

## Travel, Love and Lost Things: The earliest Sino-Tibetan Divination Manuscript

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**I** don't remember when I first met Dan Martin, but it hardly matters when there have been so many memorable meetings and conversations over the years. In this category of conversations, I'm including both those in person, often at conferences over breakfasts, lunches and dinners, and those that happened in the comments sections of Dan's and my blogs, *Tibeto-Logic* and *Early Tibet*. Dan was a regular, thoughtful, provocative, and funny contributor to the comments of my blog between 2007 and 2014, when I stopped writing for it. Dan, indefatigable, always learning, and always sharing what he is learning with us, has continued with his own.

In 2008, working for the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library, I came across a set of diagrams with Tibetan writing on the back of a Chinese scroll. The scroll had been catalogued and placed in the sequence of Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang (Or.8210/S.) and thus the Tibetan side had been completely overlooked for nearly a hundred years. Though the collections from Dunhuang are always full of surprises, this was a big one. The scroll was digitised by IDP and colour images can now be accessed on their website ([idp.bl.uk](http://idp.bl.uk)). I spent some time trying to understand the scroll, which turned out to be a series of divination practices in the Chinese astrological tradition, and later that year I wrote a post introducing it in my blog post 'The Golden Turtle: A Sino-Tibetan divination manuscript.'

As was so often the case in those days, Dan was the first to comment on this blog post, offering up an interesting correspondence with Dzogchen texts. A lively conversation continued in the comments, with Dan kindly offering references to Chinese astrological divination in Tibetan sources, and useful suggestions about the nature of the animal depicted at the end of the scroll.<sup>1</sup> The appearance of this divination scroll in that blog post, and the subsequent catalogue of Tibetan texts found in the sequence of Chinese Dunhuang manuscripts at the British Library, by Kazushi Iwao, Tsuguhito Takeuchi and myself (2012), caused quite a lot of interest, and the scroll has featured in interesting articles by Dieter Schuh (2012), Duncan Poupard (2018), and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (2018). However, neither my original blog post nor

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<sup>1</sup> I'd also like to thank others who commented on that post, some of them anonymously. I'm particularly grateful for Andrew West's suggestions, which have also informed this paper.

these articles have dealt with the scroll and its contents as a whole, so it seems worth doing that here.

Compared to the surviving texts on dice divination, there is little discussion of Chinese divination systems in the Tibetan texts from Dunhuang.<sup>2</sup> A notable exception, though one that is easily missed, is found in the manuscript IOL Tib J 339. This is a pothi, apparently from the tenth century, to judge from the handwriting, which contains a series of homages to the Buddha, the dharma, the sangha, and other noble objects. The verses are written with much space between them, which has been filled with commentary in a much smaller handwriting. In one verse, the dharma is called 'the supreme *gtsug lag*'. The commentary written underneath this line goes on to distinguish between right and wrong forms of *gtsug lag*. Right *gtsug lag* is Buddhism itself, which is defined here in terms of teaching, accomplishment and the path. The definition of wrong *gtsug lag* is interesting for what it reveals about the systems of divination in practice at the time.

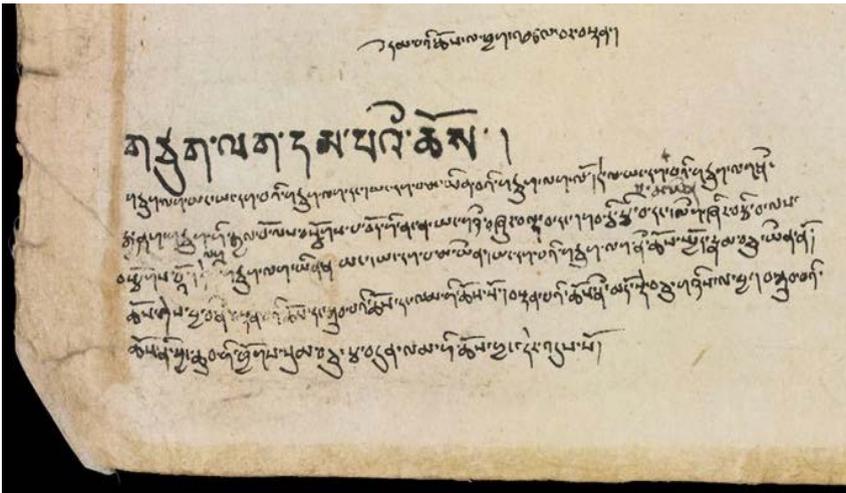


Fig.1 -- Detail from IOL Tib J 339, where the term *gtsug lag* is discussed.

The first kind of wrong *gtsug lag* is called 'the emperor of the Chinese *gtsug lag*' (*rgya nag gi gtsug lag gi rgyal po*). The exact system that is being referred to here is unclear but it may refer to the Chinese system of

<sup>2</sup> If the numbers of surviving manuscripts mean anything, it seems that Tibetan dice divination was more popular than Tibetanized Chinese divination systems in Eastern Central Asia in the ninth and tenth centuries. For excellent and recent reviews of the dice divination manuscripts and the tradition they represent see Ai 2019 and Dotson 2019.

astrology in general, in which the night sky is equated with the emperor, his palace and entourage.<sup>3</sup> The commentary tells us that there is wrong *gtsug lag* 'even within Tibet'. This is said to include studying the portents of the days (*gnyi bzhur blta ba*), probably referring to a divination system for deciding whether particular days are favourable for certain activities. Another kind of wrong *gtsug lag* is the *gab tse*, a word still used by Tibetans to refer to astrological charts. The last form of wrong *gtsug lag* is something called *li zhi*, which, as Andrew West has pointed out, is almost certainly a transliteration of the Chinese word *li ri* 曆日. This means 'astrological almanac' and is a common term for almanacs during this period. For example, the title of the almanac for the year 978 on the recto of Or.8210/S.612 is *Da Songguo guanben kanding daben liri* 大宋國官本勘定大本曆日.<sup>4</sup>

We can see from the discussion of *gtsug lag* in this manuscript that Chinese divination systems were well known, and apparently practiced in Tibet by the tenth century. It is surprising though, that only one Tibetan manuscript from Dunhuang, as far as I know, gives a complete treatment of divination systems that seem to derive from the Chinese tradition.<sup>5</sup> This is the scroll that is the subject of this article, Or.8210/S.6878.<sup>6</sup> Dieter Schuh has confirmed that this scroll is the earliest example of the Sino-Tibetan divination tradition:

The Dunhuang document described above clearly shows that the

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<sup>3</sup> This can be seen in another Dunhuang manuscript containing the famous star map (Or.8210/S.3326). As the authors of a study of this manuscript state: 'As was usual in the Chinese sky representations, the North Polar region features the central Purple Palace with the Celestial Emperor at the pole, surrounded by his family, servants, military officers and the corresponding housing' (Bonnet-Bidaud, Praderie and Whitfield 2009: 7).

