

Early Shōwa Ideological Schisms in Shichū Suimei Texts

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Abstract—Shichū Suimei or Four Pillars of Destiny is a Sino-Japanese astrological form built on a transnational literary canon with centuries of history. The early Shōwa period saw increased efforts by Japanese Shichū Suimei practitioners to divest from Chinese ideological traditions in favor of forming philosophically innovative schools of thought unique to Japan. Dialogues on the mechanisms of predestination, the place of religion in modernity, and the importance of accessibility were all cornerstones of Japanization for this originally Chinese art as Japan and its career astrologists entered the contemporary age.

Keywords—Japan, literature, identity, religion, modernity, astrology

I. INTRODUCTION

Only decades after Four Pillars of Destiny astrology reached Japan from China in the late Edo period, local practitioners began seeking to adjust the tenets of this school of thought to better fit the unique social conditions of a Japan transitioning into the contemporary era. These conditions are the driving force behind innovations in Shichū Suimei, the Japanese Four Pillars astrology school.

Erstwhile divination method of the Chinese royal courts, Shichū Suimei entered Japan from its western shores and saw little imperial application there. Rather, from the outset it was for the masses, and as such the needs of Japanese clients were immediately different from those of their Chinese counterparts. After the Meiji and Taishō periods came and went, the public struggled to understand how their worldviews and religions fit in to the new early Shōwa contemporary era. Shichū Suimei professionals suffered these same conflicts of mind and sought to adjust their craft to address the weaknesses they perceived in it.

Progressives like Katō Daigaku and Kumazaki Ken'ō, as well as conservatives like Takagi Jō and Abe Taizan, offered various solutions to the issues they faced. They debated the natures of predestination and free will in astrology, the place of religion in their contemporary iteration of the art, and also ostensibly mundane issues like how publicly accessible Four Pillars techniques should be. In this work I describe early schisms between these influential Shichū Suimei schools as seen in their early Shōwa writings and endeavor to analyze the significance of their innovations in particular.

II. BACKGROUND

A. The Basic Mechanism

Four Pillars astrology is a metaphysical framework used to foretell major life events like social and professional developments, health complications, and other matters of popular fatalism. Its core mechanics revolve around interactions between the five elements, yin and yang, and the permutations of these relationships across different phases of human life. The elements, in combination with yin and yang,

are represented by the ancient ordinal *tenkan* and *chishi* characters that comprise the sexagenary calendar. The year, month, day, and hour of one's birth are represented with one *tenkan* and one *chishi* each according to this calendar, thus creating four columns of two characters between which the astrologer can then interpret relationships to holistically analyze his client's fate. The interactions between these metaphysical building blocks provide a foundation upon which the astrologer can both cast predictions for and recommend appropriate lifestyle changes to his clients.

B. Shichū Suimei in Japan

The Confucian scholar Sakurada Komon's *Suimeisho*, a translation of the foundational Song Dynasty Chinese astrology manual *Yuanhai Ziping*, formally introduced Four Pillars techniques to Japanese audiences in the late Edo period [1]. That is to say that while precise dates are uncertain, the late 19th century saw both the arrival of Four Pillars thought in western Japan's Nagasaki [2] and the founding of early schools like Itō Kōgetsu's *Shinshōkan* [3] shortly after *Suimeisho*'s publication. The techniques and philosophical tenets adhered to by early Japanese practitioners of Shichū Suimei appear to have remained essentially identical to those of their Chinese counterparts for the first several decades following the form's initial entry to Japan. With the art's increasing geographical spread and ensuing decentralization over time, however, this gradually gave way to ideological diversity.

C. Schools and Literature

As word of Shichū Suimei spread eastward across the Japanese mainland, mystics traveled from the capitol to seek training at the new schools appearing in the central Kansai region. One such mystic was Takagi Jō, a prolific Tokyo author and future founder of the widely influential Takagi School of Shichū Suimei [4], now considered Japan's largest. Others like Abe Taizan and Kumazaki Ken'ō followed suit in founding the Taizan and Kumazaki Schools [5]. In the wake of these pioneering scholars of the 1920s came others like Katō Daigaku of the innovative Kumazaki-inspired Daigaku School [6] and A. Taigen, who later took up the Taizan School's mantle [7]. The corridor from Nagasaki to Tokyo bloomed with increasingly many Four Pillars practitioners, and as a result there inevitably came to be ideological differences among them. By the mid 20th century the schools of Shichū Suimei had already become quite innumerable; in this work I examine the writings of only the select few popular and representative sects mentioned in the paragraphs above as necessary for the brief discussion at hand.

