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<b>Irina Popova</b>	A Dunhuang Document on the Division of Property from the Serindia Fund of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS	4
<b>Peter Zieme</b>	Fragments of the Old Uighur <i>Maitrisimit nom bitig</i> in St. Petersburg, Helsinki, and Berlin	14
<b>Olga Chunakova</b>	Pahlavi Epistolary Formulae	32
<b>Aliy Kolesnikov</b>	The Zoroastrian Manuscript in the Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS (Short Reference and Structure)	38
<b>Vladimir Ivanov</b>	The Exegesis of Kṣemarāja on the <i>Vijñānabhairava-tantra</i> : Observations on the Śiva-Devī Tantric Dialogue	48
<b>Evgenii Kychanov</b>	Tangut Documents from Khara-Khoto concerning Loans of Grain (Translated and Edited by Kirill Solonin)	57
<b>Kirill Alekseev, Anna Turanskaya, Natalia Yampolskaya</b>	The First Mongolian Manuscript in Germany Reconsidered	67
<b>Tatiana Pang</b>	A Manchu-Mongolian Diploma Given to the Wife of a Mongolian Nobleman	78
<b>Hartmut Walravens</b>	Omins in Celestial Phenomena. On a Manchu Manuscript	87
<b>Karine Marandjian</b>	New Acquisition of the Japanese Manuscript and Wood-block Printed Books Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS	98
Reviews		
	<i>The Secret History of the Mongols. A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century</i> . Translated with a Historical and Philological Commentary by Igor de Rachewiltz. Volume 3 (Supplement), by <b>Natalia Yakhontova</b>	108
	Oldenburg S.F. <i>Etiudy o liudiah nauki</i> [Sketches of men of science], by <b>Helen Ostrovskaya</b>	110
	“Novye zakony” tangutskogo gosudarstva (pervaia chetvert’ XIII veka). <i>Izdanie teksta i perevod s tangutskogo, vvedenie i kommentarij E.I. Kychanova</i> [“New Laws” of the Tangut State (the first half of the 13th century). Publication of the text and translation from the Tangut language, introduction and commentary by E.I. Kychanov], by <b>Nie Hongyin</b>	116

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Hartmut Walravens

**Omens in Celestial Phenomena.  
On a Manchu Manuscript**

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*Abstract:* In ancient times the peoples of Central Asia and China considered natural phenomena a reaction of the Heaven to their deeds. The article introduces the unique Manchu manuscript from the Gest Library, Princeton University, which deals with the interpretation of celestial signs. Since the manuscript is written entirely in Manchu, similar Chinese texts on solar and lunar omens are presented as well.

*Key words:* Manchu manuscript, celestial phenomena, Qianlong, Princeton University

The Manchus—a Tungus people that gave their name to Manchuria—became known through their conquest of China, which they ruled for about 250 years. They quickly adopted Chinese culture but also created a sizeable literature in their own language. A large part of this consists of translations from Chinese but there are a number of original works; furthermore, the Manchus developed a system of dual administration which stipulated that official documents be kept in both Manchu and Chinese.

The Manchus' religion was shamanistic; but they readily adopted Confucian, Buddhist, and even Christian beliefs as is also proved by the existing literature. There is a unique Manchu manuscript which deals with the interpretation of celestial phenomena: in many cultures uncommon signs in the skies—such as eclipses and haloes—are considered meaningful to the life of the people. In China this was not merely a matter of personal belief or superstition—but part of the official view: the emperor was considered a son of Heaven, and therefore any celestial signs would express heaven's approval of or displeasure with the government and the situation in the country aptly called in Chinese *tianxia* “under heaven” 天下.

From this point of view the manuscript in question could be particularly relevant. However, only preliminary information can be given on its contents as the subject does not seem to have been studied much so far, and more basic research is required. This may be partly due to the fact that the omnia are

astronomical, or sometimes meteorological, phenomena, and sinologists rarely have expertise in those fields.

It may be pointed out that the views expressed in the manuscript—superstition from the scientific point of view—were not alien to Europe. For example, Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), an outstanding astronomer and a staunch Christian believer, was also known as a capable astrologer. He followed the line of Melanchthon who argued that the Lord’s actions were to be seen in nature, and most clearly—i.e., least obscurely—in the skies; as humans were an integral part of nature, it seemed obvious that the Lord’s actions as seen in Heaven would be applicable to man. Luther, by the way, was opposed to Melanchthon’s view.

