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NOTES ON ISOCOLOMETRY IN EARLY CHINESE ACCOUNTS OF BARBARIANS

by

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In honor of Leonardo Olschki

The equidimensionalism of graphs, that unique feature of the Chinese system of writing, the syntactical structure of the Chinese language with its wondrous terseness always amenable to judicious dilation through the optional use of particles and expletives, and the traditional addiction of Chinese stylists to rhythmic parison, all these make colometry an important adjutory in the textual criticism of Chinese historical sources. A colometrical survey of texts extending over the millenium from Han to Sung, particularly that of shorter essays and of the introductory parts of longer historical accounts where the writers took special pains to array their material, reveals that Chinese historiographers had a tendency to calibrate their statements and align their data in cola of three typical lengths: the minimal, of 16 to 20 characters (henceforth referred to as "M"), the normal, of 21 to 25 graphic units (abbreviated "N"; columns of 22 and 24 characters were distinctly favored), and the oblong, of 26 to 33 characters (abbr. "O"). Closed syntactical units with a low count of characters (less than 16 in number, (abbr. "L") appear to be rare, serving chiefly as necessary complements to bring paragraphs to a desirable "standard" length, and should always be tested as to possible affiliation with dicolic or tricollic periods nearby, or else closely scrutinized as suspected interpolations or *membra disjecta*. Our survey which covered literally hundreds of passages of crucial historiographical importance convinces us that isocolometrical analysis is an almost absolute prerequisite to all formal interpretation and translation of a text.

Colometry and Paragraphing. An exemplary illustration of the value of colometry in attempting to ascertain an author's intention in marshaling his periods may be found in the opening section of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's famous chapter on the Hsiung-nu (*Shih Chi*, 110, to be compared with *Han Shu*, 94 which follows the text of the *Shih Chi* with minor variants). At first glance, the text might well be paragraphed as in De Groot's translation

(*Die Hunnen der vorchristlichen Zeit* [Berlin, 1921], pp. 1-4). We mark in parentheses the number of characters in the Chinese original: 1. The origin of the Hsiung-nu (15). 2. Under various names, they lived in the north since times immemorial, moving about with their flocks (21). 3. Enumeration of animals found in their territory (23). 4. They migrate in search of water and grass, have no walled cities or agricultural settlements, but apportion (grazing) lands. (20). 5. They have no script. Contracts are made verbally (9). 6. Their youth is early trained in riding and the use of the bow against animals (18). 7. A long paragraph describing their strong men as mounted archers, their "natural" mores as herders, huntsmen, and predatory warriors; their weapons, their headlong advances and retreats in raids, their bent on mere gain (62). 8. They know no "propriety". Food and clothing: the best going to the vigorous whom they honor, with remnants to the old and weak who are despised. They marry their fathers' and brothers' widows (51). 9. They have proper names, but no taboo on them; no clan names or cognomina (10). The above divisions are well justified syntactically and suggestions for minor revisions can easily be shrugged off on the ground that most sentence-units in the passage follow one another in loose paratactical order and precise periodization (if at all intended by the author) cannot be objectively determined in view of the paucity of commatic particles and conjunctions. From a colometric point of view, however, the paragraphing, with its haphazard sequence of "L", "M", "N", and "O" cola, becomes immediately suspect. Two or three syntactical units appear to be of the "O" type and our first attempt at re-alignment should be made on the hypothesis that the whole section is composed on that pattern. The hypothesis is substantiated forthwith, as the following table shows (see Plate A for text):

<i>Shih Chi</i> :	30	29	29	27	27	30	32	25	Total: 229
<i>Han Shu</i> :	28	30	29	26	26	30	33	24	Total: 226

