial Officials) regards Guan Suo as having fifteen stars; this total must have
included the constellation Qi Gong 七公 (Seven Dukes) to the north. There are seven stars in Qi Gong, eight stars in Guan Suo, leaving one star unaccounted for. The book Shiji Zheng’e 史记正讹 says: “Guan Suo originally has nine stars, the one star due north is dim and seldom visible; in fact, it is anomalous for it to become visible. For this reason, the total, including Qi Gong, is fifteen stars.” This indicates that, in the past, it is considered normal when Guan Suo has eight stars. The star of Guan Suo 9 (Corona Borealis p) is a sixth grade star that is often invisible, and when it becomes visible it is interpreted to be anomalous. Accordingly Guan Suo is depicted with eight stars on this map. The ancients also considered Guan Suo as the prison for commoners; the single star at the prison gate signifies that the gate is about to open. When this star is clearly visible, it signifies that the prison is busy with criminal cases, and when the star is invisible, this signifies that criminal matters are sparse. In the Yintun constellation map, a bald-headed yellow person is depicted inside the eight stars; as the ochre colored garments signify his status as a guilty person, he is therefore a representation of a prisoner in his cell. The only two stars that are not linked refer to the celestial prison. If the prison gate is open and the stars are not entirely in view, this is considered as a good omen according to astrologists. Guan Suo is a constellation in the Central Palace, and is located along the extended line of the Dipper handle. For this reason, “Tianguan Shu” says that Guan Suo is “part of the Dipper handle.” This depiction of the Big Dipper and Guan Suo together as a unified image is also found in the Han constellation map from the tomb in Luoyang.

The constellations in the East Palace 东宫 of the twenty-eight lunar mansions are concentrated in the small south section of the east ceiling slope. Among those subsumed under the East Palace are the Jiao 角 (Horn), Kang 亢 (Gullet), Di 梁 (Base), Fang 房 (Chamber), Xin 心 (Heart), Wei 尾 (Tail)—six lunar mansions that are represented in the form of an integrated scene with star orbs and the image of the Blue Dragon. Among the seven mansions in the East Palace, six mansions are named after the body parts of the dragon, and the image of Blue Dragon, one of the system of the Four Symbolic Animals of the Celestial Palaces, is also based on the asterisms of the six lunar mansions Jiao, Kang, Di, Fang, Xin and Wei. Accordingly, using Blue Dragon to refer to the asterisms of the East Palace is equivalent to a straightforward depiction of all the star orbs of the East Palace; they are different methods with the same function. This type of symbolic constellation mapping seems to be a popular approach adopted by the Han Dynasty ancients; almost all early constellation maps use this method of representing the asterisms of Blue Dragon.

In the constellation map, two groups of stars are painted at the location of the dragon’s horns. Each group comprises three linked stars, and the two groups are symmetrical in configuration; they represent the six stars in the mansions Jiao, Tian Tian 天田 (Celestial Field) and Tian Men 天门 (Celestial Gate). To the left, the three stars from top to bottom refer to Jiao mansion 2 (Virgo ζ), Tian Tian 1 (Virgo 78), Tian Tian 2 (Virgo τ) respectively; to the right the three stars from top to bottom refer to Jiao mansion 1 (Virgo α), Tian Tian 1 (Virgo 53) and Tian Men 2 (Virgo 69) respectively. The three constellations represent three gates, alluding to the ascendance of the tomb occupant’s soul to the heavenly sphere. Blue Dragon is the equivalent of the constellations; it is the spiritual vehicle that transports the tomb occupant’s soul to the heavenly sphere. Similar primitive religious beliefs are also expressed in the painted banner from the Han tomb at Mawangdui 马王堆.

Three linked stars are depicted at the location of the dragon’s heart. They must be referring to the mansion Xin. One star at the center of the Xin mansion (Scorpius α) is a red star with brilliance of the highest magnitude; it is an important asterism in ancient observations of astronomical phenomena. This star is painted red in the large constellation map at Xi’an Jiaotong University 西安交通大学. According to astrology, when the three stars in the lunar mansion Xin display a crooked layout, it is a good omen. This is the way mansion Xin is rendered in the Yintun constellation map. Constrained by such concepts, other constellation maps from ancient China often deploy the same emphatic approach with a tendency to stretch reality.