The manuscript in question, in the possession of the Gest Library, Princeton University, is completely in Manchu and consists of 142 paragraphs, accompanied by coloured drawings. One, sometimes two, paragraphs describe a celestial phenomenon which is illustrated and then given an interpretation which usually refers to military actions, the government of the empire and the ruler himself. In a number of cases a timeline is provided within which the prognosticated events would happen.

There is no title; the one assigned by the librarians is *Manwen riyue xingchen zhan* 滿文日月星震占. The text is written in a neat hand; unfortunately, only a reduced black and white reproduction is currently available which leaves several words unintelligible.

The manuscript does not seem to have been described before—it is neither mentioned in Princeton catalogues of rare and old Chinese books<sup>1</sup> nor listed in the union list of Manchu books in the United States.<sup>2</sup> It is also not listed in the union catalogue of books *WorldCat*, which includes a large number of items in Chinese and Manchu.

There is no information whatsoever pointing to the author, or to a Chinese work from which this text might have been translated. The book is not dated. Reference is, however, made in the text to events of the “45th year” which must refer to the Qianlong reign as the year 1724 is also mentioned earlier. This means that the manuscript has to have been written after 1780 (the 45th year of that long reign).

Let us look at the contents of the manuscript:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Not in the rare books catalogue by QU WANLI 1975, nor in the catalogue of other old Chinese books by CHANG BIDE 1990.

<sup>2</sup> WALRAVENS 1976, 551–613.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Martin Hejdra for kindly furnishing me with a scan of 2 pages of the ms. In the meantime the Gest Library has placed a splendid electronic version of the whole manuscript in full colour on their website.

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1

*Šun be tugi sukdun hontoholome dalici amba cooha bi tanggū inenggi be dulerakū bahafi sembi*

When clouds and vapours cover half of the sun, that means a large army. Before one hundred days are over, this will happen.

2

*Šun be dobori tucifi amba jiyanggiyūn cooha aššambi*

When the sun rises during the night, a great general will move his army.

3

*Šun-i uju be hiyahame jeci gurun booi jiyanggiyūn facuhūrambi*

When the sun is eclipsed crosswise, the empire's generals will be in confusion.

4

*Šun mukdefi tuhefi. geli dahime mukdefi tuheci sain cooha yabuci taifin gurun boode oci facuhūn akū*

When the sun after sunset sets again, the military campaigns will be fortuitous and the empire will enjoy peace without break.

5

*Šun wargi de tucifi dergi de tuhere julergi ci tucifi amargi de tuhede oci abka-i fejergi cooha dekdembi*

When the sun, risen in the West, sets in the East or rises in the South and sets in the North, troops will be raised in the empire.

6

*Šun de fulahūn šurgin tuwa-i adali oci abkai fejergi amba facuhūn suwayan boco oci ho fei de sain niowanggiyan boco oci cooha bi šanggiyan boco sahaliyan boco oci ejen de nimeku bi juwe aniya be dulemburakū bahafi sembi*

When there is a light red humid haze like fire with the sun, then great confusion will arise in the empire; when the colour is yellow it will be good in Hofei; when the colour is green, there will be an army; when the colour is white, the ruler will fall ill.

7

*Šun-i dolo sahaliyan tongki emke bici edun aga eherembi juwe oci edun akū ilan bici aga akū duin oci hiya sunja bici amba facuhūn geli henduhengge emke amban bucehebi juwe ejen buyen de dosimbi ilan dorgi facuhūn duin cooha facuhūn sunja ci wesihun ejen de amba facuhūn*

When there is a black dot in the sun, then wind and rain will be bad; when there are two dots, there will be no wind; three dots, no rain; four, then drought; five, then great unrest; it may also mean: one, an official will die;

two, the ruler will indulge in vices; three, unrest inside [the country]; four, military uproar; five, great confusion with the supreme ruler.

