

On this appointed day the mandarins attended at the palace with bows and arrows. When the eclipse commenced, the Emperor himself beat on the drum of thunder to give the alarm; and at the same time the mandarins let fly their arrows towards the sky to aid the eclipsed body. Gaubil quotes these particulars from the ancient Book of Rites, and the principals are announced in the Tcheou-li. After this, the discontent that would be caused by an eclipse not taking place at the time predicted may be imagined; and likewise if one suddenly appeared without being predicted. In the first case, the whole ceremonial was found to have been uselessly prepared; and the desperate efforts which, in consequence of the want of preparation, were made in the second case, inevitably produced a disorderly scene compromising to the imperial majesty. Such errors, although so easily made, placed the poor astronomers in danger of losing their goods, their office, their honor, and sometimes their life.

Such a disgrace happened in the year 721 of our era: the Emperor Hiouen-Tsong sent for a bonze Chinese, called Y-Hang, renowned for his knowledge of astronomy. After having shown himself very learned, he had the misfortune to predict two eclipses of the sun, which were ordered to be observed throughout the whole Empire. But no one saw anywhere on the appointed days any trace of an eclipse, although the sky was almost everywhere serene. To clear himself he published a work, in which he pretended that his calculation was exact, but that heaven had changed its rules of movement—doubtless in consideration of the high virtues of the Emperor. Thanks to his reputation, otherwise deserved—perhaps, also, to his flattery—he was pardoned.

The same ideas on the importance and signification of the moon and sun which existed with the Chinese more than four thousand years ago, remain at the present day, and are still powerful, causing the same demands; but they have become less perilous for astronomers, as these phenomena are now predicted several years in advance, with a mathematical certainty, in the great ephemerides of Europe and America, which can easily be procured.