In the abdominal area of Blue Dragon, there is a star corresponding to the leading star of the Fang mansion (Scorpius π). The dragon’s tail is painted as nine linked stars corresponding to the nine stars of the Wei mansion. The two mansions Kang and Di are not separately depicted as any part of Blue Dragon as a whole as they must have been absorbed into the image of Blue Dragon itself.

To the left of the Blue Dragon’s tail, there are two linked stars referring to the Ji 筠 (Winnowing-basket) in the East Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Although Ji’s nomenclature has no ancient associations with the dragon, its location along the extended line of
the dragon’s tail inspired the ancients to regard it as a star of the dragon’s tail. Ji mansion looks like a winnower basket; it also resembles a wide-open mouth, hence believed to have control over speech (mouth and tongue). Using two stars to represent the Ji mansion, the present constellation map is emphasizing the two stars as the tongue in front of Ji mansion; they correspond to Ji mansion 1 (Sagittarius ξ) and Ji mansion 4 (Sagittarius η).

On the upper east side of the south ceiling slop is a depiction of seven stars enclosing a rabbit. This is the mansion Bi 毕 (Net) in the West Palace 西宫 of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. This constellation should have been painted on the upper north side of the west ceiling slop, but it is placed erroneously here; instead, this should be the location of asterisms the Qi Xing 七星 (Seven Stars) in the South Palace 南宫 of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. The book Shiji Zhengyi 史记正义 says: “The Qi Xing mansion is also called Tian Du 天都 (Celestial City).” In the Yintun constellation map, pavilions and terraces are painted to the left of the Qi Xing mansion. This is probably meant to represent Tian Du.

On the left side below the Qi Xing mansion are seven linked stars. They must be the mansion Liu 柳 (Willow) of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Liu originally has eight stars, here one star is missing. In ancient times, Liu represents the beak of Vermillion Bird 朱雀 of the system of the Four Celestial Palaces 四象. Such a meaning is perhaps implicated in this depiction of the Qi Xing.

To the right of Liu mansion is a constellation with six linked stars. They seem to be the mansion Zhen 辰 (Axletree) in the South Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Zhen originally has four stars (Corvus γ, ε, δ, β), but here, six stars are painted including the left Xiu 锚 (Corvus η) and right Xiu (Corvus η). In the constellation map A from a Dunhuang 敦煌 manuscript, Zhen has both left Xiu and right Xiu components. In the Five Dynasties tombs of Qian Yuanguan 钱元瓘 and Wu Hanyue 吴汉月 from the Wuyue 吴越 Kingdom, there is a stone engraved constellation map in which Zhen not only has left Xiu and right Xiu components but the star Chang Sha 长沙 (Long Sand) (Corvus ζ) is included as well. The book Shiji Zhengyi says: “The star Chang Sha is part of Zhen and presides over longevity.” Here the Zhen mansion is painted with a human head, probably representing Chang Sha as the star presiding over longevity.

There are 19 linked stars painted in the center of the south ceiling slope. They represent the mansion Yi 翼 (Wing) in the South Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Yi mansion originally has 22 stars, but the number varies in ancient constellation maps. Constellation map A in the Dunhuang manuscript and the twenty-eight lunar mansions on the epitaph cover of Wang’s tomb in Hanjiang 邯江 of the Southern Tang both have the same Yi image as that shown here. This map shows Yi mansion in the middle of Central Palace probably with the purpose of underscoring Vermillion Bird as the symbol of South Palace.

On the upper west constellation map of the south ceiling slop, three linked stars in the form of a bow are painted. Behind the three stars a man is drawing the bow. This must be the mansion Zhang 张 (Spread) in the South Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. The book Shishi Xingjing 石氏星经 (Shi’s Classic of Stars) considers Zhang mansion as part of the image of Vermillion Bird, but this has no bearing on the origin of the name of Zhang mansion. The book Shiwun Jiezi 说文解字 says: “Zhang, to draw the bowstring.” Thus “spread” means drawing the bow, a meaning that corresponds to the name of the lunar mansion. This constellation map specifically depicts a man drawing the bow adjacent to Zhang mansion, thus underlining the original meaning of Zhang mansion. Zhang mansion originally has six stars. Here, only three stars are painted. The depiction of the man drawing the bow must have been used to clarify the meaning of Zhang while omitting the representation of some of the star orbs.