**8**

*Šun tucire de elden šor šar seme horonggo kisungge oci ejen-i fafun cara ohobi ergen ulhiyen ebereme kūbulimbi*

When with sunrise the rays roar with horrendous noise, then the laws of the ruler will be overturned and the life energy gradually decreases and changes. (Pl. 1)

**9**

*Šun tucire buraki adali fosokongge gemu suwayan oci abkai fejergi de amba facuhūn*

When with sunrise everything is yellow like scattered dust, then there will be great unrest in the empire.

**10**

*Šun buruhun niyalmai helme be saburakū oci erun koro-i baita bi jai geli amba muke bi emu aniya be tucirakū acanambi*

When the sun is blurred and one does not see the shadow of a man, there will be punishments and fines. Also there will be a great flood. This will happen within a year.

**11**

*Šun teni tucire de fason tuwai adali šor seme goro fošoci ejen de juwe aniya amba hiya*

When the sun has just risen and the rays gleam brilliantly into the far distance like fire, then there will be a great drought with the ruler—for two years.

**16**

*Šun-i boco fundehun oci neneme gidabumbi amala afaci ombi*

When the colour of the sun is frosty, there will be first suppression but then an attack.

**17**

*Šun-i uju de giltaršame oci dergi jiyanggiyūn dahame jimbi sain sabi*

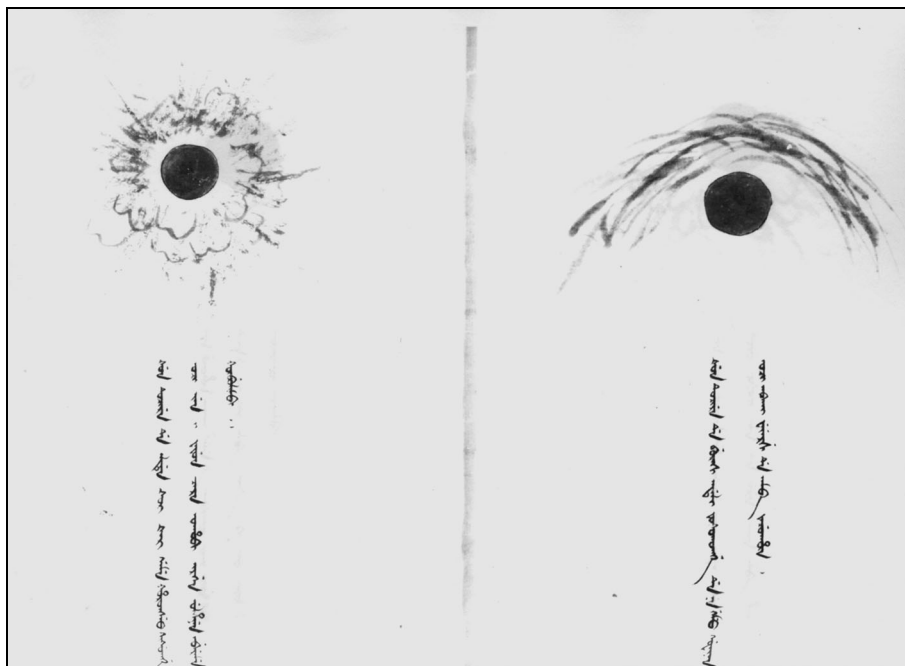
When the sun shines intensely above, then it is a good omen. A high general will come obediently.

**18**

*Šun-i dulimbade niowanggiyan sukduh hiyahame ulaci abkai fejergi ambula facuhūn*

When green vapours pass on crosswise in the middle of the sun, then there will be great confusion in the empire.

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**19**

*Šun-i dulimbade šaraci ejen de sain sabi baita bi emu aniya be dulemburakū bahafi sambi*

When the middle of the sun turns white, it is a good omen for the ruler. It will happen within a year.

**20**

*Šun-i boco biya biyahūn emu hontoho niowanggiyan emu hontoho suwayan oci hūlha-i cooha isinjimbi*

When the colour of the sun turns pale like the moon and one half green and one half yellow, an enemy army will intrude.

**21**

*Šun de duin sika-i adali salu bici cooha ambula etembi*

When the sun has four goatees like tassels of a cap, the armies will be greatly victorious.

