THE TRUE ERA OF THE CHINESE
SIXTY YEAR CYCLE

BY

HERBERT CHATLEY, D. Sc.

It has often been pointed out that the Chia Tzii (甲子) or cycle of sixty (10 “stems” and 12 “branches” paired in parallel sequence) was not applied to years before the Han dynasty (206 B.C.—225 A.D.), in spite of the popular Chinese belief that this practice goes back to the days of Huang Ti and an era of 2637 B.C. 1). This belief may be actually based on a traditional record of the invention of the cycle as applied to days.

Liu Shu (劉恕) in his preface to T’ung Chien Wai Chi (通鑑外紀序) is of opinion that the use of the cycle of sixty for years commenced in the time of Wang Mang (王莽, 9—22 A.D. 2).

A Jupiter year cycle of 12 years, Shê-t’i ko (攝提格) had certainly been in use for some centuries prior to the beginning of the Han dynasty, mainly for astrological purposes but perhaps as a year count 3) and de Saussure has shown that the phase of the cycle was adjusted twice, once in Ch’in times about 207 B.C. and


3) See the Chou Li, Tso Chuan, & Kuo Yu, all of which are probably fourth century B.C. compilations. Also in Chavannes, M.H., vol. III “Les Gouverneurs du Ciel”.
again in the data of 104 B.C. as recorded by Pan Ku (班固, died A.D. 92). In the latter's notation the 12 Jovian names of the years are related to the 12 "branches" in a manner which conforms to the current standard system. De Saussure says "Le mystère subsiste en ce qui concerne la partie dénaire.... La plus ancienne notation sexagésimale employée effectivement à la numération des années est — si je ne me trompe — celle de Pankou et l'on ne sait pas à quelle occasion la partie dénaire fut ajoutée à l'élément duodénaire" 1). See Addendum.

In the well known Han sepulchre of the Wu family in Shantung, the first year of Chien Ho (建和) is recorded as Ting Hai (丁亥, the 24th of the cycle), which corresponds to A.D. 147 2). This seems to be the first contemporary record. In Jung Kông's book on the Han bronzes the earliest cyclic year date is 184 A.D. On a northern Wei votive stele in the Victoria & Albert Museum (lent by Baron von der Heydt) dated the third year of Shén Kuei (神龜) or 520 A.D., the phrase 太歲在康子 "The Great Year being in Kêng Tzü" (37th of the cycle) shows that the sixty year cycle was in the sixth century still thought of as related to the old Jupiter cycle (太歲) 3).

The table of 76 years with the "astrological" sixty cycle names, which appears in the Shih Chi, is regarded by Chavannes as an interpolation by Ch'ü Shao-sun (褚少孫) 4). It is not in step with the present system and was considered by Chavannes to be a mere project based on the so called Yin calendar. Its use of a 76 year period suggests it may actually be as late as the time of Li

1) De Saussure, T.F., XV., p. 689.
2) Bashell, Chinese Art, vol. 1., p. 39.
3) It occurs in the Hou Han Shu, Lu Li Chih, 11, p. 11 recto, without a reference to the T'ai Sui. 河平癸已 = A.D. 28. This was written in the Tsin dynasty, 4th century. I am indebted to Prof. Yets for the Han bronze reference. — H.C.