Etymology of the word Taifun

BY

G. SCHLEGEL.

This word, first used by Pinto in 1560, in his description of the terrible whirlwinds raging in the seas of southern China, and expressly stated by him to be a Chinese term for these winds, has been hitherto a puzzle to all students.

It has been thought to be the same as the Greek word *typhon* (τυφών) (Lecomte, 1893), or been identified with the Cantonese *tai-fung* (大風), "a great wind", an identification to which the late sinologue Mayers objected (Notes and Queries on China and Japan, Vol. III, p. 10).

MM. Taintor and Kingsmill advocated the derivation from the Arab *tāfān*, from the root *tāfa* (Ibid. p. 42–43); an opinion which Mr. K. HIRTL also defended in a learned dissertation. Dr. F. HIRTL, the wellknown German sinologue, has returned to the question and states again, that the word is a genuine Chinese one, as in the *Tai-wan-fu tchi*, a Chinese work on Formosa, these terrible winds are called *t'ai* (風), a character not to be found in the imp. dict. of the emperor K'ang-hi. Thus far, he is quite right; but his etymology of the word is totally wrong. He declares the character to be composed of the radical 風 fung, Wind, and the abbreviated form of the character 臺 tai 台, occurring in the Chinese name of the island of Formosa: 臺灣 Tai-wan, also written 台灣; so that it would mean "the wind of Formosa".
Now, if Dr. Hirth had known the Amoy colloquial 1), he would never have proposed such a far-fetched etymology. In Amoy and environs these terrible storms are called hong t'ai, properly transcribed 風胎 or “womb (t'ai) of storm (hong)”, which is only a colloquial translation of the classical term 風母 kū-mu, “Mother of storm”.

Let us hear what the Chinese have to say about this term, which we, moreover, have already explained in 1882 in our “Nederlandsch-Chineesch Woordenboek” (Dutch-Chinese Dictionary) s. v. Orkaan, Storm and Typhon.

The 嶺表録異 Ling-piao luh i says: “In the southern seas, between summer and autumn, the clouds are circled by a confused halo resembling a rainbow, and which has an extension of six to seven feet. This is a sure presage that a typhoon is brewing; and it is therefore called “Mother o' typhoon”. But when a sudden clap of thunder happens, the typhoon does not break out. Sailors always consider it as a foreboding, and take their precautions against it betimes” 2).

The character 風 is composed of 風 fung, “wind” and 具 kū, “everywhere”, because the typhoon shifts to all cardinal points 3). Other names for the typhoon are 墮風 kū fung, the terrible wind; 黑風 heh fung, the black wind; 風潮風 yang chau fung, the

---

1) We must caution all sinologues who wish to treat of Formosa, to pay a due regard to the Amoy-colloquial language, as most of the Chinese in that island are Amoyites.

2) 南海秋夏間，或雲物慘然 (sic! for 參然? ) 有 暈如虹，長六七尺。此候則風潮必發。故呼 爲風母。見忽有震雷，則風潮不作矣。舟人 常以候。預為備之。Vide Encyclopedia 格致鏡原, Chap. III, fol. 5 verso, Art. 風名號. Names and designations of Winds.

3) 風者具四面之風也。Vide 南越志, quoted in the same Encyclopedia.