Observe further that the first three cola of the *Han Shu* and the last three in both texts yield the same total of characters, 87 in each case, as if an effort had been made of fitting the periods into three columns of 29 characters each; and that the first three periods of the *Shih Chi* have but one supernumerary character above the same total. The two middle periods in both texts are somewhat short, although well within our limits for the "O" pattern of colometric length. Such "catalexis" is normal, but it is interesting to note that paragraph No. 4 contains the only solecistic locution in the entire text: in the *Han Shu* version, following the words "... (youngsters) shoot foxes and hares", instead of "to use as

food" (*yung wei shih*) of the *Shih Chi*, there appear the rather mysteriously elliptical characters *jou shih*, "meat food" or "meat-eating", the Chinese construction being in this case as awkward as the English rendering would suggest. The anacoluthon was noticed by the commentator Yen Shih-ku, who lamely explained: "meaning: 'they have no grains (*mi-su*) and only eat meat (*shih jou*)' ". The *Han Shu* text may well be defective with at least one character missing. A rough paraphrase of the text in the light of its colometric structure follows with sentence-units misplaced by De Groot's punctuation underlined in their proper position:

1. Origin and names under which they lived in the north (30, 28).
2. *They move about with their flocks*; their animals, common or bizarre, are enumerated (29, 30).
3. As nomads, they have no cities and agricultural settlements, but apportion grazing lands; *this, having no writing, they effect by verbal contract* (29, 29).
4. Their boys early start practising riding and the use of the bow, *so that when they reach manhood and are able to draw the bow to the full they all become armed horsemen* (27, 26).
5. Their "natural" mores, in peace or under stress (27, 26).
6. Their weapons; they advance or retreat, bent only on gain, *for they are ignorant of propriety and ethical principles*. (30, 30).
7. Food and clothing, with preference shown to the vigorous, and the aged and the weak held in low esteem (32, 33).
8. Marriage customs; *in their undeveloped onomasticon they use no ritual taboo on names* (one of the Chinese preventives against the abomination of incest (25, 24)).

This division of the text not only eliminates the jerkiness of "L" sentences that appear interspersed in the former paragraphing, but ties every period together in one cogent and well-articulated statement. Ssu-ma Ch'ien is undoubtedly utilizing here archival material, much of it possibly verbatim, yet manages to weld it into a rhetorically effective and logically developed whole.

Pattern and Patchwork. Some seven centuries after Ssu-ma Ch'ien, we find the historiographers of the T'ang dynasty describing, somewhat in the same manner, the customs of the T'u-chüeh Turks, another great nomadic confederacy threatening China from the North, in chapters or sections of chapters specially devoted to them (*Chou Shu*, 50, *Sui Shu*, 84, *Pei Shih*, 99). The precise date of the compilation of each of these important sources and their filiation constitute one of the most mooted problems in Chinese historiography. It is almost impossible to establish with certainty which of them quotes which, except in the case of fairly obvious interpolations by later editors of passages from the *Pei Shih* to fill in lacunae in the *Chou Shu*. Colometric evidence leads us to be-

lieve, on the other hand, that some of the repetitions, redundancies, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the three accounts (henceforth to be referred to as C, S, and P) might be explained on the supposition that all their compilers had access to archival material of diverse character and provenience, supplied perhaps from different governmental bureaus and on stationery of different dimensions, and that the historians honestly attempted to incorporate the most significant data contained in the documents, only occasionally attempting to adjust the wording stylistically to their own chosen colometric pattern. It may well have been that they trusted their readers, who were well versed in these bureaucratic details, to identify easily the provenience of some contradictory or repetitious passage by the indelible stamp of its standard stationery length. Thus P and C show evidence of being partial to one source of information on T'u-chüeh customs written in the "O" tradition. Observe, for instance:

1. Paragraph comparing the titles of the Turkish royal pair, qaghan and qaghatun, to those of rulers of the ancient Hsiung-nu. P and C: 29. Not in S. 2. List of titles of dignitaries. C 31, P 29 (so also S). 3. Description of the rite of the mock-strangling of a newly elevated ruler. C: 25, 32, 26, total 83; P: 24 + 32 + 26 = 82; not in S. 4. Reckoning by tallies and use of arrows for credentials. C and P : 27. The P version of this paragraph will be discussed later. 5. Criminal code: P. 79 *vs.* C 53, presumably 3 *vs.* 2 columns of 26 characters each. The single supernumerary may well have been the initial "ch'i", "their", made necessary in the larger context of the historical work. The S version has 44 (dicolic 22?). 6. Description of the royal holy places. C: 29 + 24 + 28 = 83; P : 28 + 24 + 27 = 79. Not in S. On that text, see Peliot, *T'oung Pao* (1928-29), 26, 212-216.

