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Two Cases in Identifying a Publication Date in the Cataloging of Chinese Materials

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Generally speaking, it is not difficult to identify a publication date when cataloging Chinese materials. Most books indicate the imprint information as place of publication, publisher, and date on the colophon page or somewhere else in the book. In modern Chinese books there are two ways to state the publication date: the Gregorian calendar or the min kuo系统. A correct date in the Gregorian calendar is obtained by merely adding the number 11 to the publication date in the min kuo system.

Sometimes, however, it is not an easy job to ascertain the publication date and it is necessary to use reference books, especially when cataloging books printed prior to this century. For example, in the Nei-huang hsien chih 内黄縣志 (Nei-huang County Gazetteer), there is no colophon page indicating the publication date except two dates given at the end of the prefaces. One is Chia ching ting hai ch’iu ch’i yueh shuo 嘉靖丁亥秋七月朔 (see Fig. 1), and the other is Chia ching ting yu meng ch’iu wang jih 嘉靖丁酉孟秋 (see Fig. 2).
According to traditional Chinese expressions of month and day, both "ch’iu ch’i yueh" 秋七月 and "meng ch’iu" 孟秋 refer to the seventh month in the Chinese lunar calendar. "Shuo" 朔 means the first day and "wang" 望 the fifteenth day of a lunar month. The above information can be obtained from the "Tz’u yuan" 裨賢. By looking up in the "Li tai chien yuan piao" 李太鵠院抄 appendix (volume 4, p. 122 (3rd group)), we located the "chia ching" in the Ming Dynasty 朝 cybersecurity as a reign-title which began in 1522 (jen wu 壬午) and ended in 1566 (ping yin 內寅). Then we needed to consult either a chart of the sexagenary cycle or a very useful reference book, "Liang ch’ien nien Chung hsi li tui chao piao", 2 to identify the years of "ting hai" and "ting yu". Using either method we discovered that "chia ching ting hai" falls between the years 1527 and 1528, and "ting yu" between the years 1537 and 1538. Based on logical analysis that the later date must be closer to the publication date, we took "ting yu nien" (1537-1538) as the date. Since the fifteenth day of the seventh month in "ting yu nien" was in the year 1537, according to "Liang ch’ien nien Chung hsi li tui chao piao", we determined that the approximate publication date of the "Nei-huang hsien-chih" 内黃獻計 was 1537.

If the example above is a normal one in cataloging classical Chinese books, the example below, which employs a more complex system of making dates, is a rare case in books published in this century. A book titled "Tseng shih chia hsueh hsu pien" 曹氏家學續編 (Continuation of the Collection of Works of Tseng's Family) provides the publication date on the verso of the title page with a phrase in the colophon: "Tai sui tsai hsuan i she fi ko chu yueh kan yu Hsiang-kang 太歲在玄默攝提格且月刊於香港" (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3

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1"Tz’u yuan" 裨賢, (Pei-ching: Shang wu yin shu kuan, 1979-1982).

2"Liang ch’ien nien Chung hsi li tui chao piao" 兩千年中西歷對照表 = A Sino-Western Calendar for Two Thousand Years, Hsueh Chung-san 謝仲三 and Ou-yang I 歐陽頠, eds., Hong Kong: Shang wu yin shu kuan, 1961.
Obviously, the phrase contains the imprint information we need.

To solve this puzzle, we first looked in Tz'u yuan, which covers a great number of obsolescent words. We found that the word hsuan 亥 is another expression of jen 申 in the Chinese kan chih 千支 system. The word she tî ko 狩提格 refers to yin 寅 and chü yueh 且月 to the sixth month in the Chinese lunar calendar (usually July in the Gregorian calendar). We then checked Liang ch'ien nien Chung hsi li tui chao piao. Since the Chinese system of kan chih used sixty years as a cycle, it is crucial for us to decide which cycle this jen yin nien 寅寅年 falls in. Fortunately, it is not difficult to tell that this book was published in this century. There are only two jen yin years in this century: one is 1902-1903 and the other is 1962-1963. According to the quality of the printing, cover design, and condition of the book, we decided that this book must have been published in the second jen yin year of this century, that is, 1962-1963. Since chü yueh means the sixth lunar month of the year, we identified the book as being published in July 1962. Although this is a rare case, one which we would encounter perhaps once among the ten thousand books that we catalog, we would like to share this information with our colleagues.

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3This system is called T'ai sui chi nien 太歲紀年. In the appendix of Chung-kuo li shih chi nien piao 中國歷史紀年表, ed. Wan Kuo-ting 萬國鼎 (Shang-hai: Shang-hai shang wu yin shu kuan, 1956), there is a "T'ai sui chi nien piao" 太歲紀年表. Also one can find brief introductions of the system in many introductory books about how to use Chinese reference works, such as Wen shih che kung chü shu chien chieh 文史哲工具書簡介, ed. Nan-ching ta hsueh 南京大學 (Tien-chin: Tien-chin jen min ch’u pan she, 1980).