<sup>4</sup> Comment by Andrew West dated January 6, 2008, on the original blog post (van Schaik 2008).

<sup>5</sup> There are many Dunhuang manuscripts containing Chinese texts on divination; see the chapters in Kalinowsky (ed.) 2003. Comparison between these and the Tibetan texts in S.6878 is an important next step in the further study of this scroll but is beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>6</sup> There are a few other divination diagrams found in the Tibetan manuscripts from Eastern Central Asia. From Dunhuang, the scroll Pelliot tibétain 55 contains a circular diagram in twelve parts, based on the Buddhist twelve links of dependent origination. The extensive text above the diagram suggests that this is a divination by the day of the month, akin to the first method on S.68678; unfortunately, the beginning of the scroll is fragmentary, and the practice is not fully described. The text immediately below the diagram, which does not seem to be related to it, is on magical practices for dealing with good and bad dreams; for a transliteration and translation, see Crescenzi and Torricelli 1995. Another circular diagram, though very fragmentary, is among the manuscripts found by Aurel Stein at the Tibetan fort of Miran in the Lop Nor desert; this was used for dice divination, as Brandon Dotson (2019) has shown.

content of the "science" later known as *Nag-rtsis* and so on, and adopted from China, was disseminated in the Tibetan language in the 9th – 11th centuries and was used by Tibetans. The Dunhuang Document S.6878 is also the oldest evidence for the practice of these divination teachings from China in the Tibetan cultural area.<sup>7</sup>

Considering the uniqueness and importance of the Tibetan texts it contains, I would like to consider the provenance and material nature of the physical scroll itself. The scroll is just over 25cm wide and over 4m in length, and the top is badly damaged, while the bottom still has the original wooden roller. On the top corner of the scroll, 'Chien 0204' has been written, in what looks like Aurel Stein's own handwriting. This is different from the more commonly seen 'Ch.' prefix used by Stein for manuscripts from Dunhuang. A few other scrolls with similar 'Chien' numbers appear in the photographic plates of Stein's account of his third expedition, *Innermost Asia*. Here, Stein describes how during his return visit to Dunhuang in 1914, during his third expedition, he purchased and sent to London another 570 scrolls to add to those he had removed during his second expedition:

In the rock-cut shrine which formerly served as his quarters and now had become his storeroom, he now produced two big boxes crammed with well-preserved manuscript rolls. By the careful appearance of their writing and the superior quality of the paper it was easy to recognize that the specimens I was able rapidly to examine belonged to that great stock of canonical texts, mostly Buddhist and dating from Tang times, with which Wang Tao-shih, under the influence of quasi-religious scruples, had in 1907 been least willing to part... For a total donation of five hundred Taels of silver he agreed to transfer to my possession the 570 Chinese manuscript rolls of which his reserve store was found to consist. Their total bulk is sufficiently indicated by the fact that their transport required five cases, each as large as a pony could conveniently carry.<sup>8</sup>

Stein also guessed that the scrolls had already been examined and rejected by Paul Pelliot when he had visited the caves and purchased a

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<sup>7</sup> Schuh 2012: 324: 'Das vorstehend beschriebene Dunhuang-Dokument belegt eindeutig, daß Inhalte der später als *Nag-rtsis* etc. bezeichneten, aus China übernommenen "Wissenschaft" im 9. – 11. Jahrhundert in tibetischer Sprache verbreitet waren und von Tibetern benutzt wurden. Das Dunhuang-Dokument S.6878 ist zudem der älteste Beleg für die Praktizierung dieser aus China stammenden Divinationslehren im tibetischen Kulturraum.'

<sup>8</sup> Stein, *Innermost Asia*, p.358. Stein also mentions "The packets of Chien-fo-tung rolls that I was subsequently able to rescue by purchase at Su-chou and Kan-chou" (p.356). Plates of a few Chinese scrolls with 'Chien' numbers appear in the photographic plates in *Innermost Asia*, listed as CHIEN. 0249, 0293, 0405, 0566 (Plates CXXVIII and CXXIX).

significant number of the remaining manuscripts: "There could be little doubt that these fine *chings* had passed through Professor Pelliot's hands when, a year after my own visit, he had subjected whatever was then left of the great hoard to his expert, if necessarily hurried, examination."<sup>9</sup> The index of objects in *Innermost Asia* does not have any reference to manuscripts with the 'Chien' prefix, but this is explained by Stein's own statement that he was not able to provide any information about the contents of these scrolls, which he was now leaving to the cataloguing work of Lionel Giles.<sup>10</sup> Other scrolls with a 'Chien' number inscribed on them are all in the 6000s of the Or.8210/S. sequence, which also indicates that they were added to the sequence subsequent to the manuscripts of Stein's second expedition.

Returning to the scroll S.6878, this is a bilingual manuscript, with one side containing only Tibetan text, and the other, the Chinese text of part of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*.<sup>11</sup> This is therefore one of many scrolls from Cave 17 in Dunhuang which has Chinese written on one side and Tibetan on the other. While it is often assumed in cases like this that the Chinese sutra is the original text on the scroll, with the Tibetan added later, here it could be the other way round. The Tibetan divination text starts halfway down the scroll, just after a join between two panels of paper. It is hard to see why the text would have been copied at this point and have fitted perfectly into the remaining part of the scroll. It seems more likely that a shorter scroll with the Tibetan text was extended by gluing more panels on, and then the Chinese text was written on the new panels and the blank reverse side of the panels with the Tibetan text. When we look at the Chinese side of the scroll, we can see a clear difference in paper quality between the panels with the Tibetan text on the other side, and the panels probably added later. There is also a water stain along the edge that is not continuous across the panels.