By contrast, we have:

1. A paragraph comparing the mores of the Turks with those of the Hsiung-nu in terms reminiscent of the *Shih Chi* introduction (nomadism, food, clothing, despising the aged and honoring the vigorous, shameless ignorance of "propriety"). P 46 (two perfect cola of "N" 23). C 38 (imperfect dicolic "M" 19) following the P sequence, but omitting in it 9 characters, 8 of them on food and clothing, and adding at the end a stylistically required commatic *yeh* which P must have dropped to insure the perfection of its dicolon. S reshuffles the elements of the paragraph, omits a dozen characters, including a reference to the Hsiung-nu and comes up with a period of 34, arranged in a somewhat asymmetrical dicolon of 18 + 16. (See Plate B). No colometric justification for the different length of the three versions can be found in their contexts *infra* or *supra*.

2. Significantly tagged at the very end of its description of Turkish customs, C has an “M” colon of 16 characters stating that the written characters of the Turks (*shu tzü*) resemble those of the Hu, but that they have no knowledge of calendrical reckoning (see Plate C). The treatment of this piece of information from an “M” source is exceedingly interesting in P: there it is coupled with an “M” dicolon of 36 characters (forming 52 in all, presumably an “O” dicolon) dealing with Turkish men’s and women’s games, their drinking, worship of spirits and belief in shamans, “much in the same manner as that of the Hsiung-nu”. Instead of the sentence on writing, S has an “L” 10 on the sacrifice of sheep and horses to Heaven in the fifth month and 38 characters corresponding to the 36 of P, but with a better parisonic reading. Its total is 48, a dicolon of “N” 24. It is obvious that S quotes correctly the original “N” source. P attempted, rather clumsily, to telescope the unwonted 16 into the original “N” 48 by substituting the 16 for S’s initial “L” 10 which it could justifiably discard for it had already mentioned a fifth month sacrifice in its “O” section on “royal sacred places” (see above). The clues are unmistakable: the cautious reserve of C in leaving the 16 isolated and thus identifying it as originating in “M” environment, the perfect isocolometry of S stamping the “games and spirits” passage as being of “N” type, and the telltale parisonic slip in P. (Circled characters on Plate C illustrate the lack of balance in P.).

3. The statement “their written characters resemble (those of) the Hu” is contradicted in P and S by a phrase of three characters (*wu wên tzü*) as a last element in an “L” 9: “They excel in horse-riding and archery and are innately ruthless and cruel; they have no script”. In P this precedes the “O” 27 passage on “reckoning by tallies and the use of arrows for credentials” (also found in C), while in S the “L” 9 forms the first half of an “N” 21 reading “. . . (they have no script) (9) but make notches on wood for credentials (4); they wait for the moon to be about full and forthwith carry out their predatory raids” (8). These last 8 characters are put by P at the end of the “O” 27 item, the entire sequence being thus 9.27.8, or a total of 44 (dicolic “N” 22). Plate D attempts to show how P broke up the “N” 21 sequence, blending the “N” information with that of the “O” source.

The three chapters on the T’u-chüeh contain at least fourteen similar cases involving the juxtaposition of “M”, “N”, and “O” cola. The most fascinating one is that of the colometry of the three versions of the legend of the lupine origin of the Turks. The patchwork of sources there being most intricate and the colometric solution of the filiation of the texts extremely complicated—this major problem in the prehistory of the Turks can only be alluded to within the scope of these brief notes.

