

Era names and Zeitgeist

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ERA NAMES AND ZEITGEIST

A Review Discussion

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Era-names (nien-hao) were, for two millenia, a characteristically Chinese device for delineating successive periods of time¹. They were adopted by those states which fell under Chinese influence and were employed by non-Chinese regimes which dominated all or part of China². This method of dating raises a number of problems which are of interest to the historian; among those problems, two have received little attention. First, what was the relation, if any, between the terminology of era-names in a given period and the intellectual history of that period? Second, what, if anything, can be learned about the whole intellectual history of China from the prevalence of a certain *type* of era-name through several centuries, its replacement by a different type for another period of time?

The late Ichimura Sanjiro (1864–1946) devoted an essay to the discussion of these two problems³. We believe that his hypotheses are of some interest. We have therefore rearranged and condensed his argument and subjected it to critical comment. It is our hope that this brief discussion may stimulate further study of various aspects of these problems.

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1. The official beginning of era-names is now generally regarded as 110 B. C. Cf. H. H. Dubs, *History of the Former Han Dynasty II* (Baltimore, 1944), 122.

2. Among states which were cultural dependencies of China, the Juan-juan began using era-names in 464 A. D., Silla in 514, Annam in 544, Japan regularly from 701, Po-hai in 719, Nan-chao in 752. Would-be conquerors usually announced their intentions by taking a Chinese dynastic name, the imperial title, and by instituting era-names.

3. "Nengo ni arawaretaru jidai shisō" (The thought of periods of history as revealed in era-names) in *Shigaku zasshi* 39 (1928). It subsequently appeared in a collection of Ichimura's writings, *Shinashi kenkyū* (Studies in Chinese History) Tokyo, 1939, pp. 405–419. This essay touches upon some other aspects of era-names but in doing so adds nothing to what is already known.

Ichimura examined some 800 era-names employed in all or part of China proper between 110 B.C. and 1911. He found that they fell into the following categories:

- I. Those which symbolize an event. In this context an event means something that was believed or alleged to have happened.
- II. Those which express an idea.
- III. Those which combine the symbolization of an event and the expression of an idea.

CATEGORY I

Ichimura points out that as early as the reign of Han Wu-ti, an official proposed that an era should be named for an event which could be interpreted as a sign of Heaven's favor⁴. Some typical examples of this type of era-name are: Kan-lu (ambrosial dew) of which there were five between 53 B.C. and 926 A.D., era-names symbolizing the appearance of the four felicitous animals: unicorn, phoenix, dragon, and tortoise, era-names commemorating more substantial indications of Heaven's beneficence, such as Ho-p'ing (pacification of the Yellow River) 28-24 B.C.⁵

In our view Category I might well have a sub-group of those era-names which symbolize, not an event, but something that it was *hoped* would come to pass. An example of this is T'ien-han (100-96 B.C.) which, in its context of allusions, expressed a hope for abundant rainfall⁶.

Ichimura observes that the frequency of era-names in Category I is greatest from the Han through the T'ang Dynasties and that era-names of this type practically disappear from the Sung Dynasty on⁷. He believes

4. Cf. Chavannes, *Les Mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien* (Paris 1895-1905) vol. I, C note I and III, p. 474. The proposal was made in 114 B.C. 5. Cf. Dubs, *op. cit.* II, 384.

6. Cf. Dubs, *op. cit.* II, 103. His note 33,2 summarizes variant interpretations of this term.

7. A striking exception is Ta-chung hsiang-fu, 1008-1017, to be discussed below. Ichimura also cites the era-name Hsiang-hsing (well-omened prosperity), 1278-79, which commemorated the appearance of a yellow dragon out of the sea.

this to be a reflection of the decline in the prestige of yin-yang and five forces "science" beginning in the T'ang. As a positive factor in the transition one should add the rise of the mature rational philosophy of neo-Confucianism which gradually brought to an end the dominion of primitive symbolism over the minds of court and bureaucracy. Thus, on the second problem stated at the beginning of this essay, one might formulate the following hypothesis: Towards the end of the T'ang Dynasty, the shift in the type of era-name employed reflects an important transition in Chinese intellectual life from primitive naturalism to a mature eclectic rationalism.

CATEGORY II

Era-names of this type, those expressing an idea, seem to us to require sub-classification into two groups:

IIA Era-names expressing an abstract desideratum.