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<sup>9</sup> *Innermost Asia*, p.358.

<sup>10</sup> Stein, *Innermost Asia*, p.358: "In 1920 these rolls, together with the other manuscript materials recovered in the course of my third journey, reached a safe place of temporary deposit at the British Museum under the care of Dr. L. Giles. A first rapid inspection which this valued Sinologue collaborator was kind enough to make has confirmed my belief that most of the rolls would prove to contain texts of the Chinese Buddhist canon. But their detailed examination must wait until Dr. Giles has completed the cataloguing of the thousands of Chinese manuscripts brought away in 1907 from the same hoard, a lengthy task on which he has been engaged for a number of years."

<sup>11</sup> *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* 大般若波羅蜜多經 (N. 1; K. ii-iv; T.220).

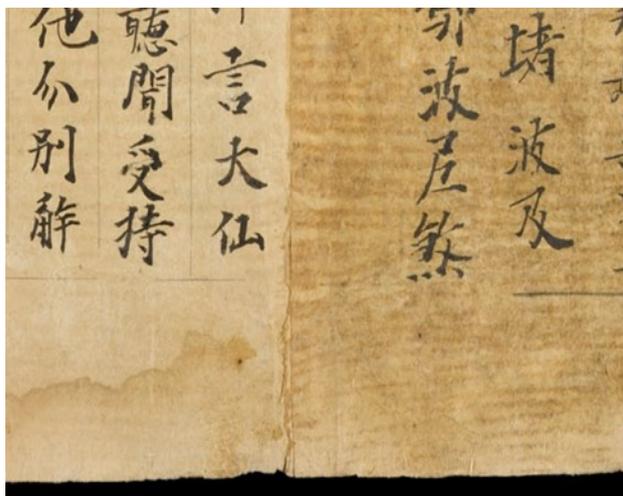


Fig.2 -- Detail of Or.8210/S.6878. showing the difference in paper quality between the part of the scroll with Tibetan text and the part without, and the water stain that ends at the division between the two panels.

If the Tibetan text and diagrams are older than the Chinese text, and moreover, the added panels then suffered considerable wear and tear after the Tibetan scroll was repurposed, we would expect the scroll to predate the *terminus ad quem* for Dunhuang manuscripts, the early eleventh century, by several decades at least. The Tibetan writing is neat but without the calligraphic flourishes seen in many tenth-century Buddhist manuscripts from Dunhuang. It resembles most closely the 'sutra style' of the multiple copies of Tibetan sutras made towards the end of the Tibetan imperial period, in the mid-ninth century.<sup>12</sup> Thus I would tentatively date the Tibetan part of the scroll to the mid to late ninth century.

The divination practices detailed on the scroll fall into three parts. The first part comprises two diagrams for determining good and bad days for travelling. The second part comprises nine diagrams for determining the outcomes of a match between a man and a woman, based on their birth year. The third part consists of a single diagram, 'the golden turtle' which is used by calculating the day of the month and matching it with a body part of the turtle. Thus there are twelve diagrams in all.<sup>13</sup>

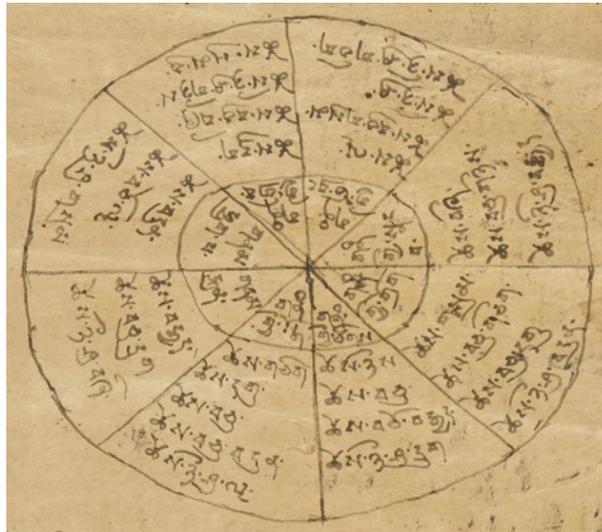
<sup>12</sup> See the categories of early Tibetan styles in van Schaik 2014.

<sup>13</sup> As Dieter Schuh has pointed out (2012: 320), the catalogue entry in Iwao, van Schaik and Takeuchi (2012: 82) incorrectly states that there are thirteen diagrams; this is entirely my fault, not that of the other authors.

*The First Divination Method: Travel*

The first two diagrams on the scroll are for divination before a journey is taken. The divination is calculated by the day of the month on which the journey is started. Thus, this is a form of hemerology, divination of auspicious days of an activity.<sup>14</sup> The month has thirty days, and each day is contained in one of the 'heavens' (*gnam*). Dieter Schuh states that what we see here in the scroll is directly derived from Chinese astrology, and the topic appears in the later Sino-Tibetan tradition under the heading of *byes 'gro'i rtsis*.<sup>15</sup> The 'heavens' of the two diagrams in the scroll are clearly linked to the twenty-eight 'heavenly mansions' (*xiu* 宿) of the Chinese astrological system. However, both of the two diagrams on the scroll are divided into only eight parts, each subdivided, but only to separate the name of the 'heaven' from a list of days of the month belonging to that heaven. This allows the diviner to identify any day of the month with one of twelve heavens.<sup>16</sup>

Chart 1



The table below gives the correspondences in the order they appear in

<sup>14</sup> On hemerology in the Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang, see Kalinowsky 2003: 213-300.

<sup>15</sup> Schuh 2012: 320-322.

