



**[Review of] Licia DI GIACINTO, The Chenwei Riddle :
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Ostasien Verlag, 2013. Pp. xi + 332. (Deutsche
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The Chenwei Riddle: Time, Stars, and Heroes in the Apocrypha. By Licia Di Giacinto. Gossenberg: Ostasien Verlag, 2013 (Deutsche Ostasienstudien, vol. 13). xi + 332 pp.

According to the "Preface" (p. ix), the purpose of Licia Di Giacinto's book, which derives from her doctoral thesis,¹ is to define the "apocryphal phenomenon" as "political documents of inverse predictions with the idea of messianic politics at the core" and to investigate how the apocrypha were used "in the scholarly realm of early China" (see also p. 23 and 203). This is the "riddle" from the book title, also called, once, a "puzzle" (p. ix). To do so, the author proposes a methodology consisting mainly in comparing apocryphal citations with data from sources supposedly pre-existing or nearly contemporaneous, as the second part of her introduction explains (p. 12–23). To this experiment she devotes the longest part of the book (Part One, "The Contents," p. 37–202), where she studies in turn the three topics giving the book its subtitle: "The Starry Sky" (p. 59–102), "Time" (p. 103–48), and "The Hero" (p. 149–202). The conclusion ("The Chenwei and Beyond: Some Conclusive Words," p. 255–66) sums up the main arguments of the book with a diagram (p. 260), but her insistence on "messianic politics" and the arrival of a "political saviour" as overarching concerns in apocryphal ideology somewhat misses the point. What many apocryphal fragments examine is, rather, as I argue in a forthcoming article, the origin and nature of sovereignty.²

The "Introduction: Approaching the Apocrypha" (p. 1–36) opens with a discussion of Western terminology, aimed at justifying the use of both "apocryphon" and "canon" in non-Western context (p. 2–5). As the author reminds us, the texts under consideration were first called *chen* 讖 (predictions). Then, from the second century AD, *wei* 緯 (weft) was used in reference to those texts attached, at least nominally, to the "Classics," *jing* 經. As to the widely used term *chenwei* 讖緯 (predictions and wefts, or predictive weft), it is a much later coinage first appearing in the fourth century. It could have been added that the earliest firmly datable mentions of the phrase *weishu* 緯書 (weft writings or books) date to the fifth century.³

The introduction then unfolds a historical synthesis, from the development of the corpus toward the beginning of our era to its repeated targeting by official proscription throughout imperial history, due to its potential dangerousness in the hands of rebels or imperial contestants (p. 5–12). The proscriptions being pri-

¹ Licia Di Giacinto, "By Chance of History: The Apocrypha under the Han," Ph.D. diss., Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 2007.

² "Epiphanies of Sovereignty and the Rite of Jade Disc Immersion in Weft Narratives," *Early China* 37 (2014).

³ In the treatise on celestial signs ("Tianwen" 天文), compiled circa 439 by He Chengtian 何承天 (370–447) and later edited for inclusion in the *Song shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 23.678; and in Xu Mao's 許懋 (464–532) advice to the throne, dated 502 or soon after, where *weishu* and the orthodox Classics (*zhengjing* 正經) are opposed; see Yao Cha 姚察 (533–606) and Yao Silian 姚思廉 (d. 637), *Liang shu* 梁書, completed 636 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 40.575.

marily directed against private ownership, copies of apocrypha were kept within the palace, but even there severe loss occurred. By Song times (960–1279), most apocrypha were believed lost and what survived was mostly citations, plus a handful of whole texts—not “only fragments,” as stated inaccurately by Di Giacinto (p. 1). Discussing the possibility of “contextualising” apocryphal ideology within the Han intellectual framework, the last part of the introduction (p. 23–36) proposes to interpret the so-called six schools of thought (*liujia* 六家) of the Warring States 戰國 (481–221 BC) and early imperial age in terms of “cultural realms” and “cultural communities” rather than discarding them, as others have done, and denounces the place of “stereotypes” in Chinese studies, here accused of being “the daily bread” of Sinology (p. 33).

