A Practical Guide to Chinese Date Conversion

The method for using the reference works described above is fairly straightforward once you have the basic ideas down. Let us take the example mentioned in the accompanying discussion of the Chinese calendar: the thirteenth day of the fifth month in the sixth year of the Heavenly Treasure (tianbao 天寶) reign period. Suppose you were looking at some Chinese text and you came across this date. It might be written as follows:

天寶 6 年 5 月 13 日

Each reference work has a slightly different arrangement, so we must look at each separately.

Sino-Western Calendar for Two Thousand Years

In this reference work, you can use the following steps to find the date in our example:

1. You need to figure out the Western year that roughly corresponds to the date. If you don’t already know this, go to Appendix Table 15 which indexes reign period titles by stroke number.
2. Table 15 will give the approximate year. Go to that year in the body of the work.
3. The second column on the page lists the lunar months in order. Find the month number that you need in the row corresponding to the year you need. Caution: if you are looking up a date near the end of the year, be sure you are looking at the correct row since the lunar years span two Western years.
4. Find the day of the month that you are looking for across the top of the page.
5. Find the intersection of the month row and the day column to find the Western date. Note that the Western month is indicated by bold numbers or letters preceding each first day. Thus 11 means January 1, whereas 11 simply means the eleventh of whatever month you are in. October, November, and December are indicated by letters (O, N, D respectively)

There are some other interesting features of this work.
1. You can figure out what day of the week any date was by using the number in the second to last column on the right. Simply add this number to the day of the lunar month and divide by 7. The remainder tell you the day of the week (0 = Sunday, 1=Monday, etc.). If the sum is less than seven, there is no need to divide.
2. You can also figure out the cyclical characters that correspond to the lunar days. Simply add the number in the far right column to the day. If the number is less than 60, you can find the cyclical characters corresponding to that number in Appendix Table 17. If the number is greater than 60, first subtract 60 and then consult Table 17.

Of course, all of these procedures can be reversed so that, given a Western date, you can convert it into its traditional Chinese equivalent.
Below you will find the full page from the *Sino-Western Calendar* that covers the date in our example (天寶 6 年 5 月 13 日). We are interested in the sixth year of the Tianbao period. It is the second row in the table, corresponding to 747-748.
Since we are only interested in that year, we can look at that row in more detail.

To find the date we want, we simply cross reference the fifth lunar month row with the 13th day of the month to discover that the date corresponds to June 25, 747.
Zhong Xi Hui shi rili

For this work, follow these steps:

1. Find the reign period title in “Table of Reign Titles” (nianhao biao [J. niango hyō] 年號表) at the back of the book. It is organized by stroke number and gives you the approximate Western year. Note: This work is bound in traditional fashion: it reads from right to left, so the back is the front of a Western language book.
2. Turn to the page that covers the appropriate year.
3. Find the small red Chinese character that corresponds to the month you need. Note that the first month of the year is indicated by the character zheng 正, and intercalary months are indicated by the small red run 閏. This number is immediately to the right of the first day of that lunar month.
4. Count off the number of days you need down that column and continuing from the top of the next column to the left if necessary. Don’t forget to count day one also.
5. The number that you arrive at is the day of the Western month. The numbers in bold are the first days of the successive Western month. Thus, 10 = October 1, but 10 = the tenth day of whatever month you are looking at.

As with the Sino-Western Calendar, there are tables to help you determine the day of the week and the cyclical characters, but these work somewhat differently.

1. To determine the day of the week, you will need to use the day of the week charts (riyao biao [J. nichiyō hyō] 日曜表). Every two pages (back to back) of the main tables corresponds to one of the day of the week tables (it is indicated at the lower left corner of every right hand page). Simply turn to the appropriate table and find the day you are looking for. The small red dots indicate Sundays. Just cycle through the days of the week to figure out the proper one for your date.
2. To figure out the cyclical characters for a given day, use the “cyclical character” table (jiazi biao [J. kōshi hyō] 甲子表) for the given calendar table that you are using. This is indicated on the lower left of each right hand page for that and the preceding page (i.e., front and back). The succession of sixty combinations runs in two columns of 30 each that correspond to the odd and even numbered rows of the main table. If you have the month and cyclical characters and need the number of the day, figure out which line the month is in and count to it from the right. This will tell you where you are in the cycle at the beginning of the month. You can then just count off the combinations until you get to the one you want. That tells you what the day is (and the Western equivalent).
3. Note that this work also allows you to convert to the Islamic calendar, but space does not allow us to go into that here.

All of these processes are reversible as well.
The Example

Here is the page corresponding to our example:
To make this clearer, we can look at just the section for our year:

We simply find the red Chinese character for five (五) and count off 13 days down the column to the left of the month number and continue down the next column to the left.