<sup>16</sup> Though it is clearly from a different tradition, it is interesting to compare the circular diagram for the interpretation of dice divination found at the Tibetan fort at Miran (S.15000/302), which has recently been discussed by Brandon Dotson (2019).

the divination results, which starts at the section to the left of 6 o'clock (*gnam gyi skor*), and moves anti-clockwise:

The door of heaven ( <i>gnam gyi sgo</i> )	1, 9, 10, <sup>17</sup> 17, 25
The junction of heaven ( <i>gnam gi tsigs</i> )	2, 10, 18, 26
The gaining heaven ( <i>gnam gyi grog</i> )	3, 11, 19, 27
The appearing heaven ( <i>gnam gyi snang ba</i> )	4, 12, 28
The palace of heaven ( <i>gnam gyi pho brang</i> )	5, 13, 20, 21
The obscured heaven ( <i>gnam gyi grib</i> )	6, 14, 22, 30
The wealth of heaven ( <i>gnam gyi phyug pa</i> )	7, 15, 23
The thief of heaven ( <i>gnam gyi rkun</i> )	8, 16, 24

The second chart follows a different system of classification and begins in the section just below 3 o'clock (*bye'u dmar po*), moving anti-clockwise from there. The results are then looked up in the text below the diagram. In the text, the readings are separated with two or four circles; in dice divination these can refer to dice rolls, but there is nothing to indicate this is the case here, so they may just be scribal variants, the circles being a common way of separating passages of texts in the Dunhuang manuscripts.<sup>18</sup> The results themselves make it clear that the primary purpose of the travel, and the reason for seeking divination, was financial.

- If it falls upon a day of the door of heaven: if you go on a long journey, it will be good. Auspicious!
- If it falls upon a day of the junction of heaven: wherever you go, you will incur a loss. Very bad!
- If it falls upon a day of the rising heaven: wherever you go, you will meet with partners, and everything you do together will result in financial gain and accomplishment. Very good!
- If it falls upon a day of the appearing heaven: you will encounter feasting with meat and beer. Good!
- If it falls upon a day of the palace of heaven: wherever you go, you will meet with a partner, and he will bring great profits. Very good!
- If it falls upon a day of the obscured heaven: wherever you go, there will be a loss of wealth and property, resulting in ruin. Very bad!
- If it falls upon a day of the wealth of heaven: wherever you go,

<sup>17</sup> The appearance of the number 10 here as well as in the next house is probably a scribal error.

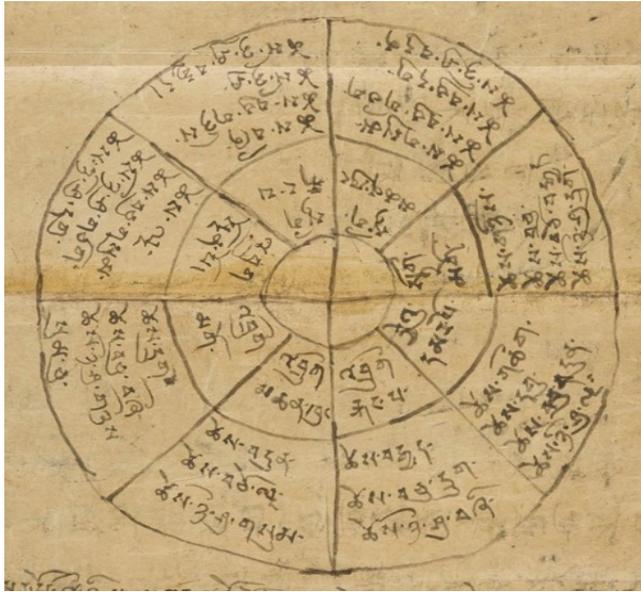
<sup>18</sup> The fact that the circles do not appear after the final entry in either this or the next section of results also suggests that they are not part of the divination, but just visual cues to divide the readings from each other.

you will meet with partners, and everything you do together will result in financial gain and accomplishment. Very good!<sup>19</sup>

- If it falls upon a day of the thief of heaven: wherever you go, you will be attacked by thieves. Very bad!

Profit and loss feature heavily in these results, and it is clear that the main purpose of consulting an expert in this method would have been to check the likely success of a journey for financial purposes. So, the person requesting the divination would be a merchant, or at least someone engaged in travelling for mercantile purposes.

## Chart 2



The second chart is based on three animals that are associated with different parts of the sky in Chinese astrology: the red bird (*zhuque* 朱雀), the white tiger (*baihu* 白虎), and the blue dragon (*qinglong* 青龍). The tiger's colour is not mentioned here, and the black turtle which usually makes up the complete set of four is not present (though note the turtle at the end of the scroll); nevertheless, the association is clear.

The little red bird (*bye'u dmar po*)

1, 9, 17, 25

The tiger's head (*stag gi mgo*)

2, 10, 18, 26

<sup>19</sup> Note that this result is the same as the day of the rising heaven.

The tiger's armpit ( <i>stag gi mchan khung</i> )	3, 11, 19, 27
The tiger's foot ( <i>stag gi rkang pa</i> )	4, 12, 20, 28
The blue dragon ( <i>'brug sngon po</i> )	5, 13, 21, 29
The dragon's head ( <i>'brug gi mgo</i> )	6, 14, 22, 30
The dragon's armpit ( <i>'brug gi mchan khung</i> )	7, 15, 23
The dragon's foot ( <i>'brug gi rkang pa</i> )	8, 16, 24

Here the numbers of the days are similar, but not exactly the same as in the previous chart. The results of this method are again written below the diagram.

- On a day of the little red bird: wherever you go, you will meet with partners. Very good!
- If it falls upon a day of the tiger's head: if you are going for the benefit of a superior, it will be good, but if you are going for the benefit of yourself, it will be bad.<sup>20</sup>
- If it falls upon a day of the tiger's armpit: wherever you go, it will be mediocre.
- If it falls upon a day of the tiger's foot: wherever you go, you will not receive any profit. Mediocre to low.
- If it falls upon a day of the blue dragon: if you are going for the benefit of a superior, it will be good, but if you are going for the benefit of yourself, it will be bad.
- If it falls upon a day of the dragon's head: wherever you go, you will incur a loss. Bad.
- If it falls upon a day of the dragon's armpit: you will make a profit. Very good!
- If it falls upon a day of the dragon's foot: wherever you go you will not obtain anything.<sup>21</sup> Very bad!