IIB Era-names expressing, more or less abstractly, the thought of a specific philosophy or religion.

Era-names in category IIA express the perennial ideals of the Chinese people and their rulers: harmony, prosperity, and peace. There is a certain rough correlation between the absence of one or more of these desiderata and the use of words symbolizing them in era-names. Thus Ichimura pointed out that the character *yung* (everlasting) occurred in some sixty era-names between Han and T'ang, a period notable for the shortness of reigns and of dynasties. Such era-names as the following reflect, in the periods they designate, the absence of the qualities they symbolize: Yung-p'ing (everlasting tranquillity); Yung-ho (everlasting harmony); Yung-hsing (everlasting prosperity)⁸.

8. Yung-p'ing: 58-76, 291, 508-512, 617-618, 911-916; all but the first of these were used in a period of disunion or disorder.

Yung-ho: 136-142, 345-357, 416-418, 433-440, 935-936, 1721 (by a short-lived rebel regime); all of these belong to periods of upheaval.

Yung-hsing: 153-155, 304-306, 357-359, 350-352, 409-414, 532, 1628 (rebels).

When, with the beginning of the Ming Dynasty⁹, an era-name was established at the beginning of a reign for use throughout that reign then a term was sought which symbolized the hoped-for character of that reign, sometimes a quality that had been notably lacking in the preceding reign period. Thus Yung-lo, 1403–1425 (everlasting happiness), Chia-ching, 1522–1566 (excellent tranquillity), K'ang-hsi, 1662–1723 (brilliant prosperity), etc.

The character *cheng* (upright, orthodox) provides interesting examples of the desideratum type of era-name. Ichimura tried rather unsuccessfully to establish a correlation between the use of this character in era-names and Buddhist or Confucian belief in court and bureaucracy. The word is indeed important in both systems of thought, but its use in era-names is most frequent with those upstart dynasties or rebel regimes which expressed in using it their hope for eventual full dominion and recognized legitimacy. Thus Cheng-shih (orthodox beginning) was used by San-kuo Wei, 240–249, by the Later Yen, 407–409, and by Northern Wei, 504–508. The term was used twice by the Jurchen Dynasty of Chin which held north China but aspired to the conquest of the whole: Cheng-ta, 1224–1232 (orthodox greatness) and Cheng-lung, 1156–1160 (orthodox magnificence).

In Category IIB the most numerous are the era-names, which number nearly 100, containing the word *t'ien*, Heaven. Such a concept as Heaven is by no means a constant in Chinese thinking; it had one group of meanings for Han Chinese, another for Chinese of the T'ang and so on. Ichimura does not bring out the developmental aspects of this term. We would suggest that an era-name containing *t'ien* in the Han and Six Dynasties periods may have expressed a hope for the active favor of the greatest of supernatural forces and that, from late T'ang onward there was a partial secularization of the idea content of the term. Thus the use of the term from the 10th Century onward could be interpreted as

9. Ichimura believed that the reduction in the number of era-names per reign was a tendency already discernible in the Yuan Dynasty, 1280–1367.

adjectival rather than hortatory. We should also add that the list of era-names containing *t'ien* includes a large proportion decreed by rebel and usurping regimes; this is obviously to be explained by the association with *t'ien-ming*, the Heavenly mandate to rule China which those regimes aspired to receive. It is probably only on its earlier occurrences that the word Heaven in era-names can be regarded as invoking a religious entity.

Another series under Category IIB are those era-names symbolizing the concepts of Taoism both in its more primitive and more developed stages. In the symbol sequences of the Taoists of the later Han yellow followed red, and yellow appeared in the names of such Taoist divinities as Huang-ti, the Yellow Emperor, mythical founder of Taoism, and Huang-lao-chün, the Yellow Ancient Prince, chief deity of the Yellow Turban movement¹⁰. Since the color of the Han was red, those succession kingdoms which hoped to succeed to its whole hegemony and whose rulers were strongly influenced by Taoism used the character Huang in their era-names¹¹. Thus Huang-ch'u (beginning of the yellow), 220–227 was decreed as the first era-name of the Wei kingdom, while Huang-wu (martial power of the yellow) 225–229 was used by the state of Wu, rival of the Wei in the struggle for control of the territory of the defunct Han.