Below and equidistant from the Zhang mansion are two linked stars; this must be the mansion Jing 井 (Well) in the South Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Jing mansion originally has eight stars. Here, only two stars are shown, one being the leading star in Jing mansion (Gemini μ), a star along the ecliptic, hence depicted here. The other is the old leading star in Jing mansion, i.e. Jing mansion 3 (Gemini γ). People at the time used the two stars to refer to Jing mansion. A similar depiction of Jing mansion of the twenty-eight lunar mansions can be found on the lacquer box of Marquis Yi of Zeng 曾侯乙. In the past, the parallel alignment of the two stars east of Jing mansion is considered as a good omen.
All ancient constellation maps show this configuration.

One star in front of Jing mansion is the constellation Yue (Halberd) (Gemini η). In the chapter “Tianwen Zhi” of the book Jin Shu 晉書・天文志 states that Yue is in charge of stamping out licentiousness and flagrancy, and it would be desirable if it is dim. If Yue is as bright as Jing mansion, this means that Yue is being levied against a high official. As this constellation map shows Yue as similar to Jing, it must be sending a special message.

On the west end of the south ceiling slope is the depiction of an immortal with human head and snake body. The forehead of the immortal is painted with a star, probably referring to the mansion Gui 鬼 (Ghost) in the South Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. According to Shishi Xingjing, at the center of Gui mansion is a star called Ji Shi 积尸 (Heaped Corpses). “Tianwen Zhi” of the book Jin Shu regards Gui mansion as having five stars with Ji Shi embedded in the middle. Some ancient constellation maps show Ji Shi as a single star orb or as two people hauling a corpse, all with the same implication of heaped corpses. The Yintun constellation map shows a single star in the mansion Gui and this star must be Ji Shi in Gui (Leo M44). As the constellation is represented in the form of an immortal, the immortality of the soul is also implied here.

The constellation map on the west slope of the tomb ceiling depicts the constellations of the West Palace 西宮 and the ancient story of the Niu Lang 牛郎 (Herd Boy) and Zhi Nü 织女 (Weaving Girl). Bi mansion should have been painted on the upper north side of the west slope, but its position is erroneously switched with that of the Qi Xing mansion and now Bi is painted on the upper east side of the south slope. Bi mansion is depicted as seven linked stars with a hare depicted at the center suggesting how Bi is trapping a hare. Ancient records also indicate that Bi is a type of hunting implement. Bi originally has eight stars, but here it is reduced to seven stars. Eastern Han Dynasty stone engraved pictures sometimes depict Bi as having seven (Fig. 4) or eight stars. The constellation map at Xi’an Jiaotong University shows Bi mansion as a man ensnaring a hare with a net; this would have the same meaning.

Coordinated with Bi mansion on the west slope are White Tiger 白虎, Niu Lang (Herd Boy), Zhi Nü (Weaving Girl), etc. Similar themes are also found in Eastern Han engraved pictures (see Fig. 4) suggesting that they are popular themes at the time. This depiction of the Niu Lang mansion shows a man leading an ox, and above the ox are three stars aligned along a horizontal line. This must be mansion Niu (Ox) in the North Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Although Niu mansion is called Qian Niu (Herd Boy), it refers to the six stars of Capricornus β., α., ξ., η., ρ., not the three stars of He Gu 河鼓 (River Drum) that is further away from the equator (Aquila β., α., γ.).

South of Niu mansion is the mansion Zhi Nü. A kneeling woman is depicted with three stars above her head in a triangular configuration, an image similar to the Zhi Nü asterism depicted in the stone engraved picture from Xiaotangshan 孝堂山, Feicheng 肥城, Shandong 山东. This mansion must be Zhi Nü with three stars (Lyra η., ε., ζ.), not the mansion Wu Nü 蜻蜓 (Serving Maid) with four stars in North Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions (Aquarius ε., μ., 4., 3.). In the Eastern Han stone engraved picture, Wu Nü mansion is depicted with four stars (see Fig. 4), a reference to Wu Nü.