Despite the similarity of the days in the two charts, the results do not accord with each other, and this second one contains worse or mediocre results. Once again, profit and loss feature here, giving the impression that the person seeking the guidance of the divination expert would have been a merchant. As Edward White has pointed out, these two charts are very similar to Chinese divination charts that appear in the compilation titled Jade Box Record (*Yuxia ji* 玉匣記). The Chinese diagrams are also divided into eight segments, each divided in two to show the parts of the sky and the corresponding days. The Jade Box

<sup>20</sup> Here, I have tentatively translated *bla* as 'a superior' as it is hard to interpret the word in this context.

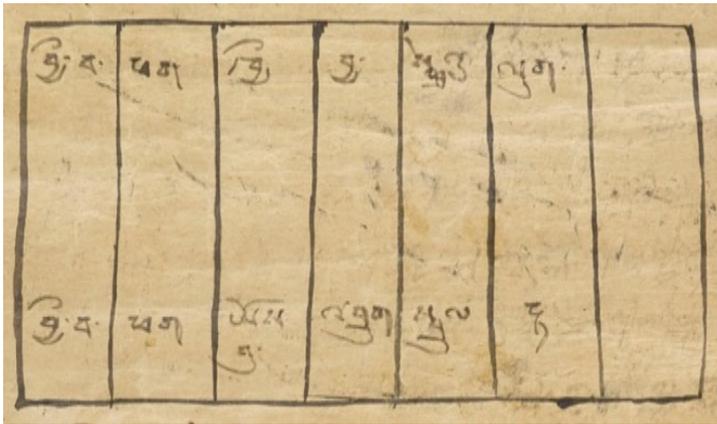
<sup>21</sup> Here, I am reading *'byor* for the text's *'brod*.

Record has three such charts and explains that different charts are to be used depending on which month the journey is made. Despite certain variations in the arrangement of the parts of the sky, the corresponding days of the month, and some details of the results of the divination, these charts clearly derive from the same tradition. As White has pointed out, this general method of divination, also used for other purposes including determining the best days for a burial, is called *zhoutang* 周堂, 'periodic halls'.<sup>22</sup>

*The Second Divination Method: Love*

The next divination topic concerns matches between a man (*pho*) and a woman (*mo*). This falls under the category of *bag rtsis* in the later Sino-Tibetan tradition. This divination takes up most of the scroll, with nine charts in total, though there is less explanatory text than in the other two divinations. Though I have used the word 'love' to describe the theme of these relationship divinations, the results are actually concerned with practical outcomes of a marriage match, such as wealth, status, and children. This aspect of Chinese astrological divination is still important in both Chinese and Tibetan traditions, and in the age of the internet has become popular all over the world.<sup>23</sup>

**Chart 3**



This is a simple set of six columns (and the empty seventh column

<sup>22</sup> See this Twitter thread by Edward White: <https://twitter.com/edwardW2/status/1400328689905115143?s=20>

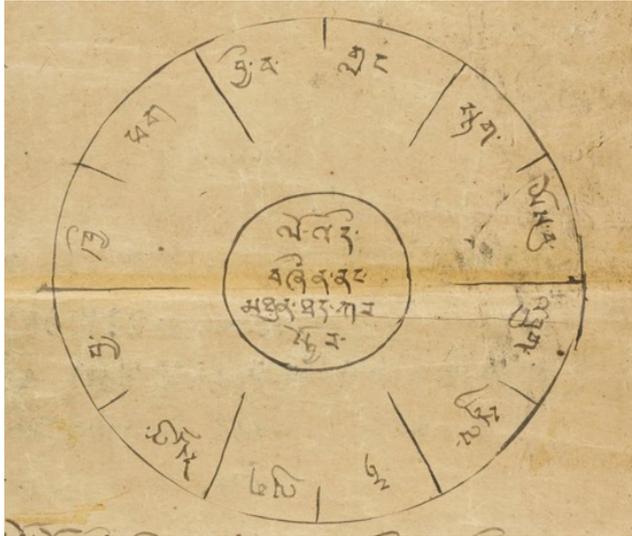
<sup>23</sup> Schuh 2012: 322. The travel divination diagrams are in the 5th volume of the Jade Box Record.

seems to be a scribal mistake). The animals at the top of each column are matched to those at the bottom, as follows:

- rat & rat
- pig & pig
- dog & hare
- bird & dragon
- monkey & snake
- sheep & horse

The text reads: “If the man and the woman are matched in this way, then they will have high status without having to seek it.”<sup>24</sup>

#### Chart 4



This chart is a circle, divided into twelve for the twelve animals, but with alternating short and long lines, so the animals fall into pairs again. There is a smaller circle in the middle which contains some text instructing the diviner to “join the [birth] year with the internally concordant one.” By this method, the pairs which are within the groups with longer lines are:

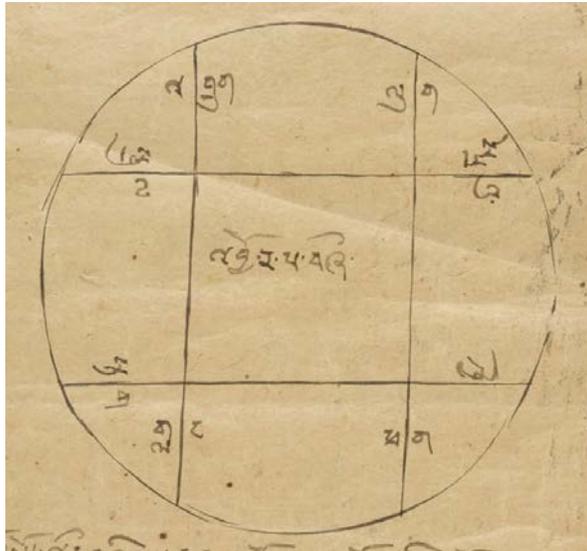
- rat & ox

<sup>24</sup> The translation here is tentative: I have translated the Tibetan *blon mtsan* as ‘high status’ but I am not completely sure of this.

- tiger & hare
- dragon & snake
- horse & sheep
- monkey & bird
- dog & pig

The explanatory text tells us that “If the man and the woman are matched in this way, then each will benefit the other. If rat or ox are matched with dog, then there will be no children [but still] each will benefit the other.”

