

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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WHAT IS A TYPHOON?

If you look up the word "typhoon" in a dictionary or other reference book you are pretty sure to find it defined as applying to a severe storm. The typhoons mentioned in the literature of the Far East are nearly always terrific tempests. The average sailor of oriental experience would tell you that the typhoon is invariably a dangerous thing to encounter at sea. He would consider such an expression as "gentle typhoon," or "mild typhoon," as a contradiction in terms.

Now a typhoon is a tropical cyclone of the Far East, and a tropical cyclone, there and elsewhere, may occur in various degrees of intensity. It may be mild, moderate or violent. Moreover, it may be mild at one stage of its existence and violent at another. If it is not violent, is it still a typhoon?

Strange to say, the meteorologists attached to the big observatories in the Far East, where the chief practical business is looking out for typhoons, disagree in their answers to this question. They held a conference at Hong Kong in the spring of 1930 to plan a uniform system of typhoon signals and they became involved in a lively controversy over the question: What is a typhoon?

These same observatories publish statistics of the number of typhoons occurring in the Far East each year. Because the authorities differ as to which of the atmospheric disturbances that develop in their common field of observation are typhoons and which are not, one observatory may report two or three times as many typhoons in a certain year as another.

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