Some Random Notes on Facts and Fancy in Chinese History

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When Europeans first became acquainted with Chinese historical literature through the Jesuits they were invariably impressed by the wealth of detail and the seemingly well-authenticated early history of China. It took Western sinology more than two centuries to discover that the chief source for their knowledge of Chinese history, the *T'ung-chien kang-mu* in de Mailla's paraphrase *Histoire générale de la Chine*, was anything but a factual and reliable account. In modern times scholars of all countries have devoted a great number of studies to the elucidation of early history and to the separation of historical fact from legendary or purely fictitious elements in pre-Han history. Indeed the Han period seems to mark the transition from so-to-speak free to bureaucratic historiography. Once the metropolitan offices began to keep documentary records on a larger scale there was not much room left for the intrusion of nonhistorical, legendary or speculative elements. It was not so easy to spin historical yarns from red tape.

But it seems also that non-historical and speculative elements continued to exist into later phases of Chinese history and historiography, although sometimes below the surface. Under the Han they were still very strong and reached a peak with Liu Hsiang and Liu Hsin. This is important because many texts of pre-Han times received their final shape in that age, under going revisions and even falsifications. All this is well known but I should like to make a few observations here which, though not altogether original, are meant to be provocative and to stimulate a critical attitude towards some of the data in our sources which we are accustomed to calling historical. I am referring to numbers, wishing to stress the impact of numerology on history and historiography. Like folklore motifs and mythical or legendary concepts, numerical speculation tends to appear where documentary and factual knowledge was lacking. This might be the case either for events or figures of a remote past, or sometimes for persons on whose personal past and ancestry not much was factually known. This latter case again might concern either persons of low social origin or barbarians. This is almost a basic law in historiography; gaps had to be filled somehow, and the less was actually known, the more we may expect legendary or speculative details. A different but related phenomenon is the appearance of *topoi* and folkloristic motifs in the biographies of fully historical persons whose dates were too well authenticated to leave much room for numerological speculation. I propose to give a few random examples for each of these potential cases of non-historical elements, mainly in the hope that one day a more

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2. For a detailed treatment see Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise* (Paris 1934).
systematic study will be made, a study that would have to take into account comparative methods more than is usual among sinologists. For all this (whether numerology and chronomantic speculation or certain folklore motifs) occurs in civilizations outside China as well, and there are some indications that Chinese chronomancy and astrology might ultimately be traced back to the Ancient Near East.

There are certain numbers which should immediately arouse some suspicion when they occur in a text. One of these numbers is 72. It has a definite calendric association (the 72 hou of the solar year); the remaining 5 days of the year (which bring the number up to 73) are considered ominous and baleful, whence the purification and apotropaic rites towards the end of the solar year in many civilizations. In other words, 72 or 73 marks a full cycle in the world of numbers. No wonder then that the later legendarization of Confucius has him die at 73 sui. Seen from this angle the attempts to determine the birth year of Confucius seem to me futile. And again Yao ruled for 73 years before he handed All-under-Heaven to Shun, who became his "assistant" in the 52th year of Yao's rule — 52 is another cyclical number if referring to sun years. Kuan Chung warned Duke Huan of Ch'i not to be the 73th ruler to perform the Feng and Shan offering because this would have been baleful. According to Chuang-tzu XIV, 5, Confucius strived to find the Tao for 51 years of his life, and in his 52nd met Lao-tzu, pretending to have transmitted the Tao of 72 princes — he is the 73rd transmitter of the Tao (Chuang-tzu XIV, 8). The parallels are obvious.

The number of Confucius' pupils is, of course, speculative. Some sources ascribe to him 70 followers (like Jesus), others 72. The number of 70 is repeatedly given by Meng-tzu (IIA,3 and IVB,31); Shih-chi and the present text of the Chia-yü have 72. It is possible that 70 (a "round" number, like 3000, and therefore frequently attested in pre-Han sources) was superseded under the Han by 72 because of the intrusion of numerological calendric speculation. Considering all this one becomes also suspicious when Chinese sources ascribe to Chinggis Khan the age of 72. The existing sources (Mon-

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3 Already pointed out by Édouard Chavannes, Mémoires Historiques vol. II, p. 325 note 6. For a fascinating study of calendar numbers such as 72 see the remarks by Gustav Haloun in his widely neglected book Seit wann kannten die Chinesen die Tocharer oder Indogermanen überhaupt? (Leipzig 1926) p. 63—66, from which most of the following examples are taken.


5 Ch'in Shih-huang-ti was said to have been the 73rd to perform the Feng and Shan offerings, thus being the last one of a full cycle. Han Wu-ti would have been the 74th, and thereby inaugurating a new cycle.