The association of Niu mansion with Zhi Nü connotes the ancient story of the Seventh Night although this story did not originate with the Niu and Wu Nü mansions of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. While the painting of the constellation map at Xi’an Jiaotong University suggests that the names of the two mansions were derived from the Qian Niu (Herd Boy) and Zhi Nü (Weaving Girl) story, this transformation actually resulted from the systematization of the twenty-eight lunar mansions and the gradual substitution of more distant stars with mansions near the celestial equator. In other words, the early Niu Lang and Zhi Nü refer to the three stars of He Gu and three stars of Zhi Nü. As the system of twenty-eight lunar mansions came into being and became further established, the Niu (Qian Niu) and Nü (Wu Nü) of the twenty-eight lunar mansions not only adopted the

![Fig. 4 Rubbing of the Eastern Han period engraved constellation map from Nanyang, Henan](Image 172x706 to 178x715)
earlier names of the *Niu Lang* and *Zhi Nü* mansions, but they also inherited their humanistic significance. The representation of the legendary meeting of *Niu Lang* and *Zhi Nü* in Eastern Han stone engraved pictures is also seen in the constellation map at Xi’an Jiaotong University where the two equatorial mansions are shown, thus confirming the link between the earlier and later groups of mansions of *Niu* (Ox and Herd Boy) and *Nü* (Serving Maid and Weaving Girl). The three stars of *He Gu* in Aquila and the three stars of *Zhi Nü* in Lyra are placed respectively on either side of the Milky Way. This inspired the ancient belief in the imaginary Swallow Bridge. The source of this imaginary concept could not have come from a configuration in which the *Niu* and *Nü* mansions are placed along the same bank of the Milky Way. Mr. Zhu Kezhen 竺可桢 once pointed out that the legendary meeting of *Niu Lang* and *Zhi Nü* originated from the meeting of the two stars at the right ascension that took place around 3000 BCE. Before this time, *He Gu* (*Qian Niu*, Herd Boy) appeared at the right ascension before *Nü*. The Yintun constellation map separates the old and new groups of mansions of *Niu* and *Nü*, pairing *Zhi Nü* with *Niu* mansion of the twenty-eight lunar mansions together in order to represent their meeting on the Seventh Night. Furthermore, *He Gu* (*Qian Niu*, Herd Boy) and *Wu Nü* of the twenty-eight lunar mansions are paired together in the constellation map on the north slope of the ceiling of the tomb chamber. If the designer had not mistaken *Zhi Nü* for *Wu Nü*, and if he had wished to represent *He Gu* (*Qian Niu*, Herd Boy), *Zhi Nü* and the lunar mansions *Niu* and *Wu Nü* simultaneously, the only choice is to bring together the three stars of *He Gu* and *Wu Nü* as constellations in the North Palace. One single constellation map cannot show two images of Herd Boy at the same time. *He Gu* signifies Herd Boy while it can also have other connotations, but *Niu* mansion can only refer to Herd Boy. As a main theme, the meeting on the Seventh Night cannot be integrated with other images besides the representation of *He Gu* as Herd boy. For this reason, people at the time could only use *Niu* mansion of the twenty-eight lunar mansions to refer to Herd Boy in the legendary meeting on the Seventh Night.

On the south side of the *Zhi Nü* mansion is a tiger with a star inside the tiger’s mouth. Where the tiger’s tail is located are two linked stars. Tiger is one of the systems of the Four Celestial Palaces in the West Palace. Originally its image is a combination of the three lunar mansions *Zi* 齊 (Beak), *Shen* 参 (Three Stars) and *Fa* 伐 (Punishment). Among the three, *Zi* and *Shen* mansions are constellations of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. “Tianguan Shu” regards *Shen* as White Tiger. On the other hand, Shiji Zhengyi uses the thirteen asterisms of *Zi*, *Shen* and *Fa* to form the shape of the tiger. Most early constellation maps depict *Shen* mansion in the form of a tiger. The star inside the mouth of the tiger in the Yintun constellation map must be referring to the *Zi* mansion, and the two stars at the tiger’s tail are probably the asterisms of *Fa*.