III. SCHISMS

A. Fatalism and Free Will

As a school of astrology, Shichū Suimei is intrinsically

fatalistic. Four Pillars as a whole necessitates some conceptual form of predestination, although modern practitioners from both Japan and China [8] debate its exact nature. The sages behind most pre-modern texts that comprise the core Four Pillars literary canon were however generally proponents of a more absolute conception of predestination, and as such “fatalism” is used here as shorthand to refer to that more absolute understanding of predestination which is still favored among conservative Shichū Suimei astrologers like those from the Takagi and Taizan Schools. That said, even Takagi himself considered that the mechanism of fate could be “biomechanical” in nature [9] and ultimately by the 1990s the Taigen school had embraced this interpretation fully [10].

In opposition to the conservative fatalist camp arose a minority of schools which came to espouse an innovative stance emphasizing the importance of free will in directing one’s own destiny (albeit still in subordination to a comparatively light-handed form of predestination). Katō Daigaku identified himself and the Kumazaki School as proponents of this progressive standpoint, decrying their predecessor schools’ practices as “spellbound” and “backward” [6]. Katō critiqued Takagi’s resignation to fate in particular, noting that “prophecy for prophecy’s sake” pales in comparison to using Shichū Suimei lifestyle management techniques to actively mould one’s destiny into a superior form.

Now, Takagi’s fatalism was not wholly devoid of new thinking. He claimed major inspiration for his philosophical framework came from the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlink’s play “Monna Vanna.” The play’s symbolist expression of wisdom and free will as critical factors in changing one’s destiny inspired Takagi to sort mankind into three categories. He described them namely as those who possess the wherewithall (wisdom and self-possession) to direct their own fates, those who lack it, and those who possess it only in part [2]. In other words even among conservative Shichū Suimei practitioners in the early Shōwa period, predestination was already not necessarily conceived of as absolute or universal.

Katō and Takagi both easily identified the cause for the latter’s stronger adherence to tradition on the matter of (variably applicable) fatalism, though only Katō considered it injurious to astrological prediction. Takagi suffered the early death of his firstborn son, and this tragic loss led him on a path of spirituality and guilt that ultimately introduced him to his lifelong passion in Four Pillars astrology - but also fully convinced him that his son’s death was his own fault and that it had been unavoidably written into his fate as a father [2, 6]. The yoke of this trauma was never raised from Takagi’s shoulders, and where it seemed to push him deeper and deeper into the comforting fortitude of ancient fatalist traditions in his trade, for the Daigaku School this glaring bias was all the more reason to be resolute in its innovative development of practices centered on individual human agency rather than consignment to fate.

B. Religion and Secularization

As mentioned above, Takagi’s initiation into Shichū Suimei was only after a lengthy journey through various sects of Buddhism, Christianity and others. Even regardless of the

personal spiritual affinities of Takagi the man, however, Four Pillars astrology has always had inherent philosophical ties to Daoism, Buddhism and Chinese folk religion [8]. The discipline presupposes a guiding hand of fate, at a minimum biomechanical and maximally at the behest of religious holy figures [2]. This is a key commonality in the background of Four Pillars thought across regions and eras.

That said, the Daigaku and Kumazaki Schools departed from tradition here as well. Just as we saw above with fatalism, Takagi’s loss drove him to agree more strictly with tradition on the position of religion in astrology. Similarly, just as we saw above with free will, Katō and Kumazaki’s thirst for progress drove them in the direction of secularization instead. Katō once again ridiculed Takagi and his ilk, cautioning Daigaku acolytes to “avoid falling into the same traps which befell the ancients” [6]. There is little evidence of this sort of deliberate “modernizing” secularization in any Shichū Suimei schools prior to the early-mid Shōwa period.