Era-names reflecting the resurgent and developed Taoism of the Fifth Century and after are the following: T'ai-p'ing chen-chün (Veritable Prince of the Great Peace) 440–461 was itself the name of a Taoist divinity. Its adoption by the Emperor T'ai-wu of the Northern Wei, famous for the first large scale persecution of Buddhism in China, reflects the Taoist predilections of that ruler¹². Ta-hsiang (the great form) is

10. Cf. Maspero, *Le Taoïsme* (Paris, 1950) 85, 121 and passim.

11. Ichimura cites the *Pao-p'u tzu* (Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an 1st series) 34, 199b which gives a saying current in the Later Han: "The Han is bound to cease from glory; the yellow essence is bound to rise." Ichimura treated the era-names derived from this nexus of ideas as belonging to Category III, arguing that by the use of Taoist symbolism they were expressing the rise to power of the succession states of the Han.

12. Cf. J. R. Ware, the *Wei Shu* and the *Sui Shu* on Taoism, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 53 (1933). 233, 236–7. Kou Ch'ien-chih, the influential and aggressive Taoist leader,

another name for Tao¹³. It was used as an era-name from 579–581 by the strongly Taoist regime of the Northern Chou; it should be noted that the future Sui Emperor Kao-tsu wen-ti was in those years the leading power at the Chou court. His first era-name, upon the founding of his own dynasty, was K'ai-huang (581–601) which is the name of one of the four Taoist sub-divisions of a *kalpa*, a period of 41 billion years¹⁴. The Buddhist historian Fei Chang-fang tried to interpret this era-name to mean the revival of Buddhism following the Northern Chou persecution of 574–578, but his argument seems highly casuistical¹⁵. We suspect that the Sui founder adopted this era-name less out of Taoist belief (he was soon to become an ardent patron of Buddhism) than from its meaning of a long period of time. Such a meaning could not but appeal to the founder of a dynasty ambitious to bring enduring unity to a China divided for more than 350 years.

Ichimura argues rather circuitously for the Taoist reference of the era-name T'ien-pao (heavenly treasure) adopted by the strongly Taoist Emperor Hsüan-tsung for the years 742–756. But the account of the excavation of a supernatural talisman in the histories is followed by the statement that Buddhist and Taoist clergy, civil and military officials petitioned that this discovery was significant enough to be commemorated in an era-name¹⁶. T'ien-pao as a Taoist divinity-essence seems not to appear in literature until the Sung¹⁷.

Chronologically the last era-name cited by Ichimura as being Taoist in its symbolism is Ta-chung hsiang-fu 1008–1017. This reflects the

proposed to the emperor the flattering equation between ruler and divinity enshrined in the era-name. Buddhist clerics later decreed that the Northern Wei Emperor *was* the Tathâgata, thus in similar fashion seeking protection and support for their religion.

13. Cf. Arthur Waley, *The Way and its Power* (London, 1934), 186, 193.

14. Cf. Ware, *op. cit.*, 222, 243.

15. Cf. *Li-tai san-pao chi* 12, *Taishô Issaikyô* 49, 101c–102a. This work was completed in 597.

16. Cf. *Ts'ê-fu yuan-kuei* (ed. of 1642) 54, 1a. Cf. also the *Hsü T'ung-chih* (Wan-yu wên-k'u ed.) 7, 3288a.

17. Cf. *Yün-chi ch'i-chien* (Ssu-pu ed.) 7, 40b. The work dates from about 1025. Cf. also Ware, *op. cit.* 220, note 19.

credulity and mental aberrations of a single emperor and is an exception to the hypothesis on change of type stated above¹⁸. Ichimura remarks that era-names containing the character *chen* (true) or *hsüan* (mystery) have a strongly Taoist flavor, but he does not subject this group to close analysis.