**24**

*Šun be šanggiyan niolmon<sup>4</sup> gocici abkai fejergi duin dere-i irgen de geri nimeku bi*

<sup>4</sup> *niolmon*—a kind of moss, stands here for *nioron*—rainbow.

When the sun spans a white rainbow, the people of all four directions of the empire will suffer from epidemics and sickness.

**25**

*Šun-i dalbade jung lakiyaha niyalmai deduhe adali oci cooha kokirambi ninju inenggi be dulemburakū bahafi sambi*

When there is a bell at one side of the sun and something like a sleeping man, troops will have a damaging influence. This will happen within 60 days.

**28**

*Šun-i dulimbade niowanggiyan sukdu latunaci abkai dulimba ulimbi emu aniya dorgi de urunakū bahafi sambi*

When there is green vapour in the middle of the sun, heaven accepts offerings. This will happen within a year.

**29**

*Šun de bisire gasha de bici ambula hiya-i jobolon bi gasha[n] bi*

When there is a bird in the sun, there will be a great drought and major trouble.

**30**

*Šun-i dulimbade niowanggiyan sukdu bici dehi inenggi be dulenderakū hūlha holo ambula facuhūrambi*

When there is green vapour in the sun, enemies will create much mischief within 40 days. (Pl. 2)

**31**

*Šun-i fejergi de suwayan sukdu bifi wesihun uhuci gurun de amba urgun bi saisa urse tucimbi*

When there is yellow vapour below the sun and it is covered above, there will be great joy in the empire and capable men will arise.

**32**

*Šun biyai dolo dosici uyunju inenggi dulemburakū amba cooha dekdembi tuwai jobolon inu bi amba jiyanggiyūn de ehe*

When the sun rises in the moon, a large army will arise within 90 days. There will be a great fire and the great general will be in trouble.

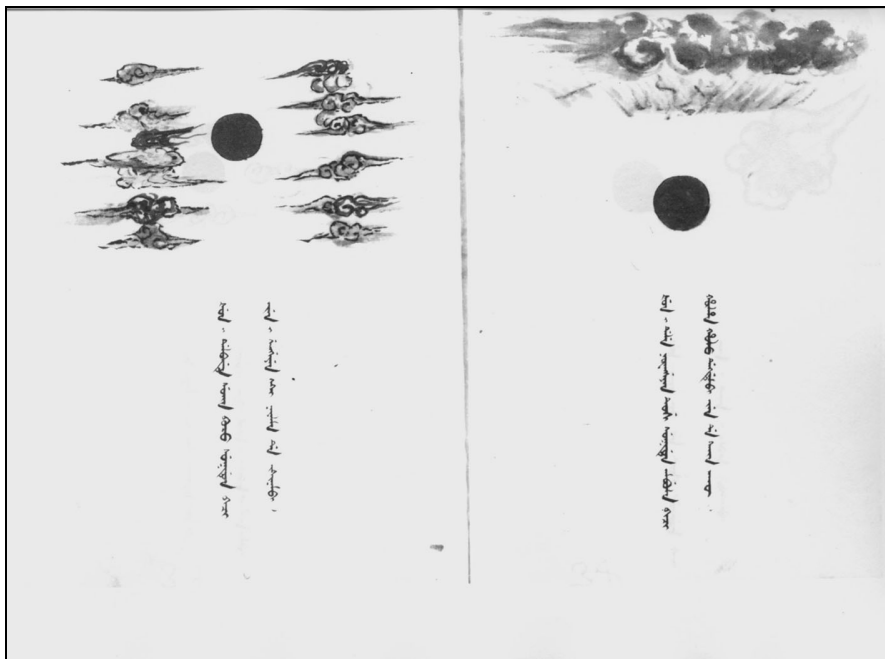
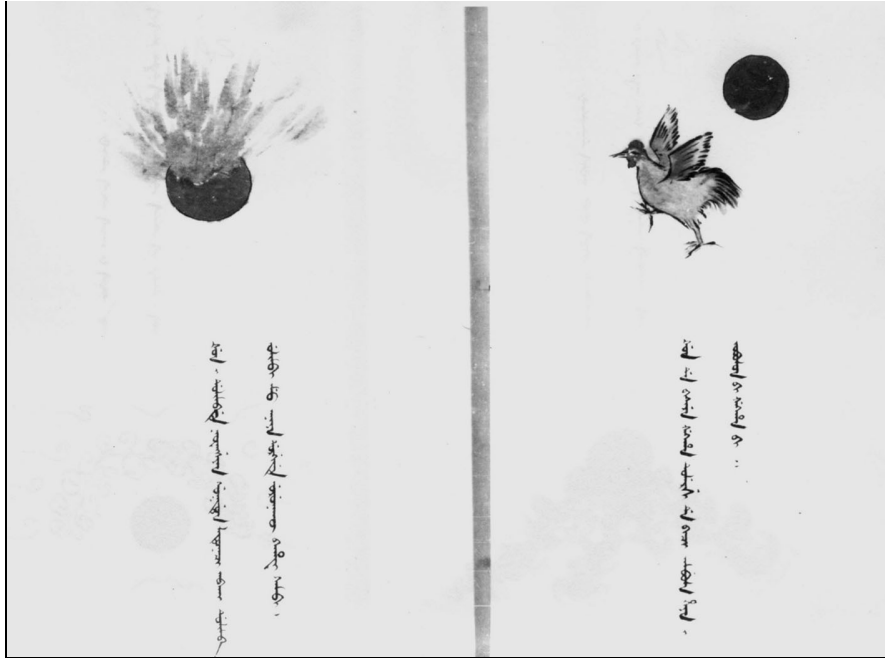
**33**

