What is the Purpose and Meaning of the Twelve Animal Zodiac (Shēngxiào, 生肖)?

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Introduction.

Keelung, now an increasingly popular tourism destination for Taiwanese as well as overseas travellers, hosts multiple Taoist (Dàoshi, 道士) temples located around the central harbour and Tien-liao river (Tiānliáo jiāng, 天遼江) such as *Qìng'ān Palace* (慶安宮), *Diàn jì Temple* (奠濟宮) and the *City God Temple* (Chénghuáng Miào, 城隍廟). However, non Mandarin speaking tourists may not be able to comprehend the true meaning behind religious iconography, or to identify such an extensive pantheon even with the use of modern translation Apps thus, can benefit from local tour guides and blog posts to explain their significance.

Interpreting Symbology.

This article explains the astronomical significance, historical context and narratives and the metaphorical semantics behind one of the world's most intriguing practices: ancient Taoist astrology and divination, which is still widely practiced in Keelung. This paper not only explains the ancient *twelve animal zodiac* (shēngxiào, 生肖), but also its connection with deities such as the *Jade Emperor* (Yùdì, 玉帝) and *Tàisuì* (太歲). As well as discusses the importance of ancient traditions regarding the psychological implications for a balanced society.

The Jade Emperor (Yùdì, 玉帝).

The Jade Emperor (Yùdì, 玉帝) is the head of the Taoist pantheon (Stevens, 1989) and a personification of the Tao (Dào, 道)(*way*) of the highest spiritual order (Olson, 2003). Thus, he represents the deterministic unfolding of cosmic patterns, into the corresponding activity upon earth: *fate*. Worshiped by not only Taoists (see fig 2.) but also Buddhists (Fójiào Tú, 佛教徒) (*see blog post*) as a way to harmonise, appease and reap the rewards of the forces of the universe. Whilst Yùdì was first written about as late as the Tang dynasty (Táng cháo, 唐朝) (618–907), his origins appear to be much earlier (Stevens, 1989).

The Shēngxiào (生肖) River Race.

Legend has it that the Jade Emperor created the division of time, he wished to devise a method for the folks to remember the sequences of heavenly chronology upon earth, so he organised a race between all of earth's animals along a river and declared that the order the first twelve animals finish in would represent the each time slot accordingly (Yuan, 2016). This system is still used today and is known as the Shēngxiào (生肖)(*twelve animal zodiac*). The twelve animals being: rat, ox, tiger rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster dog and pig (Yuan, 2016).

Figure 2.] The Jade Emperor (Yùdì, 玉帝). At Harborside Taoist Temple: Qìng'ān Gōng (慶安宮), Keelung.

The 12 Shēngxiào Bridges of Keelung.

Tien-Liao river (Tiānliáo jiāng, 天遼江)

If you take the riverwalk, down the central part of Keelung city, you will notice the twelve animal bridges from which the saga is retold. Each bridge features one of the twelve animals of the shēngxiào (生肖). The mythical river of the Jade Emperor narrative is represented here by the Tien-Liao river (Tiānliáo jiāng, 天遼江) and the animals are represented emblematically. The order of the bridges represents the finishing position of the animals in the race and thus, the celestial period of time allocated. Hence, just as the Jade Emperor intended, it helps the locals and visitors alike to recall the order of the sequence today. The winner of the race was the rat. Thus, beginning outside the national Keelung girls high school you will see four stone rats on the last bridge next to a small pond (fig 3.).

Figure 3.] Rat Mounted on Podium at Keelung's 12th Bridge.

Celebrating the Year of the Snake.

The penultimate bridge features two oxen; however, only the horns are visible protruding from the brick structures. The 10th bridge features four stone tigers on podiums and the 9th bridge features eight rabbit heads emerging from the brickwork of the bridge. Unlike most of the bridges, the rabbit bridge is a broad pedestrian only bridge and functions as a prime location for families to set off fireworks on both new years eve and day (fig 5.). On the 8th bridge you will find sixteen figural dragons, four on each corner of the bridge, located just opposite the *Keelung-for-a-walk* headquarters. The 7th bridge features four stone coiled snakes on podiums (fig 4.). Thus, representing the current astrological cycle: as we celebrate the year of the snake.

Fig 4.] Snake Mounted on the Podium on Keelung's 5th Bridge.

Figure 5.] Fireworks above Tien-Liao River,
On Lunar New Year (Nónglì Xīnnián, 農曆新年), 114, Keelung.

Metaphorical Rebirth in Taoism.

The 6th bridge features four stone horses and the 5th bridge features four goats. The 4th bridge's podiums feature four monkeys, each with young offspring (fig 1.). Within ancient China, life was viewed in relation to the heavenly stems and earthly branches, and births were used metaphorically to represent celestial cycles (Furth, 1995, p. 197). Thus, the infant monkeys reiterate the metaphor of the cycle of the year of the monkey. Thus, indicating the repeat patterns of cosmic cycles. Such iconography is intended to communicate its message intuitively and be absorbed unconsciously. The 3rd bridge hosts four golden cockerels which peer over the road and the final animals displayed are two dogs on the podiums of the 2nd bridge (fig 6.).