Era-names with definite Buddhist associations are few, and they seem not to reflect, in their incidence, the ebb and flow of the prestige of the Buddhist church. We suggest two reasons for this: the era-names were so closely bound up with the Chinese state system and the conventions for their choice so inflexible that the use of the nomenclature of a foreign religion was rarely resorted to. Secondly the messianic and apocalyptic flavor of the Buddhist social gospel made its vocabulary unsuitable to the expression of the secular desiderata of the Chinese ruling class. Rebels, however, often developed ideologies of revolt and reform under strongly Buddhist influence. The era-name Fa-lun (wheel of the dharma) was introduced by one of the monk-rebels against the Sui in 618, a would-be emperor who gave himself the title Ta-ch'eng huang-ti (Mahāyāna emperor)¹⁹. Ichimura discusses at length the question of whether the character *p'u* (general, universal) which was widely used in Buddhist nomenclature, reflected the Buddhist proclivities of those rulers who employed it in era-names. P'u-t'ung, used by the strongly Buddhist emperor Liang Wu-ti for the years 520–527, would seem to mean "universality" or "universal pervasiveness" as an attribute of the Buddhist religion, but neither Buddhist nor secular sources have yielded definite evidence for this. The other era-name including this character

18. The *Hsiang-fu* or "Fortunate talisman" was a Taoist writing of alleged supernatural origin which the Emperor's Taoist advisors assisted him to "find". Cf. *Hsü T'ung-chih* 27, 3384b, also Wieger, *Textes Historiques*, 1573–1577. The origin of the first two characters of this nien-hao is not clear. Was it meant to hark back to the Ta-chung era of the T'ang Emperor Hsüan-tsung, 848–860?

19. Cf. *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien* (Ssu-pu ed.) 186, 1792. The term Ta-ch'eng (Mahāyāna) which Ichimura regards as an era-name seems rather to have been the name of a movement or group. Cf. *Wei-shu* 9, 5a and Eberhard, *Das Tobereich Nordchinas* (Leiden, 1949), 252. The *Tz'u-hai* wrongly identifies it as an era-name.

is P'u-t'ai used by the Northern Wei in 531–32, but there is no evidence to confirm its Buddhist origin. Ichimura makes an even less conclusive effort to associate the character *kuang* (brightness) with Buddhism, and we are inclined to doubt that it can be established. Perhaps acquired Buddhist associations lent additional appeal to characters already used in era-names and increased their use. On the whole the incidence of Buddhist terminology in era-names, for the reasons noted above, is far less than the importance of Buddhism in Chinese intellectual life would lead us to expect. The use of Buddhist personal names and appellations – matters of personal or family choice – reflects far more accurately than do era-names the influence of Buddhism²⁰.

CATEGORY III

Era-names in this group, which combine the symbolization of an event and the expression of an idea are virtually limited to the 11th and early 12th century. These era-names reflect the ebb and flow of the fortunes of the Reformist and Conservative groups under the Northern Sung. Thus, according to Ichimura, Shao-sheng (continue the sagely), 1094–1098, reflects the return to power of the Reformists. The era-name meant that in the new period there would be a continuation of the sage-like policies of the Emperor Shen-tsung who had first backed the Reformists in 1068–1078. Ichimura believes that the character “sage” refers directly to Emperor Shen-tsung. The effort at compromise between the two hostile groups in the years 1101–02 is reflected in the era-name Chien-chung ching-kuo (establish a mean and tranquillize the country). The next return of the Reformists is reflected in the era-name Ch'ung-ning, 1102–1106, and is interpreted by Ichimura as meaning “respect for the Hsi-ning era”, the period 1068–1077 when the Reformists first put their program into effect; it served to indicate that

20. Cf. the lists of Buddhist personal names of the Six Dynasties period, compiled by Miyagawa Hisayuki, *Tôyôshi kenkyû* 3 (1938), 503; 4 (1938), 71, 94 and 4 (1939), 538–539.

they would pattern their measures on the model of their earlier effort. We suspect that the rise and fall of the fortunes of various cliques may be reflected in the era-names of other periods, but the examples given are the easiest to establish since the clash at that time was on fundamental grounds of policy and was given due attention by Chinese historians; struggles between cliques are given far less full and formal treatment, so that their reflection in era-names would be very difficult to establish.

Ichimura's and our own researches have led us to some tentative conclusions: 1. The shift in type of era-name, about the year 900, is probably a genuine reflection of a major change in Chinese intellectual life. 2. The incidence of era-names with specific religious or philosophic reference does not reflect the popularity or importance of movements of thought, being often the choice of an emperor whose preferences were not necessarily those of the majority of the ruling class. 3. The desideratum type, both concrete and abstract (and these are by far the most numerous) do generally reflect the major desires or preoccupations of the court at the time they were selected.