PLATE A *Shih Chi* text (significant *Han Shu* variants below)

1. 匈	1. 隨	1. 逐	1. 兒	1. 其	1. 其	1. 自	1. 父
2. 奴	2. 畜	2. 水	2. 能	2. 俗	2. 長	2. 君	2. 死
3. 其	3. 牧	3. 草	3. 騎	3. 寬	3. 兵	3. 王	3. 妻
4. 先	4. 而	4. 遷	4. 羊	4. 則	4. 則	4. 以	4. 其
5. 祖	5. 轉	5. 徙	5. 引	5. 隨	5. 弓	5. 下	5. 後
6. 夏	6. 移	6. 毋	6. 弓	6. 畜	6. 矢	6. 咸	6. 母
7. 后	7. 其	7. 城	7. 射	7. 因	7. 短	7. 食	7. 兄
8. 氏	8. 畜	8. 郭	8. 鳥	8. 射	8. 兵	8. 畜	8. 弟
9. 之	9. 之	9. 常	9. 鼠	9. 獵	9. 則	9. 肉	9. 死
10. 苗	10. 所	10. 處	10. 少	10. 禽	10. 刀	10. 衣	10. 皆
11. 裔	11. 多	11. 耕	11. 長	11. 獸	11. 鋌	11. 其	11. 取
12. 也	12. 則	12. 田	12. 則	12. 爲	12. 利	12. 皮	12. 其
13. 曰	13. 馬	13. 之	13. 射	13. 生	13. 則	13. 革	13. 妻
14. 淳	14. 牛	14. 業	14. 狐	14. 業	14. 進	14. 被	14. 妻
15. 維	15. 羊	15. 然	15. 兔	15. 急	15. 不	15. 旃	15. 之
16. 唐	16. 其	16. 亦	16. 用	16. 則	16. 利	16. 裘	16. 其
17. 虞	17. 奇	17. 各	17. 爲	17. 人	17. 則	17. 壯	17. 俗
18. 以	18. 畜	18. 有	18. 食	18. 習	18. 退	18. 者	18. 有
19. 上	19. 則	19. 分	19. 士	19. 戰	19. 不	19. 食	19. 名
20. 有	20. 橐	20. 地	20. 力	20. 攻	20. 羞	20. 肥	20. 不
21. 山	21. 駝	21. 毋	21. 能	21. 以	21. 遁	21. 美	21. 諱
22. 戎	22. 驢	22. 文	22. 彎	22. 侵	22. 走	22. 老	22. 而
23. 獫	23. 羸	23. 書	23. 弓	23. 伐	23. 苟	23. 者	23. 無
24. 狁	24. 馱	24. 以	24. 盡	24. 其	24. 利	24. 食	24. 姓
25. 葷	25. 馱	25. 言	25. 爲	25. 天	25. 所	25. 其	25. 字
26. 粥	26. 駒	26. 語	26. 甲	26. 性	26. 在	26. 餘	
27. 居	27. 駱	27. 爲	27. 騎	27. 也	27. 不	27. 貴	
28. 於	28. 驪	28. 約			28. 知	28. 壯	
29. 北	29. 驥	29. 束			29. 禮	29. 健	
30. 蠻					30. 義	30. 賤	
						31. 老	
						32. 弱	

