SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE I CHING

BY

J. Y. LEE
Westerville, U.S.A.

The origin of the I Ching or the Book of Changes is uncertain. Its authorship has become under debate throughout centuries in the past. In Shuo Kua, the Discussion of the Trigrams, the authors of the book are identified with the holy sages: “In ancient times the holy sages made the Book of Changes” 1). The much same idea is also expressed in Ta Chuan or the Great Treatise: “The holy sages instituted the hexagrams, so that phenomena might be perceived therein. They appended the judgments in order to indicate good fortune and misfortune” 2). According to the original version of Chinese texts, we do not know whether the term “shen jen” (聖人) was intended to signify the “holy sage” or the “holy sages.” Since there is no distinction between the singular and plural nouns in Chinese, it is difficult to say whether it meant plural or singular. However, the translation of shen jen as the holy sages seems to be correct, because the multiple authorship of the I Ching has been accepted by Chinese tradition. According to the tradition the I Ching was originated from the practice of divination and was attributed to the legendary king, Fu Hsi (2953-2838 B.C.). Later King Wen, the founder of Chou dynasty (1150-249 B.C.), rearranged the sixty-four hexagrams and gave them the Judgments (kua tz'u). His son, Tan, who was Chou Kung or Duke of Chou, composed the texts on the lines of hexagrams (hsiio tz'u) to supplement and to expound the kua tz'u. The Ten Wings, which are the Commentaries attached to the I Ching, were traditionally attributed to Confusius. The traditionally accepted authorship of the Ten Wings came to subject to much severe criticisms by recent scholars. It is not my intention here to deal with the authorship of this controversial area. The intention of my immediate concern is to examine the authorship of the main texts of the I Ching.

1) Shuo Kua, 1 : 2.
2) Ta Chuan, Sec. I, Ch. 2.
The *I Ching* went through four states of formation in Chinese history. At first there was the stage of divination practice without reference to cosmology. The second stage was the creation of eight trigrams, which were meaningfully correlated with the primitive cosmology. The third stage was the formulation of 64 hexagrams and the Judgments. Finally, the fourth stage was the elaboration and explanation of lines of hexagrams. We may take each stage of formation separately for a detailed examination.

The *I Ching* has its origin in the practice of divination. Thus it is most of all the book of divination. According to the Book of Rites, “The ancient kings made use of the stalks of the divining plant and the tortoise shell; arranged their sacrifices; burned their offerings of silk” 3). The sacrifices were offered to them because they brought knowledge of the future. As it was written again in the Book of Rites, “In the various articles of tribute the tortoises were placed in front of all other offerings, because the shell gave knowledge of the future” 4). The use of both the stalks of the divining plant and the tortoise shells for divination was evident in early Chinese history. Nevertheless, it seemed to suggest that the divination by means of the tortoise shell could be much older than that of the stalks of the divining plant. As Legge has pointed out, “In the Shu King, in a document that purports to be of the twenty-third century B.C. (The Shu II, ii, 18), divination by means of the tortoise-shell is mentioned; and somewhat later we find that method continuing, and also divination by the lineal figures, manipulated by means of the stalks of a plant (The Shu V, iv, 20, 31)” 5). It was uncertain why the tortoise shell was first used for divination. It presumes that the tortoise was thought to have more mysterious and oracular powers than all other living creatures. These mysterious and oracular powers were thought having derived from the tortoise because it survived longer than any other living creatures they knew. For the primitive mind the life of tortoise was so long that it was recognized as the symbol of immortality. Because of its immoral life, it became the object of divination. In the method of divination, the belly surface of the tortoise shell was incised with a red-hot stylus, so that the shell was to be cracked and to form lines of cracks. The diviner

3) *Li Chi* 7 : 2, 1.
4) Ibid., 9 : 7.