6 The Grimm fairly-tale of the hare and the hedgehog contains a curious parallel: The hare who races between the two hedgehogs runs the course until he collapses during his 74th run. He too has fulfilled a full circle and therefore must die.

7 Arthur Waley (see Gustav Haloun in ZDMG vol. 91, 1937, p. 250 note 1) has suggested that the 13 years during which Confucius wandered homeless in China are also due to a calendric and therefore speculative number. Chang Ch'ien, the explorer of Central Asia, too was absent for 13 years, but a close study of the texts shows that his actual expedition took less time (Haloun loc. cit.). — The fictional element in the Shih-chi description of Confucius' wandering is also borne out by the fact that the text shows traces of rhythmical rhymed prose, that is, poetry.
golian, Persian, Chinese) all give conflicting dates which even the acumen of Pelliot⁸ could not reconcile and it seems most probable that the year of his birth was not exactly known. As he was fairly aged when he met his death in 1227 it was almost natural that an age which marks a full circle was ascribed to him.

Cosmological and chronomantic speculation has also shrouded the beginning of the Chou dynasty. The end of Yin is given by Han sources as 1123 B.C. In a brilliant paper which unfortunately remained widely unknown W. Eberhard⁹ has demonstrated why these speculations on celestial parallelism and the theory of the 5 elements resulted in just 1123—1122 B.C. In the Han system used by Liu Hsin the Yin corresponded to Water/Moon and to the planet Mercurius, whereas the Chou are associated with Fire/Sun. The Ch'in dynasty "ruled by the virtue of Water". The Jupiter cycle of 513 years played a prominent role in Liu Hsin's speculations. In 1123—1122 the Jupiter was in a stellar constellation corresponding to the element fire, and the water planet Mercurius became invisible. Another astrological calculation based on long-term world cycles shows that eight years before the actual victory of Chou Heaven entrusted the Mandate to Chou; this was a year when a new Jupiter cycle of 513 years began¹⁰. The "beginning" of the world in the Han system was 142,109 years before the victory of the Chou, which assigns the proclamation of the Heavenly Mandate to a year when a new cycle of 513 years began. Eberhard has also shown that there existed in Han astronomy a larger world-cycle of 4617 sun years. The year 104 B.C. marked the end of the 31st world-cycle and the beginning of the 32nd. Consequently Han Wu-ti established a new calendar, introduced a new ritual and altogether acted as if an actual new dynasty had been founded. — The importance of similar speculations for the rise of Wang Mang to imperial power is well known and does not have to be mentioned here.

Although the time of Han must be regarded as the formative period for astrological and chronomantic speculation, not a few features from this at first sight strange and abstruse world of cosmological speculation survived into later periods of Chinese history. In my opinion a closer study of the Wu-hsing chih sections of the dynastic histories would be rewarding. They have mostly been read so far by historians of China with the objective of finding records of natural phenomena (droughts, twin and triplet births etc.) but rarely, with the exception of Eberhard, in order to find out more about the ideas on historical change which they embody. It is easy to dismiss all this as superstition but the prominent place accorded to the wu-hsing chapters in the dynastic histories — before rites, ceremonial, bureaucracy, state economy and other more institutional parts of the histories — is clear

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⁹ Wolfram Eberhard, "Der Beginn der Dschou-Zeit. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Han-Zeit", in Sinica vol. 8 (1933) p. 182—188.
¹⁰ Meng-tzu VII B, 38, states that there were over 500 years between Yao and Shun and T'ang of the Yin, and over 500 years between T'ang and King Wen of Chou. This might be influenced by the Jupiter cycle of 513 years and points to a comparatively late date of that passage.
evidence of their importance in the eyes of those who composed the histories. In a later part of this paper we shall try to show that some of these ideas connected with natural phenomena were still current in the 14th century. It is, moreover, obvious that at least the elemental symbolism was not only restricted to the learned class but at the same time an active factor in folk traditions and superstitions. Popular Taoism is full of it, and has influenced rebel ideologies. The Yellow Turbans chose Yellow, the color of the Earth, of Huang-ti, as their distinctive sign. And when the Red Jackets in North China under the Chin in the early 13th century and the Red Turbans in Chekiang about 1350 chose Red, this was certainly not mere fancy but a conscious allusion to the fact that Red (and the element Fire) were the emblem of the Sung dynasty. The color was a program.