**Chart 5**



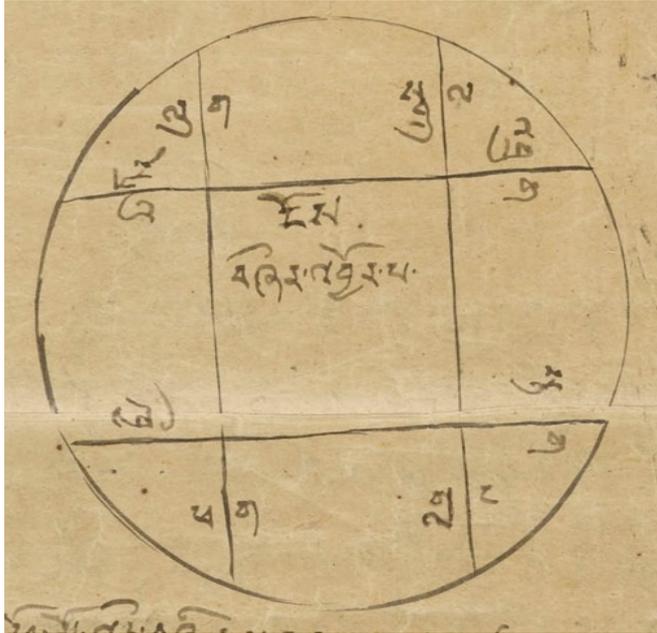
This is a circle divided by four intersecting lines to make eight parts. The text in the middle says simply “the four connections”. If the animals closest to each other are connected, then the four pairs are as follows:

- sheep & monkey
- dog & pig
- ox & tiger
- snake & dragon

The explanatory text states that “If the man and the woman are

matched in this way, then there will be five male children and two female children."

**Chart 6**



This is the same design as the chart above, but the text in the middle says, "joined at the four sides". It is not clear to me whether this indicates a different method of matching the animals, but if one uses the same method as in the previous chart, these are pairs:

- snake & dragon
- tiger & ox
- pig & dog
- monkey & sheep

The explanatory text simply states, "If the man and the woman are matched in this way: wealth and status."

Chart 7

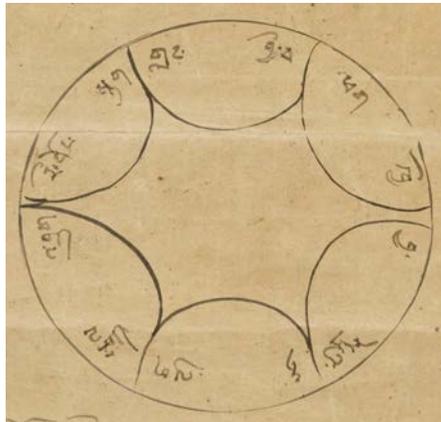


This chart is in the form of a circle, with four internal curved lines delimiting four animal pairs. The text in the middle says, "Four links." The groups are:

- ox & pig
- dog & monkey
- sheep & snake
- dragon & tiger

The explanatory text states, "If the man and the woman are matched in this way: great valour."

Chart 8

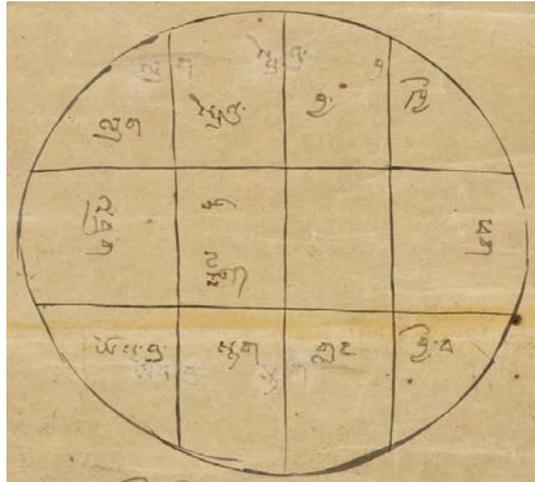


This chart takes the same form as the one above, but gives six internal groups of animal pairs. They are:

- ox & rat
- pig & dog
- bird & monkey
- horse & sheep
- snake & dragon
- rabbit<sup>25</sup> & tiger

The explanatory text states, "If the man and the woman are matched in this way: longevity, wealth and status."

### Chart 9



This chart is a circle divided by two horizontal and three vertical lines, forming twelve sections. One animal is written in each section, each for the middle left section which contains two, and the middle right one, which is left empty. The scribe originally started to write some animal names across the lines, as in Charts 5 and 6, but then erased these. All twelve animals are present, but apart from the two which inhabit the same section, snake and horse, there is no clear method for pairing them. If they are considered to be paired with any adjacent section, and assuming that the snake and horse (usually considered a

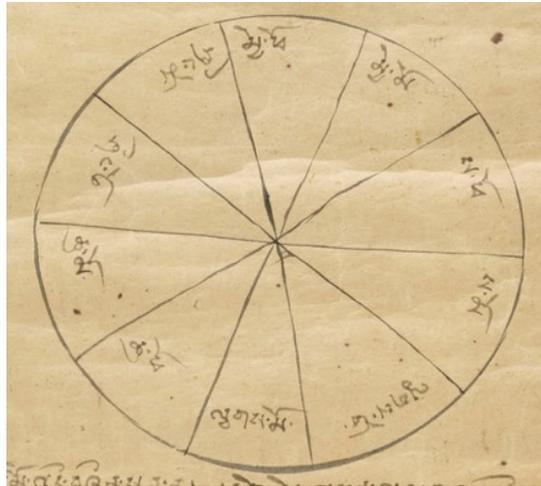
<sup>25</sup> The text here has *ri bong* rather than *yos bu*. The latter term, which appeared in Chart 3, is more commonly used in the Tibetan zodiac.

bad match) are not a pair, then the following would apply:

- rat: pig, ox
- ox: rat, tiger
- tiger: ox, hare, snake, horse
- hare: tiger, dragon
- dragon: hare, sheep, snake, horse
- sheep: dragon, monkey
- monkey: hare, bird, snake, horse
- bird: monkey, dog
- dog: bird, pig
- pig: dog, rat
- snake: tiger, monkey, dragon
- horse: tiger, monkey, dragon

The explanatory text says, "If the man and the woman are matched in this way: wealth and status."