In practical terms, the conservative side emphasizes the importance of chiefly Buddhist prayer in fate management while the progressives opt for other traditional lifestyle activities in accordance with more earthly metaphysical principles instead. Reverence for tutelary dieties is an ancient and established element of the Four Pillars tradition going back at least to *Yuanhai Ziping* [11]. The same can essentially be said for the other lifestyle activities alluded to above, e.g. balancing metaphysical representations of the five elements in one’s life with auspicious colors, numbers, animals, and so on as reflected on in the Qing dynasty Four Pillars compendium *Qiongtong Baojian* [12], an adaption of the then only privately circulated Ming-era *Lanjiangwang*. Thus Takagi and the like are conservative here in the sense that they espouse both of these spiritual areas of traditional fate management, while the progressive camp prefers a secularized arrangement more free from organized religious influence.

C. Esotericism and Accessibility

A final area of variation among Shichū Suimei schools is in their stances on how accessible the art itself should be to the public. Four Pillars astrology is a highly complex system marked not only by the intricacies of its many moving parts working in tandem but also by countless exceptions and special cases baked into its mechanisms through centuries of observations by sages in China and Japan. Some would say Four Pillars methods are labyrinthine by design, being an inherently esoteric art intended only for use by the erstwhile priestly astrologist caste in communing with the spiritual realm. Others would say this is not necessarily the case, with the practice having instead simply become bloated from centuries of superfluous manipulation [6] which ought to be whittled away to streamline the craft and in doing so make it accessible to the masses again.

In terms of early Shōwa perspectives on this issue, we see the same divide here that we saw regarding fatalism and religion. The conservative camp did not take issue with the involved processes and layers of esoteric knowledge required for Shichū Suimei calculation, but the progressives indicated a major need to simplify the techniques and make them more accessible [6]. Katō raised three key reasons for this; the first

was that he considered such reform to already be a cyclically occurring phenomenon in Four Pillars astrology, with its increasingly “burdensome” complexity and apparent ossification in his time both being accidents of history. He argued that rendering Shichū Suimei methods as simple and accessible to the public as possible was absolutely paramount for the modernization of the art [6] - a goal that not all metaphysicians concern themselves with. Finally, as with many other Four Pillars professionals across the Sino-Japanese world at large [13], Katō was concerned that the sophistry that Shichū Suimei had grown to follow in its methods did not actually necessarily produce results with greater accuracy than simpler methods.

Katō Daigaku identified strongly with earlier work by Kumazaki Ken’ō, rejecting late pre-modern Chinese attempts to sophisticate Four Pillars methods and instead returning to the foundational classic *Yuanhai Ziping* to make his own alterations from there as needed [6]. In other words Katō and Kumazaki were revivalists on the technical side of Shichū Suimei, making progressive changes to methods used since an earlier stage of the craft than the one from which conservatives like Takagi and Taizan based their methods on. The latter schools conserved traditions which had been built up later through astrological commentaries of the Ming and Qing dynasties in China [13] and the Meiji and Taishō periods in Japan. It remains unclear precisely how different the fate calculation techniques came to be between the Daigaku-Kumazaki and Takagi-Taizan camps as a result of this, but for our purposes at this time let it suffice to say that the revivalist “progressives” claimed to reject post-*Ziping* literary attempts to sophisticate Four Pillars astrology and instead sought to make it more broadly accessible and, as Katō put it, “modern.”

IV. ANALYSIS

In the sections above I identify several areas in which a selection of Japanese Shichū Suimei practitioners’ working philosophies came to diverge from one another in the literature they produced during the early Shōwa period. In doing so I find two ideological camps to have been developing at this time, here called the conservatives and progressives. The former appears, at least in the case of the schools of thought discussed here, to be a sort of conservative force developed in reaction to the contemporary age rather than one only persevering through it. The latter camp vocally pursued modernization and secularization in their craft, rejecting the failings of near-modern predecessors and reverting to a much earlier phase of the premodern Four Pillars literary canon in order to do so. Both camps take liberties with the art’s Sinocentric tradition, incorporating elements of Western and Japanese thought into their philosophies.