Another curious fact might be mentioned here. The element Water (with the connotation Black, North) was assigned to the Mongol Yüan dynasty, of course not by the Mongols themselves (who regarded White as their auspicious color) but by their Chinese court literati under Kublai Khan. If we look at the colors assigned to previous dynasties we find that the only dynasty of any importance associated with the element Water was the Ch'in dynasty. The Ch'in were always regarded as slightly or even strongly suspect and unorthodox by Confucians and it is a possible hypothesis that those Chinese scholars who in the course of their calculations decided on Water as the Yüan element did this in order to disapprove in a very subtle way of their Mongol overlords. It is true that the sequence of elements followed a rational system, but the inclusion or omission of dynasties of the past allowed some manipulation. The orthodox list of elemental correspondences leaves out altogether the Liao dynasty (perhaps because the Liao could not be assigned a place in the chain of legitimate succession). There must have always existed a certain antagonism between conscious manipulation and the rationality of the pseudo-scientific systems of numerology, chronomancy and astrology.

The idea of cyclical returns and of historical changes was also linked to the chia-tzu calendar system. As early as the Han, speculations based on certain

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11 It could also be pointed out that the theory of fen-yeh (correlation between regions of China and certain stellar constellations) was one of these elements. Chinese gazetteers even of the 19th century do not fail to state in the beginning what constellation was associated with the region in the fen-yeh system.
12 The two others are the Liu-Sung dynasty of the Liu-ch‘ao period and the Later Han dynasty of the Wu-tai period. It is perhaps not impossible to discover in early Yüan writings a text showing why just Water was chosen as the element and emblem of the Yüan dynasty.
14 An interesting example for the ambivalence of strange phenomena is given by the Ming author Ch‘i Ch‘ün-ch‘ia in his T‘un-weng sul-p‘i (ed. Ts‘ung-shu chi-ch‘eng) ch. hsia, p. 54—55, where omina under Hui-tsung which were originally considered auspicious are, post eventum, interpreted as freaks of nature and therefore baleful (yao).
cyclical combinations for certain years were current. The Yellow Turban revolt broke out when a new cycle began, in the chia-tzu year 184 A.C. In later phases this cyclical theory was merged with the originally Indian idea of worlds ages (kalpa) but it is seems that the numerological element was superseded by a vague messianism, particularly that of the Maitraya sects. But Chinese scholars continued to speculate about the esoteric meaning of certain calendric cyclical signs, just as these signs played a prominent role in prognostication for personal fates. There exists abundant textual material for this kind of retrospective pseudo-historical interpretation. Just one example might be given here. There was a wide-spread belief that the combination fire-sheep (ting-wei[5]) always marked a major change or revolution (pien)15. Ch'i Chün-chia, a late Ming author, made a statistical analysis and found that out of a total of 27 ting-wei years 19 showed a major change. In his collection of data the end of Chou and the end of Yüan, both in ting-wei years, are the prize items16. From retrospective pseudo-rational explanation there is only a step to prognostication. The idea of calculating future events implies a semi-rational view of history and the existence of certain laws which rule changes in the human world. It ist to be regretted that no systematic study exists on the various methods of prognostication in China as far as political and supra-individual events are concerned. Prognostication is always the reflection of a certain view of history, but there is a long way from the short-term oracle questions of the Shang-Yin ("Will it rain next week? Will the King's child be a boy or girl?") to the more sophisticated and, to our modern minds, more abstruse pseudo-historical predictions of later periods. It must be acknowledged that the great mass of predictions to be found in Chinese texts are normally written post eventum and, even if not, in their majority concern rather imminent events (the death of an emperor, the fall of a dynasty). For the formation of popular ideology and even mass hysteria the genuine historical importance of all kinds of prognostication must not be underestimated. Long-term prediction implying a certain historical Weltanschauung did, however, exist, and it would be interesting to study from this angle a text like the "Chinese Nostradamus" T'ui-pei t'u[6] (or Tui-pei t'u[7]), attributed to the T'ang scholar Li Ch'un-feng17. The fact that the book was banned for centuries shows that at least the Chinese bureaucracy has regarded it as relevant and as a potential danger. Even the compilation of a chronomantic calendar with its short-term predictions in

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15 We have to remind ourselves that our term "revolution" was originally an astronomical and astrological term, referring to the revolution of celestial bodies.  
16 T'un-weng sui-pî ch. hsia, p. 62—63.  
the personal sphere was in the eyes of Chinese governments since the T'ang so important that it became a state monopoly, and a fortiori every long-term political prognostication would have to be regarded as subversive and dangerous.