Figure 6.] Dog Mounted on a Podium upon Keelung's 2nd Bridge from the Harbor.

Keelung's Alternate Ending to the Animal River Race.

There are multiple variants of this fable, each with its own twist and metaphorical explanation (Yuan, 2016). However, the Keelung animal river race's end is rather unconventional. It appears the pig, the slowest animal behind the dog, is not featured on the 12th podium to claim its place in the race, as Keelung's 1st bridge is currently under reconstruction thus, the pig is not yet *finished*. Though tourists can expect in time, a more beautiful pig than before will emerge on the final spot, just where the river meets Keelung harbour.

12 Animals & a Twelve-Year Orbit of Jupiter.

The shēngxiào (生肖)(animal zodiac) which assigns a different animal, to each year of a twelve earth year cycle, is related to the orbit of Jupiter, as it takes Jupiter 11.86 (*approximately* 12) years to orbit the sun (Aslaksen, 2002). Jupiter passes through a different star constellation every solar earth year; these constellations are termed *mansions* (xiù,宿)(Vogel, 1964)(Yuan, 2016). These mansions are synonymous with the constellations of the western zodiac yet, alternate animals are utilized to represent these star clusters (Yuan, 2016). A *sexagenary* cycle (60 years) is when Jupiter completes 5 successive 12 year orbits of the sun (Vogel, 1964). After this 60 year period Jupiter realigns with Saturn forming a *great conjunction* (Woody, 1977). Which is a rare point, when these two planets are the closest together.

Figure 7.] The Sixty Gods of *Tàisuì* (太歲). Qing'an Palace, (Qìng'ān Gōng慶安宮), Keelung.

The 60 Gods of *Tàisuì* (太歲).

Tàisuì is a deity who personifies time and cosmic cycles and is regarded as the *Grand Duke of Jupiter* (Stevens, 1972). Harbourside Taoist temple *Qìng'ān Gōng*, situated minutes walk from the Tiānliáo (天遼) river features on one of its many alters the 60 Gods of *Tàisuì* (fig 7.), who personify the sixty year cycle of Jupiter and are metaphorically subservient to their leader *Tàisuì* (Stevens, 1972)(fig 8.). Whilst each year can be represented by an animal of the zodiac. It can also be metaphorically represented by one of these sixty deities.

Figure 8.] Deity: *Tàisuì* (太歲). The Grand Duke of Jupiter.
Qing'an Palace (Qìng'ān Gōng, 慶安宮).

Heavenly Stems (Tiāngān, 天干) & Earthly Branches (Dìzhī, 地支).

The Chinese created and utilized their own unique cyclical counting system of *10 heavenly stems* (tiāngān, 天干) and *12 earthly branches* (dìzhī, 地支) to quantify these astronomical and geometric patterns (Yuan, 2016). Ten heavenly stems are the intangible qualities. I.e., the *five elements* (wǔxíng, 五行): *wood*, *fire*, *earth*, *metal*, *water*; yet doubled, to have one set of five elements labelled *yīn* and one labelled *yáng* (Tiquia, 2008). There is no physical component of the ten stems hence, termed heavenly. The 12 earthly branches are the more tangible elements of physical and visible activity, this system segregates data into sets of 12, e.g., *the 24 solar terms* (Yuan, 2016).

Microcosms and Macrocosms.

Within this ancient Chinese calendar, the sun's orbit is divided into 24 segments of approximately 15 days (Yuan, 2016). It measures changes in the sun's ecliptic longitude; each solar term represents a 15 degree movement in the sun's orbit (Tiquia, 2008). However, being holistic it incorporates correspondence between the sun and occurrences on earth, e.g., the weather patterns and vegetative activity (Aslaksen, 2002). The *winter solstice* (dōngzhì, 冬至) marks the 22nd solar term, whilst the 1st solar term named: *lì chūn* (立春) marks the beginning of spring (Yuan, 2016). The lunar new year (nónglì xīnnián, 農曆新年) or spring festival (Jiéqì, 節氣) generally falls two new moons post the solstice (Aslaksen, 2002). Hence, both calendars: solar and lunar; are needed to keep the Lunar New Year's date aligned with spring, which is when the successive animal signs energy comes into effect (also see post: Why is Lunar New Year in Taiwan: A Buddhist and Taoist Celebration?).