Above the White Tiger asterism is a painting of twin towers; although they are not shown with star orbs, they must be pictorial representations of the constellation *Tian Que* 天阙 (Celestial Tower) (*Monoceros* 18, δ), also known as Tower Mound. Shiji Zhengyi says: “The two stars of Tower Mound are south of *Nan He* 南河 (South River), the twin towers of the Son of Heaven, the two watchtowers of the Duke.” This painting of the twin towers seems to refer to the Celestial Towers of the Son of Heaven. In the engraved and painted pictures from the artifacts of the Eastern Han, the Celestial Gate is often flanked by twin towers. This suggests that the twin towers refer to the Celestial Towers.

The twin towers are paired with two gates, but the two stars of the two gates are painted to the right of the *Qian Niu* constellation. The Yintun constellation map shows one immortal above and another below. The immortal above wears a crown with double ears or double chignon; with fine eyebrows and willow mouth, this immortal seems to be a female; the immortal below is bald-headed with long hair in the back of the head and seems to be a male. Each immortal has a star painted above the head; the star on the immortal above must be the *Bei He* 北河 (North River) 3 (*Gemini* β), the star on the immortal below must be *Nan He* 3 (*Monoceros* α). Both stars have brilliance of the highest magnitude; for this reason, they are selected to represent the two river constellations. In ancient times, *Nan He* is also known as *yang* 阳 gate, and *Bei He* as *yin* 阴 gate. The two immortals – one male and one female – depicted next to the two stars in the Yintun constellation map precisely imply that *Nan He* is the *yang* gate and *Bei He* is the *yin* gate.

The constellation map in the West Palace – in which the legend of the *Niu Lang* and *Zhi Nü*, *Bi* mansion and White Tiger asterisms are integrated into one scene – is a composition that can be found in Eastern Han stone engraved pictures as well (see Fig. 4), indicating that it
is a popular subject at the time. Its origin can be traced to “Da Dong” in the chapter “Xiao Ya” of the poem book Shi 诗 · 小雅 · 大东. The concept of the sky in the “Da Dong” is based on the common people’s casual observations of celestial phenomena, but depictions of similar subject matter found in the Yintun constellation map and Eastern Han engraved pictures reflect the legacy of traditional themes in the “Da Dong.” Even if that is the case, that the Yintun constellation map shows the constellation Celestial Towers in the vicinity of the lunar mansion Shen is an indication that the designer of the constellation map not only used classical studies such as “Da Dong” as a source but also incorporated direct observations of celestial phenomena at the time in order to enrich the content of the constellation map.

The constellation in the first scene on the west side of the north ceiling slope is part of the constellation in West Palace, a constellation with six linked stars. This must be Mao 南 (Spear) mansion in West Palace. Mao mansion is a small star cluster in Taurus, also called stars of the Seven Sisters, later known as the Pleiades. The book Jin Zhi 晋志 considers them as Seven Stars (Taurus 17, 19, 21, 20, 23, η, 27), Chunchiu Yuanming Bao 春秋元命包 also considers Mao as having six stars. As the ancients observed stars with the naked eye, their accounting of stars varies. Ancient constellation maps sometimes depict Mao as having six stars; there is a basis for this. Tianguan Shu 天官书 says: “Mao refers to hairs gathered on a head.” The twenty-eight lunar mansions on the Warring States lacquer box of Marquis Yi of Zeng treats Mao as “spear” as the stars of Mao are clustered together like the strands of hair gathered together in the decorative tassel of a spear; from then on, the tassel is used to refer to Mane. In the Yintun constellation map, there are three heads with one joined body; the heads must be referring to the meaning of Mao, and the joined body refers to the meaning of gathering together. This conforms to the ancient meaning of Mao.

The second scene on the west side of the north slope has eight stars linked to form a ring. This must be the Kui 奎 (Thigh) mansion of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Kui mansion originally has sixteen stars, but the number is often reduced in ancient constellation maps. The nomenclature of Kui mansion is controversial. Shouwen Jiezi 索隄子 says: “Kui, between two thighs.” Duan Yucai’s 段玉裁 Annotations says: “Kui sounds like character ‘kua’ (thighs). The sixteen-starred Kui mansion receives its name based on its shape.” The Yintun constellation map shows the sideview of a man in kneeling inside the eight stars, probably suggesting the meaning of Kui mansion as the space between the two thighs.