A particularly salient theme across these issues is the ongoing struggle to fit Four Pillars metaphysical theory into the modern age. This is an issue which we naturally also see in China and which continues there to this day as well [13]. Writers like Katō Daigaku discussed the challenges involved in keeping Shichū Suimei attractive and relevant to their clientele in an age of rapid scientific and educational development [6], a fight for control over the narrative and the astrological Fremdbild or public optics [14] which continues

to this day for astrologists the world over [3, 10]. Astrology had become a “pseudoscience,” and Shichū Suimei careerists faced an unprecedented identity struggle with their trade coming to be recognized demeaningly and only in reference to a different field [4]. The awkward tension between science and astrology strained Japanese Four Pillars scholars after the Taishō period [15], and so they either sought either to “modernize” the art like Katō and Kumazaki or else turned back to religion and hard fatalism like the Takagi camp in spite of modernity. In essence the rift was between those who grew insecure about the Fremdbild of Shichū Suimei in a more scientifically knowledgeable contemporary age [2] and those who remained contented with pseudoscientific and faith-based approaches [9]. However, the desire to be perceived as trustworthy and relevant - educated, even - in these times of rapid change was not the only force with which Japanese astrologers found themselves grappling in the early -mid Shōwa years.

At a deeper level these new schisms underscored Japanese nation-building in general. More precisely, a need arose to Japanicize the form of Four Pillars astrology; this was more for the astrologers’ own community identity or Selbstbild [14] rather than for how broader Japanese society perceived them, unlike the case of scientific modernization discussed above. With Four Pillars astrology being Chinese in origin and Sinocentric in its literary tradition, its Japanese practitioners increasingly craved a decoupling from Chinese scholars that would allow them to center their own identities and interests and to frame Shichū Suimei as a Japanese art. By this point Japan had already been desynchronizing itself politically and culturally from China for some time [16], but Four Pillars astrology was a late entry to their cultural exchange and needed to quickly catch up to the rest of Japan in deciding who and what to be in the dawning contemporary age. The way forward for the Kumazaki and Daigaku schools was to identify themselves with innovations that would set them apart as Japanese, rather than keeping to a mould set by philosophical traditions [17]. In other words Shichū Suimei scholars began dialogues not only on to what extent they needed to be perceived by others as sufficiently modern, but also in what way they should conceive of themselves.

Beyond the two camps’ efforts to manage their community’s self-image and “reclaim the soul” of Four Pillars astrology to wrangle its societal perception, there is one additional point of significance in this ideological rift. It is namely the deeply personal nature of Shichū Suimei’s history in Japan. Katō and Takagi both were quite certain about the role of personal loss and trauma in the development of the latter’s traditionalism-inclined perspective. Reading between the lines we can see much of Daigaku’s innovation appears to have been compensation for what he saw to be delusional folly on Takagi’s part. The inner emotions of these men are laid bare in the tensions we see in their writings, and it could not be clearer how their personal experiences predetermined their paths as philosophical arbiters on the trans-Japan linkage that filtered Shichū Suimei from Nagasaki to Tokyo and built communities from these lingering memories of intrigue.

V. CONCLUSION

The above passage identifies a selection of conservative

and progressive schools of Shichū Suimei astrology in eastern Japan based on ideological tenets on display in their founders' early Shōwa writings. Their differences represent two broad approaches to addressing the community's post-Taishō grappling with modernity and Japaneseness at the dawn of the contemporary age. On the side of the Takagi and Taizan Schools we see support for traditionalist interpretations of fatalism, religion and methodological esotericism; among the progressive Kumazaki and Daigaku Schools it was conversely free will or self-determination, secularity, and accessibility that took favor. This work gives a glimpse into the rich history of the genuine transnationalization of Sino-Japanese astrological literature in early Shōwa Japan, a story just as interwoven with personal intrigues and great societal shifts as it is with deliberate philosophy. This was certainly a major turning point in the seemingly quiet and stable history of astrology in Japan up through the Taishō era, although perhaps if we take Katō Daigaku's words to heart it may have really only been one of innumerable many transmigrations of the Four Pillars spirit through passing ages.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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