Part One opens with a lengthy criticism of “the belief in a monolithic Chinese cosmology” (p. 37–58). The “silent revolution” the author sees happening in Chinese cosmology (p. 38) actually extends to received Sinological knowledge as a whole, currently reassessed thanks to, among other things, archaeological discoveries and improvements in methodology. Furthermore, if used as a convenient designation for the various worldviews expressed in ancient sources written in Chinese, the phrase “Chinese cosmology” does not imply that the phenomenology thus encompassed must be “monolithic.” The first of the author’s three topics deals with astrology, astrography, and the correspondence between the starry sky and the human realm. It includes two “case studies”: the *fenye* 分野 (“allotted fields”) system (p. 79–85) and “exceptional phenomena”—a category encompassing “solar eclipses,” “planetary conjunctions,” and “ominous stars” (p. 85–91). The second topic, concerned with calendar, chronomancy, chronology, and “the art of scheduling time,” also offers two cases studies: the *shangyuan* 上元 (“Superior Origin”) theory (p. 118–26) and “the Knots of Time,” a phrase borrowed from E. Zürcher (p. 135–38). The third topic covers ontology, anthropology, physiology, ethics, and Heaven, then the narratives related to the “birth,” “physical appearance,” and so-called “talismans” (see below) of “charismatic personalities” (p. 179)—cultural heroes, the “saint” (*shengren* 聖人), and the “ideal ruler” (which is the awkward translation of *wangzhe* 王者 on p. 244). The author rightly stresses the importance of politics in all three topics.

Part two, “The Cultural Phenomenon” (p. 203–53), first returns to terminology. The author now explains that *chen* 讖 means “reverse prediction” (“foresights dealing with events that had already happened,” p. 205), which will remind some readers of the phrase “*prédiction de l'advenu*” coined by the sociologist and anthropologist Jacques Berque (1910–1995) to criticize retrospective explanations of past events, typically wars and economical crises, which contemporaries never foresee. In subsequent pages *chen* is thus translated, even though “reverse” does not exist in the semantic load of the Chinese word. We then move on to the supposed “core” of apocryphal ideology: “messianic politics”—a “fairly ambiguous” term in the author’s own admission—or “the belief that a political saviour is there to come” (p. 209). But this idea of a “messianic” leader who would “save” mankind exists

more in the author's interpretation than in the material she quotes. The ensuing discussion of "Texts and Authorship" (p. 203–28) leads to the hypothesis that the apocrypha may have been created by experts in the field of "judicial astrology" (*tianwen* 天文), whom the author apparently equates with *fangshi* 方士 ("masters of recipes"), and the "popular" *ru* 儒, aware of "classical learning" (p. 219–28). The third-century scholar Song Jun 宋均, a Doctor (*boshi* 博士) under the Wei 魏 (220–265), is ignored in this discussion as in the entire book, although he could well be behind those apocrypha whose earliest mentions date to his lifetime. In "The Crossroads of Early History" (p. 229–53), the author returns to the "riddle" and argues that the 78 BC debate on the calendar and the submission to Emperor Cheng 成帝 (r. 32–7 BC) of the earliest Great Peace (*taiping* 太平) text marked decisive steps in the formation of the genre.⁴

A first appendix sketches the literary history of the "Collections of Apocryphal Fragments" in China (p. 267–75). The earliest systematic collection, the *Guwei shu* 古微書 (Book of Ancient Arcana) in thirty-six chapters (*juan* 卷) was compiled by Sun Jue 孫穀 (dates unknown). Contrary to the author's belief that "the largest part of [this work] disappeared quite early" (p. 269), it still exists in its entirety. On the same page (n. 8), the author's statement that "the first three sections were lost before the compilation of the *Siku quanshu*" 四庫全書 (completed 1782) seems to result from a misreading of the notice (*tiyao* 提要), dated 1780, provided by the *Siku quanshu* editors. The notice explains that, since three of the four types of "arcana" defined by Sun—*shan wei* 刪微 (expunged arcana), *fen wei* 焚微 (burned arcana), *xian wei* 緘微 (strung arcana), and *que wei* 闕微 (lost arcana)—are, by definition, no more extant, Sun's work perforce contains material belonging to a single type (fols 2a–b). A second appendix, "The Reference Material" (p. 275–82), discusses the validity of the nomenclature of apocryphal texts in these late collections, stresses the need to distinguish between individual titles and "generic labels" such as *Yiwei* 易緯 (Wefts of the Changes) and *Hetu* 河圖 ([Yellow] River Chart), and suggests that some series of so-called citations may be later forgeries. Tables 30–40 sum up the titles of the sixty-four texts referred to in the book. The reader is warned that the English titles provided are "rough translations" only (p. 278, n. 35; see also below). Astronomical lists fill two more appendices.

Figures, including a dozen photographs taken by the author, are in most cases of very satisfying quality. Those reproducing archaeological material help bridge the gap between the intellectual sphere and its material or visual expressions.