We mentioned earlier in this paper that the less factual knowledge about figures or events in earlier history, the more we may expect legendary or folk-tale motifs connected with such figures or events. This statement must, however, be modified insofar as we certainly have to distinguish between two types of such motifs: those where the personality itself is an original part of the legend as such and prima facie unhistorical (such as for example the story of Hou-ch'i's miraculous birth and youth, and most of the legends connected with ancient gods, clan-heroes or mythical "emperors"), and those where the historicity of a person is beyond any reasonable doubt and the legendary or folk-tale motifs are an addition or later embellishment. This latter type would include all the stories about miraculous conception or supernatural births and also all the omina we find in the birth stories of founders of dynasties, from Liu Pang on (here again we find the number 72 — he had 72 black moles on his left thigh) right up to Chu Yüan-chang. These supernatural elements, originally confined to persons of importance, heroes and the like, developed later into a literary topos so that even biographies of "normal" persons, officials, monks etc. contain stories about five-colored clouds appearing over the hut where the child was born, sometimes also rationalized into dreams announcing the birth of an unusual child. One might even call this a democratization of legendary motifs.

Folk-tale motifs are detachable, which means they are at the same time attachable, and can be linked to fully historical persons and their life. They are "Wandermotive", not in the sense that they can necessarily be traced back to a specific source from which they have spread, but that they are universally present in the primitive mind of people in many civilizations. Some of these motifs have even found their way into historical compilations like the Shih-chi and account for the charm which distinguishes some of the Shih-chi biographies from the more bureaucratic later biographies. The famous biography of the Lord of Meng-ch'ang in the Shih-chi contains several

18 For Chu Yüan-chang's miraculous birth see the Ming Pen-chi chiao-chu (Commercial Press 1948) p. 1 and the T'ai-tsu shih-lu. — It should be pointed out that Robert Ruhlmann in his article "Traditional Heroes in Chinese Popular Fiction" in The Confucian Persuasion ed. by Arthur F. Wright (Standford, Calif. 1960) p. 155—161, sometimes tends to overstress the popular element in heroic traditions. His remarks however on p. 343 note 76 seem to me to the point: "Writers of historical romances found much material of this kind in the standard Histories."

19 Even in our days we can witness the omnipresence of such "floating" and attachable anecdotal motifs in the popular mind. The same kinds of jokes were told about Hitler in Nazi Germany and about Stalin in the Soviet Union; many jokes about the later years of the old and reportedly sometimes decrepit president of Germany v. Hindenburg are old acquaintances, having been told about the aged Habsburg emperor Franz Joseph one generation before.

20 Hans Bielenstein in his "The Restoration of the Han Dynasty" in BMFEA vol. 26 (1954) p. 41—84 has clearly demonstrated that the more vivid a description in the Hou Han-shu the less reliable the passage is as a factual account.
such motifs, beginning with the birth of the hero (the Oedipus motif combined with that of the originally despised youngster who later rises to fame and prominence). The world-wide motif of the "Magic Flight" is present in the Meng-ch'ang story as it is in the story of Prince Tan of Yen — the flight from the state of Ch'in in both cases. The heroes are assisted by helpful animals (another widespread motif) or, as in Meng-ch'ang's story, by skilful helpers who can act like animals (clearly a later rationalization of the motif)21. Whereas in real folk-tales the region from which the hero (or heroine) flees is the domain of giants, ogers or (this is as it seems the basic meaning) the Land of Death22, in the Shih-chi and Chan-kuo ts'ê it is a real state, that of Ch'in, a state, however, that in popular tradition could easily be associated with ideas concerning the Land of Death from which it is difficult to return. To read the Shih-chi and Chan-kuo ts'ê with a copy of Stith Thomson's Motif-Index at hand is a truly rewarding experience.

The admixture of fictional elements in history evidently decreases from the Han time on and is to a certain extent replaced by topoi and literary clichés, but nevertheless it seems that even in later periods of Chinese history biographies may still contain such elements. Outside history, in fiction pure and proper, we find many examples for "Wandermotive" attached to historical persons, and it can be demonstrated that sometimes whole stories and anecdotes are ascribed to historical, real persons23. This might be due to a tendency in Chinese fiction to pin down persons and events in time and space; even fiction tries to follow historical or rather historiographical patterns.