#### Chart 10



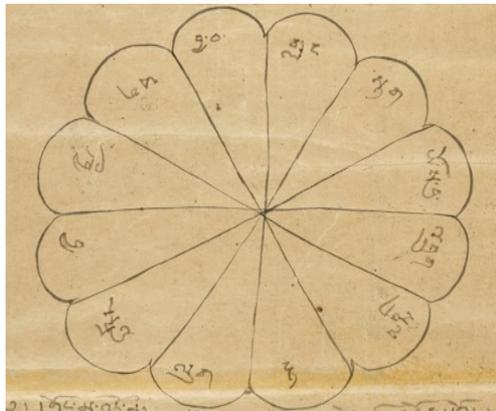
This chart is a circle divided through the middle with straight lines forming ten segments. Unlike the other charts, this one presents the elements of the zodiac, each in a male and female form. Like the animal cycle representing the years, this is a traditional aspect of the Chinese zodiac which has continued to the present day. If we take the pairs to

be formed by neighbouring segments, they are as follows:<sup>26</sup>

- male fire pairs with female fire and wood
- female fire pairs with male fire and earth
- male earth pairs with female earth and fire
- female earth pairs with male earth and iron
- male iron pairs with female iron and earth
- female iron pairs with male iron and water
- male water pairs with female water and iron
- female water pairs with male water and wood
- male wood pairs with female wood and water
- female wood pairs with male wood and fire

The explanatory text says, "If the man and the woman are matched in this way, then much virtue and benefit will be the outcome."

**Chart 11**



This chart is flower-shaped, and divided into twelve sections, each containing one animal name. The sequence of animals here is the classic one from Chinese astrology. A line of text above it states that "The below are not to be joined." A line of text below this chart states "The above shows what are called 'the six afflictions' which are not to be

<sup>26</sup> Read in this way, the table is in accord with the harmonious relationships in later Sino-Tibetan astrology. From Philippe Cornu (1990: 59-60): "The son of Wood is Fire; the son of Fire is Earth; the son of Earth is Metal; the son of Metal is Water; and the son of Water is Wood." The table also avoids the following bad correspondences: "The enemy of Wood is Metal; the enemy of Metal is Fire; the enemy of Fire is Water; the enemy of Water is Earth; the enemy of Earth is Wood."

joined." This indicates that there is only one unfavourable match for each sign. If we take the signs directly opposite each other to be the unfavourable pairs, which is the usual practice in Chinese astrology, then the bad matches are as follows:

- rat & horse
- ox & sheep
- tiger & monkey
- hare & bird
- dragon & dog
- snake & pig

These are the classic unfavourable matches in Chinese astrology, as we see through to the present day.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Third Divination Method: Lost Things*

The final divination rests on the interpretation of a single chart, which is in fact an illustrated animal. This section is titled "The divination (*mo*) of the golden turtle, for finding things that have escaped or been lost."<sup>28</sup> Here, I have translated the Tibetan word *mo* as 'divination'. In the later tradition this word usually refers to divination by means of dice, but here, as with the other charts on this scroll, it is a calendrical practice. Like the first divination on the scroll, the results of this depend on the day of the month, when the loss occurred. The title suggests that the divination might be used not only for inanimate objects, but also for animals, servants or enslaved people who have escaped.

The diagram itself is a sketch on a creature called a *ru sbal*. In later Tibetan sources this always means a turtle or tortoise. Here, the animal depicted has no shell, and looks somewhat like a frog rather than a turtle. The Tibetan words for turtle and frog, *ru sbal* and *sbal po* respectively, are very similar, and Duncan Poupard has pointed out that there is a similarity here with a Naxi divination tradition featuring an animal which is both turtle and frog. However, the animal depicted here not only lacks a shell, but possesses a tail and claws, unlike a frog.

The turtle on the scroll does in fact closely resemble later Tibetan versions of turtles found in divination diagrams and amulets; for example, in a series of amulets to be worn by people born in particular years, studied by Tadeusz Skorupski, the turtle has a similar tail,

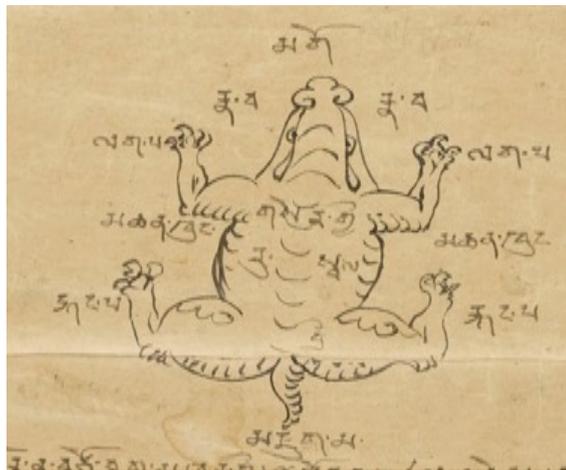
<sup>27</sup> E.g. the excellent educational resource at <http://idp.bl.uk/education/astrology.html> (accessed 2 May 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Here, as in my original blog post, I use the word 'turtle', although the Tibetan *ru sbal* can be applied to both the turtle and tortoise.

clawed legs, and bulbous nose. Another interesting thing about the amulets discussed by Skorupski is that the turtles are viewed from underneath; if that is the case in the sketch here as well, the shell might have been assumed to be unseen on the other side of the turtle. The difference is the missing circular shape of the body in these designs, stylised so that it can contain circular diagrams, but also suggesting the shell.<sup>29</sup> Thus what we have in the 'golden turtle' here on the Dunhuang scroll does seem to be a turtle without its shell depicted (a suggestion which Dan Martin made in a comment on my original blog post). It is quite possible that the circle representing the shell is not depicted on the Dunhuang scroll simply because it was not necessary for teaching the method that is described here.