The bibliography (p. 289–332) is dense and up-to-date. Omissions include Yasui's study of the variant editions of the *Da Tang Kaiyuan zhanjing* 大唐開元占經 (Prognostication Book of the Kaiyuan [Era] of the Grand Tang), one of the earliest

⁴ When recalling that auspicious grain (*jiahe* 嘉禾) with nine ears per stem (*yi jing jiu sui* 一莛九穗) reportedly grew on the year Emperor Guangwu 光武帝 (r. 25–56 AD) was born (p. 249), the author misses the fact that these details form a graphic pun justifying his personal name Xiu 秀.

and wealthiest cover sources of apocryphal citations; B. Kandel's monograph on the early Great Peace "faction"; J. Ø. Petersen's paper on the clepsydra reform in connection with the early Great Peace text; and B. Nielsen's masterful study of time cycles in the *Yiwei Qianzuo du* 易緯乾鑿度 (Weft of the Changes: Regulations Chiselled by Qian).⁵ There is no index.

Perhaps the main weakness of the book is that only selected fragments are dealt with instead of entire series of explicit citations of given texts. This results in inaccurate statements, such as "a few fragments list auspicious signs and omens" (p. 65): in the case of the *Chunqiu Qiantan ba* 春秋潛潭巴 (Spring and Autumn: The Ophidian Deeply Immersed), no less than 188 of the 232 citations collected in the Japanese critical edition contain extrapolative material based on the interpretation of signs.⁶ The surviving corpus is arguably much richer than the thematic triptych "time, stars, and heroes" in the book's subtitle suggests. As to the concept of "religion," deemed to be "the missing plug of the whole story" (p. 265), it is nowhere delineated.

Errors invite to use the book with caution. Example: to Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), editor-in-chief of the *Sui shu* 隋書 (compiled 629–636), the author confidently ascribes the opinions professed in the treatise on bibliography ("Jingji" 經籍) of that standard history (p. 5, 14, 17, 208, 262, and 267). But this treatise very likely was compiled by Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645) under the supervision of Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 (583–666) and then of Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (594–659), rather than by Wei, who did supervise the compilation of chronicles and biographies but left the scene soon after work on the treatises began.⁷

The book never consistently follows chronology, hence the feeling the reader gets of an accumulation of received and reassessed scholarship, translation blocks, technical explanations (such as the excellent n. 19, p. 109, on the astronomical notion of *du* 度), original ideas, and, in the author's own words, many "remarks" (about two dozen occurrences). The internal structure betrays late reorganization: on p. 89, n. 96 alludes in the past tense ("As we have seen ...") to a topic actually discussed later on, p. 111–12. Some very interesting footnotes would have deserved inclusion in the main text, for instance the discussion of the loss of books during

⁵ Yasui Kōzan, "Dai Tō Kaigen senkyō ihon-kō" 大唐開元占經異本考, *Tōkyō kyōiku daigaku bungaku-bu kiyō* 32 (1961): 1–83; Barbara Kandel, *Taiping jing: The Origin and Transmission of the "Scripture on general welfare": The History of an Unofficial Text* (Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, vol. 75; Hamburg, OAG, 1979); Jens Østergård Petersen, "The *Taiping Jing* and the A.D. 102 Clepsydra Reform," *Acta Orientalia* 53 (1992): 122–58; Bent Nielsen, "Calculating the Fall of a Dynasty: Divination Based on the *Qian zuo du*," *Zhouyi Studies (English Version)* 6.1 (2009/2010): 65–107.

⁶ As I showed in my lecture on "Knowledge and Foreknowledge Extrapolation in First–Second Century China: Remnants of the *Spring & Autumn Weft Profundity and Remoteness*," Internationales Kolleg für Geisteswissenschaftliche Forschung, Erlangen, 22 October 2013.

⁷ See Zhu Wentao 朱文濤, "Sui shu 'Jingji zhi' zuozhe bianzheng" 隋書經籍志作者辯證, *Guilin shifan gaodeng zhuanke xuexiao xuebao* 1 (2008): 34 and 47.

the medieval era (n. 33, p. 11). An elucidation would have been welcome of what Lingtai 靈臺 (“Observatory” in the translation on p. 125) refers to—an institution of power as crucial as the Mingtang 明堂 (mentioned once, p. 98, n. 128, as “Hall of Light,” without Chinese characters). Footnotes offering dry strings of bibliographical references under the ‘name year’ format read as catalogues. The English is clumsy in places, occasionally unclear, and style does not always meet the best scholarly standard. Poor stylistic choices include “kids” and “babies” for underage puppet emperors (p. 1 and 243), and the inelegant “*ru*-ization” (p. 8) and “*mathem*-matization” (p. 108–10, 114). Terms with a high repetition rate include the adverb “fairly,” which totals seventy-five occurrences, twelve of which occur in the adverbial phrase “fairly obviously.”

