SOME REMARKS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF
CHINESE DYNASTIC HISTORIES

by

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It is well known that the official dynastic histories of China are more or
less influenced by traditional ways of thought. This calls for some criticism
regarding their contents. All the information given by their authors must
not be taken at its face value; on the other hand the reader must be careful
to avoid a hypercritical attitude towards the texts. On the whole, it is a well
established and recognized fact that the official histories, beginning with the
Shih-ki, are written for officials by officials. This accounts for the almost
uniform neglect of events which did not concern official circles, in particular
those of the metropolis. This point needs no further emphasis, nor, equally,
the traditional methods of praising or condemning men and manners, pao-
pien. Another factor to which the author should like to draw atten-
tion has, however, not always been sufficiently realized by Western
historians: the influence of preconceived traditional schemes derived from
cosmological speculation 1, even in later dynastic histories. The examples
given below are taken from the official dynastic history of the Mongol
(Yuan) dynasty, Yuan-shi 元史, i.e. a history of comparatively recent
date (compiled 1368-1370).

For the interpretation of Chinese historical conceptions of the Han and
pre-Han period a good deal of work has already been done by Western and
Chinese Scholars such as Granet, Maspero and Ku Kie-kang. We know that,
for example, dates of solar eclipses have been interpolated for political
reasons, as a way of expressing pao-pien. We may therefore presume that
the entry of an eclipse in an historical text had generally some meaning and
purpose. The same principle applies, a fortiori, to the great number of por-

1 Cf. W. Eberhard, Beiträge zur kosmologischen Spekulation der Chinesen zur Han-
Zeit, Baessler-Archiv, Berlin 1933; and Der Beginn der Chou-Zeit, in Sinica 1933
(Franke-Festschrift, p. 182-188).

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tentous events to be found in historical texts. It might even be argued that the actual number of ominous events during the reign of a certain emperor could serve as a measure of the opinion which the Chinese historian had of that emperor. A study of entries of such events during the reign of the last Mongol emperor (Shun-ti, *regnavit* 1333-1368) reveals some remarkable features.

The astronomical-astrological chapters of the *Yüan-shih* (YS), *t'ien-wen*天文, contain a list of eclipses of the sun which are said to have occurred under the reign of the Yüan emperors (op. cit. ch. 48, 6238 V-6239 I) 2. In addition to this list, we have records of eclipses in the Annals (pen-ki). A comparison of both kinds of entries shows that the Annals do not agree with the astronomical chapter: the Annals mention solar eclipses which are not recorded in the chapter on astronomy. I shall not discuss the question whether the sources for the astronomical chapter were more incomplete than the sources from which the Annals were compiled (i.e. the *shí-lu* 禦錄 "veritable records"), or whether actually observed eclipses only have been recorded in the *t'ien-wen* chapter, whereas some eclipses in the Annals have been calculated. It will be seen that the last mentioned alternative is not quite improbable. One point, however, is striking: generally we find in the Annals immediately before or behind an entry of an eclipse not recorded in the astronomical chapter an entry of ominous of disastrous events. Some examples are given below.

1). ch. 41, 6225 IV: "(1346). In the spring, on (the day) *keng-sii* of the second month, there was an eclipse of the sun". Next entry: "On (the day) *sin-wei* there was in Hing-kuo 興國 (prov. Hupei) a violent rain and hail, big as the head of a horse. In the same month there was in Shan-tung an earthquake which lasted for seven days 3". The Chinese date given above corresponds to Febr. 22, 1346 (dates here and below are those of the Julian calendar). On that day there was, according to Oppolzer 4, an eclipse of the sun, visible in China.

2). ch. 41, 6226 III: "(1348). In the autumn in the seventh month, the

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2 Quotations refer to the K'ai-ming edition, indicating chapter, page and column.

3 An earthquake means that the Yin principle is superior to Yang. This is chiefly the case when the ruler is under nefarious influence of women, cf. Granet, *Dances et Légendes* p. 396 note 8. It is interesting to compare the examples of erotic practices at the court of the last Mongol emperor given later in this paper.

4 I am indebted for information on astronomical details to Professor Dr. Becker, head of the University observatory at Bonn.