Within the system of 10 heavenly stems and 12 earthly branches, the 24 solar terms, or one solar year, is utilised as a microcosm of the 60 year orbit of Jupiter (Yuan, 2016). Yet, it is also utilized as a macrocosm of one month (*with 12 solar months per year*) as well as a macrocosm of one day, by breaking a day into 12 sets of two hours (Yuan, 2016). Other temples do often depict more than 60 gods to represent these smaller portions of time metaphorically also (Stevens, 1972).

Zodiac Charts.

Each stem and branch is labelled yīn or yáng. Yīn stems are matched with yīn branches and yáng stems are matched with yáng branches forming 60 *stem-branch* combinations (Wei and Bang, 1946;Yuan, 2016). Applying the stem-branch pairs to either small or large quantities of time this system is believed to predict the fate and fortune of an individual for either a day, a month or a year relating to your *personal shǔ* (屬)(animal zodiac sign)(Wei and Bang, 1946).

Whilst the shēngxiào is often revered predominantly on the lunar new year, the animal bridges of Keelung serve as a daily reminder that these energies affect lives every hour of the day. Harbour side Taoist temple, Qing'an Palace produce and disseminate their own almanac and yearly zodiac charts utilizing the stem-branch pairs in conjunction with the shēngxiào which can be used to determine fortune as well as assist within ritual worship (fig 9.)(also see blog post: *https://keelung-for-a-walk.com/culture/mazu-goddess-27225/*).

Figure 9.] Shēngxiào (Zodiac Chart) for the Year 114: Qing'an Palace (Qìng'ān Gōng, 慶安宮).

Discussion.

Han (Hànzú, 漢族) Culture Versus Conscious Identity.

The Shēngxiào river race narrative of the Jade Emperor, is fundamental concept within Han (Hànzú 漢族) culture. Hàn culture proliferated in Taiwan dominating over the prior aboriginal line during the Qīngcháo (清朝)(1644 to 1912) due to large-scale migration of Hàn Chinese from Fujian province and further increased in relation to the recent wave of Chinese migrants in 1949 (Davison and Reed, 1998; Zhu and Liu, 2019). The shēngxiào tale being communicated symbolically through the architecture of Keelung indicates that the ancient Hàn culture remains the dominant ideology of this region.

Local Government Action.

Locals report that not all of the bridges were built at the same time. Hence, the lack of uniformity of bridges as well as statues (fig 10.). It appears that the Keelung city government has intentionally constructed twelve bridges to support the twelve animals of the shēngxiào as a means to retell the allegorical story. The epic tale has been infused with the streets of this northern Taiwanese city within recent generations affecting the perspectives people live through. The river race repeats within the mind of the public and travelling tourists subconsciously, regardless of one's conscious identity.

Figure 10.] Four Figural Dragons on Keelung's 8th Bridge.

The Shēngxiào (生肖) and a Balanced Brain.

A large component of the basis of the shēngxiào and the Tàisuì systems are identical to the astronomy of physics: i.e., the mapping of orbits of celestial bodies. Thus, psychologically related to science, ration and logic of the left-hemisphere of the human brain (Alcorta, 2019; McGilchrist, 2019). While conversely, the shēngxiào legend contains a considerate component of astrology: the belief in the effects of the planet on fate and fortune. Such constituents are more related to mythology and religion and more so associated with the right-hemisphere of the human brain (Alcorta, 2019; McGilchrist, 2019).

Hence, together such cultural beliefs create psychological perspectives which are intellectually and cognitively balanced in terms of yīnyáng (陰陽) and brain activity (Spencer-Rodgers and Peng, 2018; Wang, 2012). Within Taoist philosophy, multiple strata of existence are interconnected and all express the yīnyáng polarity (Tian, 2000). To which the inner state of balance of the mind is reflected within a well balanced Taiwanese society. Contributing to Taiwan as a relaxed and safe place for tourists.

Ancient Mind Versus Modern Brain.

Whilst the 12 earthly branches were developed within the Shang dynasty (Shāngcháo, 商朝) (16th-11th century BC) along with the solar terms and the normative calendrical system, the elusive heavenly stems were created much earlier within the Xia dynasty (Xiàcháo, 夏朝) (21st-16th century BC)(Huang, 1991, p. 163). Thus, the intangible was originally greater understood than the tangible. Fully functioning, complete and unified systems which were implementable in society were formed closer toward the Han (Hàn cháo, 漢朝)(206 BC-220 AD) and Táng dynasties (618–907 AD)(Huang, 1991;Yuan, 2016).

Historical data is key to understanding the ancient mind was not that of the modern material world, being more in touch with the yīn *essence* of creation than the yáng *physical* plain itself. There has been an increasing level of evidence that the ancient world generally used the right-hemisphere of the brain more than people do today, prior to a global shift occurring (McGilchrist, 2009), to which the modern west predominantly uses the left-hemisphere of the brain more than they do the right (Spencer-Rodgers and Peng, 2018). Though through Taiwan's connection with its ancient traditions a balance is still kept between the old ways and the new.

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