Below Kui mansion are two linked stars in horizontal configuration, probably Lou 廊 (Bond) in West Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Lou mansion originally has three stars, but only two are shown here, Lou mansion 1 (Aries β) and Lou mansion 3 (Aries α), both stars with brilliance of second highest magnitude. In comparison, Lou mansion 2 (Aries γ) is relatively dim, hence it is omitted here.

Below Lou mansion is a depiction of three stars in a crooked layout. This must be Wei 胃 (Stomach) mansion of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Wei is the Celestial Granary 天仓; when it is bright, all under heaven is peaceful, and the harvesting of the five grains would be plentiful. The three stars of Wei mansion (Aries 35, 39, 41) are all dim stars with brilliance of low magnitude. In the Yintun constellation map however, the three stars of Wei mansion are large, indicating that Wei mansion is signifying a good omen.

The area below Kui mansion has deteriorated. The report says that in this area is a depiction of two linked stars. It can be concluded then that this is Wu Nü of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. Wu Nü has four stars (Aquarius ε, μ, 4, 3) that are all dim stars. They replace the three stars of Zhi Nü that are distant from the celestial equator with the constellation close to the celestial equator. Although Wu Nü has an inferior status, but she abides by her duty of weaving cotton and silk. The Yintun constellation map shows one person sitting down, similar to the composition of Wu Nü mansion in the constellation map at Xi’an Jiaotong University. This seems to be a representation of Wu Nü.

The third scene on the west side of the north slope shows three stars in a horizontal configuration on the opposite side of the Serving Maid image mentioned above. This is He Gu, the ancient Qian Niu (Herd Boy), commonly known as the Shoulder Pole star, probably based on the form of the three stars in a horizontal layout. The Yintun constellation map depicts a person shouldering a pole probably with reference to this meaning. Qian Niu is paired with Zhi Nü in the legend of Seventh Night, but this subject is transformed as Niu mansion has replaced He Gu and is painted in the constellation map on the west slope. However, He Gu shares the same name Qian Niu with Nü mansion and is the original mansion that is later known as Nü mansion. For this reason, the designer has placed it here as a replacement for Nü of the system of lunar mansions, and it is paired
with Wu Nü in the North Palace.

Above He Gu are six linked stars forming the shape of a peck measure. This must be the six-starred Nan Dou mansion (Southern Dipper) in the North Palace of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. ‘‘Tianguan Shu’’ says: ‘‘The Nan Dou is a temple.’’ Jin Zhi says: ‘‘The six stars of Nan Dou controls the duration of life.’’ The Yintun constellation map shows a person as an immortal with human head and snake body on the side of Nan Dou, suggesting Nan Dou as the controller of longevity. Xi’an Jiaotong University constellation map shows Nan Dou as a person holding a dipper. This image probably has the same underlying meaning as that conveyed by the immortal depicted next to the Nan Dou in the present constellation map.

The last scene on the north ceiling slope shows three constellations all belonging to the North Palace. The lower left shows four stars linked together to form a square. This must be the two lunar mansions Shi 室 (Ying Shi, House) and Bi 壁 (Dong Bi, Wall) of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. These two asterisms Shi and Bi were considered as one unit in the past. In the twenty-eight lunar mansions painted on the Warring States lacquer box of Marquis Yi of Zeng, Shi is called Xi Ying 西萦 (West Enclosure), Bi is called Dong Ying 东萦 (East Enclosure), suggesting that they are the two walls, east and west, of a house. ‘‘Tianguan Shu’’ mentions only enclosed Ying Shi and not the Dong Bi. The chapter of ‘‘Tianwen Zhi’’ in the book Han Shu 汉书·天文志 follows this tradition by treating Shi and Bi as one mansion, and treating them as all belonging to Enclosed Ying Shi. In the constellation map at Xi’an Jiaotong University, Shi and Bi are linked together as a single mansion. According to this map, the two stars on the east refer to the Shi mansion, and the two stars on the west refer to the Bi mansion. Below the two mansions seems to be a depiction of the head of an immortal, implying that it is the dwelling of immortals to be differentiated from that of mortals.

