ANCIENT CHINA
AND THE NIGHT SKY

In ancient China, the sky was given great importance. The Emperor was seen as the Son of Heaven, ruling under a mandate from the sky. It was believed that earthly events were reflections of heavenly phenomena, and as such, astronomers were charged with deciphering the skies in order to advise the emperor. The night sky was studied intensely during this time, and many astronomical advancements resulted. In fact, the world’s oldest existing manuscript star chart comes from China, and by the close of the Han Dynasty, court astronomers had assigned 1464 stars into 283 constellations.

This Chinese star chart likely dates to the Tang Dynasty.

This is an image of comets, from the Hunan Provincial Museum.

A Chinese astronomer, circa 1675
Ancient Chinese Astronomers also used the night sky to determine the four seasons. They would observe the position of stars over fixed locations to ascertain the beginning and end of each quarter. Below, the images from the Beijing Ancient Observatory depict this.
Ancient astronomers divided the sky into 28 sections, referred to as “mansions,” or “lunar lodges.” These sections are called “xiu” in Chinese. While it’s unknown exactly where these mansions were derived from, there is speculation that they corresponded with the location of the moon throughout the month, and may have served as a way to track lunar location. Eventually, these sections were used to decipher locations of celestial bodies. Additionally, many important Chinese constellations fall within the 28 lunar lodges.

The 28 mansions are divided into four parts—one for each direction of the compass.

Each of these four directions is represented by a colored animal.

North:
The Black Tortoise

West:
The White Tiger

East:
The Azure Dragon

South:
The Vermilion Bird
Qing long is a blue-green dragon with a long tongue. It resides in the eastern sky, and represents spring. Qing long is associated with the element wood, as well as benevolence.

Within Qing long’s realm are these 7 of the 28 mansions:

角 HORN
亢 NECK
氐 ROOT
房 ROOM
心 HEART
尾 TAIL
箕 WINNOWING BASKET
Bai hu is a celestial white tiger. It resides in the western sky, and represents autumn. Bai hu is associated with the element metal, as well as protection of the dead.

Within Bai hu’s realm are these 7 of the 28 mansions:

- 奎 LEGS
- 倧 BOND
- 胃 STOMACH
- 昴 HAIRY HEAD
- 毕 NET
- 蜥 TURTLE BEAK
- 参 JOIN - THREE STARS
ZHU QUE: THE VERMILION BIRD

Zhū què is a red phoenix-like bird. It resides in the southern sky, and represents summer. Zhū què is associated with the element fire, and good fortune.

Within Zhū què’s realm are these 7 of the 28 mansions:

井 WELL
鬼 DEMON
柳 WILLOW
星 STAR
张 GROWTH
翼 WINGS
軫 DEEP EMOTION
Xuan wu is a black tortoise combined with a snake. It resides in the northern sky and represents winter. Xuan wu is associated with the element water, as well as longevity.

Within Xuan wu’s realm are these 7 of the 28 mansions:

斗 DIPPER
牛 OX
女 WOMAN
虚 EMPTINESS
危 DANGER
室 ROOM
壁 WALL