5, 12. ○	1 + : 車	Ditto	16-18: 肉食	7. ○	Ditto	23 + : 飲	24. ○
30. 邊				8. 田			

PLATE B

P		S		C	
1. 其	24. 食	1. 其		1. 其	○
2. 俗	25. 肉	2. 俗		2. 俗	○
3. 被	26. 飲	3. 畜	19. 被	3. 被	○
4. 髮	27. 酪	4. 牧	20. 髮	4. 髮	○
5. 左	28. 身	5. 爲	21. 左	5. 左	○
6. 衽、	29. 衣	6. 事、	22. 衽	6. 衽	○
7. 穹	30. 裘	7. 隨	23. 食	7. 穹	○
8. 廬	31. 褐	8. 逐	24. 肉	8. 廬	○
9. 氊	32. 賤	9. 水	25. 飲	9. 氊	23. 賤
10. 帳、	33. 老	10. 草、	26. 酪	10. 帳	24. 老
11. 隨	34. 貴	11. 不	27. 身	11. 隨	25. 貴
12. 逐	35. 壯	12. 恒	28. 衣	○	26. 壯
13. 水	36. 寡	13. 厥	29. 裘	12. 水	27. 寡
14. 艸	37. 廉	14. 處、	30. 褐	13. 草	28. 廉
15. 遷	38. 恥	15. 穹	31. 賤	14. 遷	29. 恥
16. 徙	39. 無	16. 廬	32. 老	15. 徙	30. 無
17. 以	40. 禮	17. 氊	33. 貴	16. 以	31. 禮
18. 畜	41. 義	18. 帳	34. 壯	17. 畜	32. 義
19. 牧	42. 猶			18. 牧	33. 猶
20. 射	43. 古			19. 射	34. 古
21. 獵	44. 之			20. 獵	35. 之
22. 爲	45. 匈			21. 爲	36. 匈
23. 事	46. 奴			22. 務	37. 奴
					38. 也

PLATE C

S		(C) P	
1. 五	25. 歌	1. 其	31. 歌
2. 月	26. 呼	2. 書	32. 呼
3. 中	27. 相	3. 字	33. 相
4. 多	28. 對	4. 類	34. 對
5. 殺	29. 敬	5. 胡	35. 敬
6. 羊	30. 鬼	6. 而	36. 鬼
7. 馬	31. 神	7. 不	37. 神
8. 以	32. 信	8. 知	38. 信
9. 祭	33. 巫	9. 年	39. 巫
10. 天	34. 覲	10. 曆	○
11. 男	35. 重	11. 唯	16. 男
12. 子	36. 兵	12. 以	17. 子
13. 好	37. 死	13. 艸	20. 好
14. 擣	38. 而	14. 青	21. 擣
15. 蒲	39. 恥	15. 爲	22. 蒲
16. 女	40. 病	16. 記	23. 女
17. 子	41. 終		24. 子
18. 踏	42. 大		24. 踏
19. 鞠	43. 抵		25. 鞠
20. 飲	44. 與		26. 飲
21. 馬	45. 匈		27. 馬
22. 酪	46. 奴		28. 酪
23. 取	47. 同		29. 取
24. 醉	48. 俗		30. 醉
			40. 重
			41. 兵
			42. 死
			○
			43. 恥
			44. 病
			45. 終
			46. 大
			47. 抵
			48. 與
			49. 匈
			50. 奴
			51. 同
			52. 俗

PLATE D

S	P	P = C	P
		(10) I. 其	(24) 15. 并
1. 善	I. 善	(11) 2. 徵	(25) 16. 一
2. 騎	2. 騎	(12) 3. 發	(26) 17. 金
3. 射	3. 射	(13) 4. 兵	(27) 18. 鏃
4. 性	4. 性	(14) 5. 馬	(28) 19. 箭
5. 殘	5. 殘	(15) 6. 及	(29) 20. 蠟
6. 忍	6. 忍	(16) 7. 諸	(30) 21. 封
7. 無	7. 無	(17) 8. 稅	(31) 22. 印
8. 文	8. 文	(18) 9. 雜	(32) 23. 之
9. 字	9. 字	(19) 10. 畜	(33) 24. 以
10. 刻	.....(20) 11. 刻	(34) 25. 爲	.....
11. 木	.....(21) 12. 木	(35) 26. 信	.....
12. 爲	.....(22) 13. 爲	(36) 27. 契	.....
13. 契	.....(23) 14. 數	.....↑	.....
14. 候			(37) 10. 候
15. 月			(38) 11. 月
16. 將			(39) 12. 將
17. 滿			(40) 13. 滿
18. 輒			(41) 14. 轉
19. 爲			(42) 15. 爲
20. 寇			(43) 16. 寇
21. 抄			(44) 17. 抄