*Šun-i duin dalbade niowanggiyan sahaliyan šanggiyan sukdu bici ejen-i cooha de nimeku bi*

When there is green, black and white haze on the four sides of the sun, the army of the ruler will suffer damage.

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38

*Šun-i dalbade sunja boco sukduŋ bici ejen-i genggiyen kesi niyalma de is-inambi*

When there is multi-coloured haze on the side of the sun, the brilliant graciousness of the ruler will reach the people. (Pl. 3)

39

*Šun-i dele niowanggiyan tugi sukduŋ ambula bici hūlha holo dekdembi ejen de sain akū*

When there is plenty of green cloud mist above the sun, enemies will arise and the ruler will not fare well.

Celestial phenomena are discussed in Chinese literature in a number of places:

– in the astronomical chapters of the annals which have been published according to dynasties for the last 2000 years.<sup>5</sup> Prof. Ho's translations show that celestial phenomena are carefully described and interpreted. In addition, there are historical tables recording such signs (often correlating them with historical events). Here is an example from the ample material:

“A *yün* 暈 is a vapour which forms a complete circle around the sun, red inside and blue-green outside. When the sun has such a *yün* halo, it symbolises the tents of an army. This appearance encircles the sun with a ring of even thickness and indicates that the strengths of the two armies are evenly matched. In time of peace it means that the emperor is losing his grip and that there will be many revolts among the people. The presence of all of the five colours in the *yün* foretells happiness, but the absence of one or more of them means that there will be anxiety.”<sup>6</sup>

– in encyclopedias and similar works.<sup>7</sup>

– in the Buddhist canon, the Tripitaka.<sup>8</sup>

– in astronomical and astrological treatises. Joseph Needham, in his *Science and Civilisation*, vol. 3, refers to a manuscript at Cambridge University

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<sup>5</sup> HO PENG YOKE 1966.

<sup>6</sup> HO PENG YOKE 1966, 143.

<sup>7</sup> *Tushu jicheng*, shuzhengdian 庶徵典, j. 102, only gives instances of lights phenomena, no interpretation or prognostications. Edouard Biot focuses only on “chaleur et froids de longue durée”—see: BIOT 1849. According to Giles' Index to the *Tushu jicheng*, shuzhengdian 庶徵典 j. 18–24 (日異部) deal with solar phenomena and also give interpretations of them.

<sup>8</sup> In the sutra *Yuezang jing* 月藏經, translated into Chinese in 556, 7 apocalyptic events like epidemics, conquest by enemy troops, civil wars, uncommon stars (asteroids, comets), sun and moon eclipses, unseasonal tempests, floods and droughts are described. Also the sun emitting white or green light, respectively, is mentioned.