East of the two mansions Shi and Bi are five stars, and further to the right are two coiled blue snakes. The number of stars, the position and the images coincide with the two mansions Xu 虚 (Ground) and Wei 危 (Rooftop) of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. ‘‘Tianguan Shu’’ says: ‘‘The Black Wu 玄武 (Tortoise and Snake) of the North Palace.’’ Encircled by blue snakes, the two mansions constitute the Black Wu Image. The constellation map from Xi’an Jiaotong University shows the five stars of Xu and Wei as linked together, and must be referring to the same image. The only difference is that a small snake is depicted at the center of the five stars as a representation of Black Wu, and is therefore a slightly different image from that shown here. Among the ancient system of Four Celestial Palaces, it is the Image of the North Palace that has been transformed from Deer to Black Wu (Tortoise and Snake). The tortoise form of Black Wu is derived from the shape of Xu and Wei mansions, while the snake form is based on the appearance of the Snake constellation. In this map, Xu and Wei mansions are depicted in the form of a tortoise; combined with the snake, they clearly refer to the Image of North Palace.

Above the four mansions is the depiction of a gate with a single star painted above. This seems to be the Bei Luo Shi Men 北落师门 (Gate of the Northern Military Division). Shiji Zhengyi considers the star Bei Luo Shi Men as the symbol of the gate of the celestial army. The north gate of Chang’an 长安 city is called Gate of the Northern Military Division probably with the same implication. Bei Luo Shi Men is situated south of the four mansions Xu, Wei, Shi and Bi. It is a star with brilliance of the highest magnitude. As the star is named after a military gate, a gate is painted in order to suggest this meaning.

The special features of the Yintun constellation map are very clear. It represents celestial phenomena by integrating ancient constellations and their distinctive forms with their astrological meanings. It is based on the celestial system that was traditionally significant to the ancients, a system founded on the key concepts of the Big Dipper and twenty-eight lunar mansions. It is a work of art that has vivid imageries and it is rich in content. Among the stars depicted are the four constellations Big Dipper in Central Palace, Guan Suo, Zhi Nü, and He Gu. In the East Palace there are the Ji mansion, the Blue Dragon asterisms comprising the six mansions Jiao, Kang, Di, Fang, Xin, Wei, together with nine constellations of Tian Tian and Tian Men. In the South Palace there are the twelve constellations Jing, Gui, Liu, Xing, Zhang, Yi, Zhen, Yue, Chang Sha, Bei He, Nan He, Tian Que. In the West Palace there are Kui, Lou, Wei, Mao, Bi, and the White Tiger Image comprising the asterisms of Zi, Shen and Fa. In the North Palace there are the eight constellations Nan Dou, Niu, Wu Nü, Xu, Wei, Shi, Bi, Bei Luo Shi Men of the twenty-eight lunar mansions and others. The constellation map on the west slope is based on the content of the text ‘‘Da Dong.’’ Among the Four Celestial Palaces, only those
of East, West and North remain. The Image of South Palace is not depicted in detail. However, in the central domain of South Palace is a depiction of Yi mansion. As Yi mansion is named after the wings of a bird, and they are the most visible and direct aspects of Vermillion Bird, it is possible that this depiction is meant to symbolize Vermillion Bird. The Dragon Image of East Palace, Tiger Image of West Palace, Black Wu of North Palace all reflect their associations with stars, indicating that the Four Images are used to symbolize the respective palaces and they are the more integrated representations of the main lunar mansions of the celestial palaces. This approach reveals a very ancient tradition of the Four Celestial Palaces. It is clear that the many omissions and mistakes found in the Yintun constellation map – the misplacement and erroneous switching of positions of constellations in particular – detract from the scientific value of the constellation map. However, this does not affect the value of the Yintun constellation map as a distinctive example of ancient constellation maps. In fact, it is a rich source of information on cultural history. It also provides rare evidence for the study of the ancient meanings of the twenty-eight lunar mansions, the connection between the twenty-eight lunar mansions and the Four Palaces, and it is significant for the study of ancient astronomy, astrology and ancient intellectual history.

[Translator’s note: English translations of the lunar mansions vary; some of those adapted here are based on Edward Schafer, Pacing the Void: T’ang Approaches to the Stars (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1977)]

Reference Works


Note: The original essay, published in Kaogu 2005:1: 64–75, with seven illustrations, is written by Feng Shi. This summary is prepared by the author himself and English-translated by Judy Chungwa Ho.