As Dan Martin pointed out to me in a comment on my original blog post on this scroll, 'the golden turtle' is also the name of a Dzogchen text in the Nyingma and Bonpo traditions. This text was studied by Samten Karmay who showed that the Nyingma version was simply a repurposed form of the Bonpo one. The use of the term 'golden turtle' in this Dzogchen text is then probably explained by its Bonpo origin, as an example of their use of earlier terms from Tibetan ritual practice in their texts, such as *g.yung drung* and *gtsug lag*. In fact, the latter term also appears in the title of the Bonpo golden turtle Dzogchen text.<sup>30</sup>

### Chart 12



<sup>29</sup> Skorupski, *Tibetan Amulets*, pp.60-64. In fact, other animals - the twelve animals of the zodiac - depicted in amulet diagrams also have their body replaced by circular diagrams (pp.95-106)

<sup>30</sup> The full title of the Bonpo text is *rGyud kyi rgyal po gser gyi rus sbal g.yung drung thigs pa man rdo rje theg pa rtsa ba'i rgyud*. See Karmay 2007: 220-223.

Inside the turtle, the words “golden turtle” are written, as well as a faint syllable *'bri*, meaning to write or draw, and probably an instruction that this animal is to be drawn for each divination. The instructions written above the diagram are as follows:

Count from the first lunar day of the month on which the loss happened to the date of the loss, match this with a point on the golden turtle and mark it. If the loss happened within this thirty-day month, start from the head and count around to the right. If it happened beyond this thirty-day month, start from the tail and count around to the left.<sup>31</sup> Write whether the result is good or bad at the tail of the turtle.

Thus, the practice is to identify the turtle body part that corresponds to the day on which the thing was lost. This is done by generating a number which corresponds to the date of the thirty-day lunar month on which the item was lost, counting round the turtle and seeing where you end up. Whether you count clockwise or anticlockwise will depend on whether the item was lost within the last month or not. Some of the turtle's body parts (the nose, arms, armpits and feet) are repeated on its right and left side, but the result does not depend on which side the mark is made on. The results are then read as follows:

- If it was lost on the day of the head, it will be found if you look in the vicinity of a laundry washer.
- If it was lost on the day of the ears, then even if you come across it while out searching, it will not be beneficial to get your hands on it.
- If it was lost on the day of the arms, you will find it if you look for it on a high mountain, in a ravine, or in the middle of a graveyard.
- If it was lost on the day of the armpits, you will find it if you look for it at the goldsmiths, at the watermill, or in the town centre.<sup>32</sup>
- If it was lost on the day of the feet, you will find it if you look near an aristocrat, a minister, or an official gathering.
- If it was lost on the day of the tail, you will find it if you look in the direction of your girlfriend.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Dieter Schuh's translation (2012: 322-323) interprets this part of the text as saying that the direction of counting depends on whether the month has thirty days or less than thirty days; however, as I understand it, the lunar month would always be thirty days, except in exceptional circumstances.

<sup>32</sup> Here 'town centre' is a tentative translation of *grong 'khor*.

<sup>33</sup> //gser gyI ru bal mo ste//bros pa dang/rlag btsal pa'/zla ba gang la bab kyang rung ste//tshes zhag gcig nas bgrangs la stor pa'I/nyi ma ru sbal kyi tshigs gar bab pa dang/sbyar te gdab bo/zla ba sum/cu thub na ni/mgo nas g.yas logsu bgrang/zla ba sum cu myi thub na ni/mjug bas g.yon logsu bskor te bgrango//bzang ngan gyi tsigs ni/ru sbal kyi mjug du bris so// //mgo 'i nyi ma la/stor na btso blag mkhan gyI/ 'khor du btsal na rnyed//rna ba'I nyi ma la stor na/btsal te lam du phrad kyang /bdag gl lag tu thob la myI phan no//lag pa'I pa'I

Thus, of the six results, five give hints as to where to look, some of which are so vague that their use to the inquirer seems questionable. Only one result is negative, stating that even if the thing (or animal, or person) is found, this will not actually benefit the seeker.

### *Conclusion*

As we have seen, the scroll Or.8210/S.6878 is uniquely important for our understanding of the history of Chinese astrology in Tibet. Yet, as with many such manuscripts, its significance and importance to us may not reflect how it was perceived at the time. One question we always need to ask about manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave is, was this made to be used? Many manuscripts were prestige items copied for merit and may rarely or never have been opened again. Others were copied by students, so their purpose was the learning process itself. This text is not the type to generate merit, so the first option is unlikely. The diagrams and texts might well have been used for teaching or copied out in the learning process by a student. Equally, the manuscript might have been the property of someone practicing divination, used in the process of providing a reading. It's interesting to note that the turtle divination text instructs us to write the result at the turtle's tail; since no such results are written on the scroll, it seems this scroll was not used for that practice at least, but rather as a model, much as we have models for talismans written on some Dunhuang scrolls.<sup>34</sup>

There is good reason to think divination methods of this sort would have been in use: they relate to ever-present concerns about trade and profit, successful marriages, and the recovery of lost property. Yet the manuscript itself suggests that these divination texts and diagrams were not used much; if I am right that they predate the Chinese side of the scroll, then they were repurposed, perhaps not long after being written. Unlike the worn and fragmented top part of the scroll, the divination diagrams look fresh and have few marks or stains, as if they had been kept safely rolled up in the scroll rather than being revealed for use many times.<sup>35</sup> As we have seen, there are a few errors and corrections in the diagrams, so perhaps this was the result of a learning

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*nyi ma la stor na/rI mthon po dang/grog mo dang/mchad khrod du/btsan (=btsal) na rnyed//mchan khung gI nyi ma la stor na/gser mgar dang/rang tag (=thag) dang/grong 'khor du btsal na rnyed//rkang pa'I nyi ma la stor na/rdze (=rje?) sgo dang/zhang lon dang/ tshong dus su btsal na rnyed//mjug ma'I nyi ma la stor na/grog (=grogs) mo pyogsu btsal na rnyed//*

<sup>34</sup> See Copp 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Compare the worn and very fragmentary sheet containing the diagram for dice divination (Or.15000/302) discussed in Dotson 2019.

effort after all, a step in a student's progress to being an expert in these divination systems. It is nice to think that those who created the Dunhuang manuscripts were sometimes still learning, just as we are.

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