Returning to historiography proper, 25 years ago I tried to show the persistence of certain preconceived traditional schemes24. Even a superficial glance at the Basic Annals for the Yüan-shih dealing with the last Mongol emperor Shun-ti shows that solar eclipses are usually recorded in connection with disastrous events. These eclipses were in part not observed but calculated; out of seven recorded eclipses between 1346 and 1367, three could

22 A basic comparative study in which also material from Chinese folk-tales is used was Hans Naumann, "Primitiver Totenglaube" in his Primitive Gemeinschaftskultur (Jena 1921) p. 18—60.
23 A Near Eastern and originally Talmudic story appears in Chinese garb in the 14th century, associated with a local mandarin (Herbert Franke, "Der kluge Richter", in Asiatische Studien 1950, p. 55—59). For a similar case of motifs from the Near East in a Yüan play see Renate Nöthen, Das Sha-kou ch'üan-fu (München 1960). Also here the salomonic judge is a real person, living under the Yüan dynasty who was famous for his skill in solving complicated cases. — An interesting example for the focus role of a person to which "floating" motifs are attributed is Hsü Wei [8] (1521—1593), the hero of many facetious anecdotes in popular tradition (Wolftram Eberhard, Tyepn chinesischer Volksmärchen (Helsink 1937) p. 302—351). Cf. also Howard S. Levy, China's Dirtiest Trickster (Arlington, Va. 1970).
not, for astronomical reasons, be observed in China at all, and two more did not take place at the recorded dates. This is because solar eclipses had an ominous meaning in spite of their calculability. Also the astronomical chapters of the Yüan-shih show that for the 35 years of Shun-ti’s reign almost as many celestial phenomena are recorded as for the 73 years from Khubilai Khan’s accession to 1333. In European medieval historiography we find exactly the same phenomenon as in Chinese annals: strange phenomena (comets, shooting stars, earthquakes etc.) occur, according to medieval beliefs, when the harmony (pax) in the world of men is troubled and an unjust ruler (rex iniquus, rex inustus, tyrannus) or a rex inutilis is in power. And, like in China, favorable omen (rich harvests, or plentiful offspring of cattle) are considered as an indication that a rex iustus or imperator felix rules the world. Fortune and misfortune, order and disorder in the human and the natural spheres characterize a “good” or “bad” ruler, like in China. Since the publication of that article many more instances have been adduced to show the interdependence between political historiography and the recording of natural phenomena and it is certain that, for example, an analysis of the various wu-hsing chih of dynastic histories would corroborate this, not only for earlier dynasties but also for what we might term medieval China.

It could also be shown that the topoi connected with a “bad last ruler” which was so ably studied by Granet and others continued to influence historiography at a much later date. Again the Yüan-shih can be adduced to show the persistence of these traditions, in particular the juxta-position of disasters in the empire (famines) and personal extravagance of the ruler. The description of Shun-ti’s pleasurable activities at the court and of his indulgence in Buddhist sexual rites is in each case preceded by the record of disastrous events, a famine and a drought. The insertion of “bad last ruler” topoi into the Basic Annals was made in a tendentious way; events had to be justified post eventum. This is very different from the treatment of the last years of Sung rule. There it is a “bad last minister”, Chia Ssu-tao (1213—1275) who bears the blame and whose picture has been equally distorted by tendentious historians. This attitude of Chinese Sung loyalists could find its justification in a Han text; Tung Chung-shu once stated that “All the good should be ascribed to the prince, all evil to the minister.”

The counterpart of pejorative topoi is to be found in the biographies of “good” servants of the state. There too we find typical constituents of biographies. Looking back at my article of 1950 it seems to me that not enough attention has been paid to the distinction between topoi and literary clichés.

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25 The authoritative work on these medieval concepts is still Ernst Bernheim, Mittelalterliche Zeitanschauungen in ihrem Einfluß auf Politik und Geschichtsschreibung (Tübingen 1918).
26 For example, Hans Bielenstein, An Interpretation of the Portents in the Ts'ien-Han-shu, BMFEA vol. 22 (1950) p. 127—143, and Eberhard’s article quoted in note 1.
28 Ch'un-ch'iu lan-lu (Hangchow 1876) ch. 44, 7b.
When the administration of a model servant has been so successful that "lost things are not picked up on the street", this is a circumscribed way of expressing good management, and a literary cliché. That a "good" person is a precocious child who can speak and write at an early age or, if a future general, plays with weapons, is a topos, comparable to the puer-senex topos in later Latin and Greek literature (and medieval hagiography). A new inventory of biographical topoi should perhaps be made, both for "good" and "bad" persons, and their origin determined, which, in many cases, would lead us back to Han and pre-Han literature. A similar list of topoi could also be drawn up for categories like Buddhist monks, Taoist hermits and other well definable groups of persons. Research into Chinese historical literature has by now long since passed the stage of unquestioning acceptance of all that is written in a text. Perhaps a new stage of historical research could concentrate more on an elucidation of pervasive elements that have influenced historical writing over the ages, and study more deeply the history of concepts that have formed recorded history.