Translations of fragments and of excerpts of fragments are of variable quality and could easily be clearer and closer to the original text. To give a short example, the fragment 故月蝕, 常也; 日蝕, 為不臧也 is translated as “Lunar eclipses belong to the realm of ‘what is ordinary’ and, therefore, are profoundly different from solar eclipses which ‘do not leave any hideaway’” (p. 76; *bucang* 不臧 is misunderstood again on p. 77). “Therefore, lunar eclipses are normal and solar eclipses are not auspicious (literally: not good)” would have been more straightforward and far less interpretative. Is it really necessary to insert “indeed!” (p. 150, 171, 173, 175, and 182) when no equivalent word exists in the Chinese text? Many translations omit parts of the Chinese text (see p. 136 for two consecutive examples) and punctuation marks in English translations tend to mismatch those given in Chinese citations.

Many translation choices are injudicious. *Xiang* 象 (for example in *jixiong zhi xiang* 吉凶之象, p. 67) can be simply translated as “sign” (or “image,” as on p. 156) rather than rendered by the unclear “*simulacra*” or replaced with a *pinyin* romanization (p. 74, n. 43). *Qunyang zhi jing* 羣陽之精 means “the essence of all things Yang,” not of “pure” Yang (p. 74). *Morui* 末兇 means “a pointed extremity,” not “without a point”; in the same translation, the verb “to advance” indiscriminately renders *jin* 進 and *tui* 退 (p. 90). *Mo* 末 is again misread as *wei* 未 on p. 130–31, where *mo suan* 末筭 is rendered by “that which has not been counted.” The combined antonyms *huan* 緩 and *ji* 急 serve to suggest gradations of urgency, rather than “*exigencies*”; in the next sentence, the latter alone simply means “[in case of] emergency,” hardly “confronted with [seasonal] tasks” (p. 104, n. 7). “Juncture” for *ji* 際 would be more appropriate than “crevice” (p. 135–36). In reference to the first month, “normative” renders *zheng* 正 better than “corrector” (p. 141); the *sanzheng* 三正 are “three norms,” not “Three Correctors” (p. 200, n. 197). In physiology, *sizhi* 四肢 means “four limbs,” not “four arts” (p. 156). In the context of supernatural birth, *gan* 感 denotes being stimulated or emotionally moved, not “attracted” (p. 183–84). The compound *shuaizhang* 帥長 points to “leaders,” not “masters or overlords,” which betrays the misreading *shi* 師 for *shuai* 帥 (p. 183, n. 133). *Diexing* 迭興 is misunderstood as “missed the Rising” (p. 251 and 265). The term “*cheng-huang*,” corresponding to 乘黃 in the Chinese text, is not translated or explained

(p. 195). When dealing with apocryphal material, one must be prepared to correct erroneous readings, as the author rightly does on p. 112–13, n. 32; however, further on she claims to “read *zhong* 重 as *xiang* 象” in a given passage (n. 38, p. 157), but her translation gives “heaviness,” evidently for *zhong* (p. 157).

Inconsistency in translation choices includes “Four Treasuries,” then “Four Numinous Animals,” for *siling* 四靈 (p. 63–64); “circuit” (p. 120), then “circle” (p. 121), finally “revolution” (p. 131) for *zhou* 周 (a cycle in calendar context); first “juncture” (p. 137), then “knot” (p. 138), for *e* 厄 (hazard); for *daze zhi pi* 大澤之陂, found in two parallel narratives, first “a slope nearby a big marsh” (p. 180), then “the shore of a big marsh” (p. 183). “Saviour” renders *shengren* 聖人 (p. 233) and *sheng* 聖 (p. 239), and even appears in a translation whose corresponding Chinese text only has *qi* 其 (p. 244), but then *shengwang* 聖王 becomes “the sage ruler” (p. 251).

Now a quasi-Pavlovian reflex translation for *fu* 符 in Western publications, “talisman” has little relevance in the context of the transcendent tokens of sovereignty, as the translations on p. 68, 87, 134, and so forth, make clear. The section on “The Talismans of the Hero” (p. 193–202) opens with a definition of *fu* as “objects or events that attested to the extraordinariness of the ruler” (p. 193), which points to “tokens”—as *fu* is aptly translated on p. 196—clearly differing from the prophylactic devices carried by individual travellers and adepts. Rightly said to denote, again, “tokens,” the term *fuming* 符命 is rendered by “Talismans of the Mandate” in the same footnote (p. 197, n. 186), then becomes “talismans indicating (a change of) the mandate” further on (p. 252). “Token of the Stimulated Essence” for the title *Gan-jing-fu* 感精符 would certainly come closer to the original meaning than “Talisman for the Attraction of the Essence” (p. 14), and *Chifu fu* 赤伏符 in all likelihood denoted a “Token of the Subduing Scarlet-Red” rather than a “Talisman of the Red Secret” (p. 6).⁸