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Library, *Tian-yuan yuli xiangyi fu* 天元玉曆祥異賦 of 1425, by ZHU Gaozhi 朱高熾, the Ming emperor.<sup>9</sup> A Korean text of similar nature was examined by Hermann Bohner.<sup>10</sup> The latter bears some resemblance to the Manchu text, e.g.:

p. 36: “Bottom of the sun red, the army of that party flees. Bottom of the sun yellow, great joy.”

p. 37: “Haze like arrows shot down from the sun: the army marches off for three autumns.”

p. 38: “Red rainbow from below straight upwards: the empire experiences mourning and chaos, the country perishes; white rainbow and haze: disloyal vassals plot, and their wishes are fulfilled.”

– reports on important events also often refer to simultaneous celestial phenomena, e.g., regarding Nurhaci:

“On a date corresponding to November 24, 1612, on the eve of Nurhaci’s campaign against the Ula tribe, ‘two heavenly white and blue vapours appeared’ (*abkai šanggiyan lamun siren lasha gociha bihe*). Interestingly enough, this brief annotation in the *Jiu Manzhou dang* has been noteworthy ‘embellished’ in subsequent works—for example in the well-known *Kaiguo fanglue* where we read that ‘on the side of the sunrise white and blue vapours arose, pointing to the northern side of Ula City’ (*Šun dekdere ergide šanyan lamun siren sumafi, Ulai hoton-i amargi teisu hadaha be sabufi*). The reference to Ula city is a later ‘interpretation’ of this phenomenon, which is already found in the ‘Manchu Veritable Records’.”<sup>11</sup>

A multitude of omens is listed in the *Kaiyuan zhan jing* 開元占經<sup>12</sup> *Qutanxida zhuan* 瞿曇悉達 which, unfortunately is not available to me at the moment; the book is ascribed to Qutanxida. Therefore I quote some examples from a list of omens of the moon which closely parallel the sun omens described in the manuscript; the list was compiled by Wolfram Eberhard and is part of the Eberhard file (German emigré collection) of the State University of New York at Albany.

From juan 5:

“When the moon turns blue, there will be hunger and misery; when it turns red, quarrel and war, when it turns yellow, there will be virtue and

<sup>9</sup> NEEDHAM 1959, pl. LXX.

<sup>10</sup> BOHNER 1936, 33–42. On the *Guangui jiyao* 管規輯要, see preface by FAN Wencheng 范文程 1653 (Korean ed.).

<sup>11</sup> STARY 2013, 263.

<sup>12</sup> A modern edition was produced by CHANG BINGYI, 2006. 2 vols.

joy, when it turns white there will be drought and mourning, when it turns black, there will be flooding, and half the population will perish.

When the moon is large and without brilliance, the country does not have a ruler, the population has no peace, and there will be war.

When the rabbit and the toad are not to be seen in the moon, there will be no officials in the country.

When there is something black in the moon, like a peach or a plum, then there is a subject who eclipses the emperor in holiness.

When feudal lords plot a rebellion, the moon will develop claws and teeth.

When the moon is small and broad at its first appearance, there will be a flood during that month.

When the moon is seen during daytime, it will surely be the country's downfall.

When the moon rises and sets again, there will be unrest in the country."

From juan 12:

"When the moon shows earrings and headgear, the emperor will be full of joy, or there will be a strong wind.

When the moon has 2 earrings there will be rain for 10 days; 3 earrings, the country will have joy; 4, the death of a (sovereign) mistress. Or, a ruler or feudal lords will be put up.

When the moon shows the same brilliance as Jupiter, there will be hunger and misdemeanour.

When the moon swallows Jupiter, the country will perish within 12 years."

From juan 15:

"When the moon has a halo and there is no major rain or strong wind within 7 days, wars will start and attacks on ground.

When the moon has a halo which is red and resplendent, there will be war and one town will surrender."

From juan 17:

"When the moon has a halo and there is an eclipse of the moon, then men will eat each other."

This example shows that there is apparently a comprehensive literature on omens and celestial phenomena which refer not only to the sun but also to the moon, the planets and stars.

This manuscript seems to be the only currently known surviving illustrated text on the subject in Manchu; but it is highly probable that it was translated from Chinese sources.

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As stated, there is still further research to be done — this is just a report on work in progress.

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