Copy-editing has missed numerous misspellings and mistakes.⁹ Gan De’s full name in Chinese characters is nowhere to be found. A useful but deceptive tool in word-processing software, the copy-paste function has deeply impacted the way we work: uncompleted uses of it include, among a dozen or so cases, “Qingdi 白帝” for “Qingdi 青帝” (p. 94); the contents of n. 28, p. 111, and n. 112, p. 139, partly identical; and n. 9, p. 231–32, which reads twice within a few lines “See Seidel 1983, 299.”

⁸) See p. 342 of Huang Fushan 黃復山, “Dong Han tuchen *Chifu fu* benshi kao” 東漢圖讖赤伏符本事考, *Jingxue yanjiu luncong* 經學研究論叢 8 (2000): 319–50.

⁹) Examples: “intrareligius” (p. 4); “1223–1996” for Wang Yinglin’s 王應麟 dates (p. 5, n. 12, and p. 296); “forth” in lieu of “fourth” (p. 40); “five 72-days period” (p. 42); “Bielenstein 1977” (p. 43, n. 24) without a corresponding item in the bibliography; “Perenboom” (p. 53); “mouses” for “mice” (p. 60); “Han rules” for “Han rulers” (p. 98, n. 127); “la premiere des hommes” and “au premiere jour” (p. 102, n. 141); “the assumption of spicy food,” perhaps meant to read “the absorption of spicy food” (p. 153); “ox and flesh” (*sic*) for *grou* 骨肉 (p. 154); “mouth” instead of “tongue” (p. 157); “these studied” for “these studies” (p. 215, n. 44); “the a time-knot” (p. 246, n. 53); and “37 seven texts” (p. 274, n. 24).

Tables are plainly designed and some of them have lacunae and errors.¹⁰ In Table 23, the column supposedly displaying the correlations in the *Qiantan ba* is based on a misreading: each of the Five Flavours (*wuwei* 五味) does not correspond to the indicated organ but “generates” (*sheng* 生) it, following the standard “mutual generation” (*xiangsheng* 相生) cycle of the Five Agents (*wuxing* 五行). Actually, the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Inner Scripture of the Yellow Emperor) and the *Qiantan ba* reflect identical correlations (not “different association models,” p. 159), exactly as Table 24 shows on the same page.

It is naturally difficult, occasionally impossible, to make sense of some of the shortest citations, deprived of context, and the organization of the Japanese critical edition is unsatisfying.¹¹ But reading it will induce “bewilderment” and a feeling of “chaos” (p. 15) only in an unprepared or lay audience (“the bewildering array” of themes of the corpus returns on p. 208 and 255). Acknowledging the intrinsic value of this wealth of unused information implies discarding outdated value judgments. During the second half of the past century, as apocryphal studies enjoyed a brief vogue in Japan and China, an esoteric and mystic approach prevailed, but recent research—including the present book—shows that, on the contrary, an unquestionable rationality presided over the ideology of the apocrypha.

Even though the existing “*chenwei* scholarship deserves a book-length study” (p. 23), the field remains widely neglected, especially in Europe and North America. Licia Di Giacinto’s courageous endeavor to synthesize as complex a phenomenology as late pre-imperial and early imperial knowledge and to attempt the rewriting of a few hundred years of an intellectual history in many respects still controversial is meritorious. One hopes that this contribution, however imperfect, will have a follow-up and stimulate broader research into the apocryphal corpus. But in view of the thousands of fragments to be processed, the chances are that, as she writes, “if one day there is to be a bible on this subject, it will be the result of a collective effort” (p. ix).

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¹⁰ In Table 4 (p. 61), “Autumn” appears to be missing; in Table 5 (p. 72), “Yaoguang” should once read “Yaoguangtu,” unless the Chinese source is misquoted; in Tables 6–7 (p. 82–83), the name of the tenth Lodge (*xiu* 宿) is not “Shunnü” but Xunü 須女; in Table 25 (p. 162), two occurrences of “Wisdom” should read “Trustworthiness.”

¹¹ Yasui Kōzan 安居香山 and Nakamura Shōhachi 中村璋八, eds., *Jūshū Isho shūsei* 重修緯書集成 (Tokyo, Meitoku, 1971–1992), 6 vols, 8 tomes; Chinese revised edition: *Weishu jicheng* 緯書集成 (Shijiazhuang, Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1994), 3 vols.