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DIVINATION BY SHELLS, BONES AND STALKS DURING THE HAN PERIOD

BY

MICHAEL LOEWE

1. *Sources of information*

Our knowledge of divination by means of shells and bones (*pu* 卜) during the Han period is bound by completely different considerations from those that affect earlier times. For the Shang-Yin and earlier ages, research depends almost exclusively on the material remains of the process itself; there is no support from contemporary documentary evidence compiled either to describe its mysteries and forms, or to record in chronicle form incidents in which the process played a part. For the Han period, however, while archaeologists have yet to identify examples of shells or bones actually used for the purpose and inscribed accordingly, it is possible to call on a considerable body of literary evidence, dating from both pre-imperial and imperial times, and at times scattered among different texts.

For sources that were compiled in their original form before the imperial period, attention focuses on the various compendia of *li*, which are concerned not only with the use of bones and shells, but also with divination by stalks (*shih* 筮); there arises the immediate difficulty of determining how far the references in such books may be taken as having a bearing on the Han period. For while these texts purport to the practices of the kings of Chou, it is only too likely that at times they may be referring to later practice, continuing even into the imperial age. In addition, the respect in which such books were held during Han times was such that they may well have constituted a framework within which much of official Han thinking took place.

When the compendia on *li* were being written,¹ the practice of

¹ For traditional accounts of the four principal works (*Chou li*, *I-li*, *Li chi* and *Ta Tai li chi*), see Loewe, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death: Faith, Myth and Reason in the Han period* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982, p. 205, s.v. *Chou li*. References to the first three of these works are given below to *Chung-k'an Sung pen Shih-san ching chu-shu fu chiao-k'an-chi* 重刊宋本十三經註疏附校勘記 1815 (facsimile: Kyoto: Chūbun shuppansha, 1974), and to the following translations: (a) Edouard Biot, *Le Tcheou-li ou Rites des Tcheou*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1815): (b) S. Couvreur, *Cérémonial: texte chinois et traduction* (Sien hsien: Mission Catholique, 1928), and John Steel,

divination by shells or bones was already at least a thousand years old, and the use of yarrow stalks was not much younger. Some measure of stylisation had long since set in, with a rigorous set of procedures taking the place of the spontaneous actions and reactions of a seer. It may even be suggested that by this time the original motives for the practice had become outmoded, and that much of the procedure was being conducted without an understanding of its purposes. In such circumstances the force of a written set of rules for the ritual may well have acquired an overwhelming and disproportionately high influence, whatever the motive may have been for the compilation of such documents. Possibly the rules and procedures were set down in writing as a means of asserting the permanent nature of certain considerations that transcend the ephemeral lives and rule of individual men. Possibly the books on *li* were intended to form a defence of certain aspects of human behaviour, on intellectual grounds; possibly they were compiled as handbooks for consultation, or to ensure the maintenance of orthodox procedures and ceremonies.

Whatever the dates may have been when the compendia on *li* were originally written or reached their present form, the terms of reference and the technicalities that they describe partake of the pre-imperial age, and it must remain open to question how far this may have been due to deliberate anachronism. We cannot tell how far these books were describing practices that had never been operated; or procedures that had long become obsolete; or rites that survived from the *Chan-kuo* period until Han times. It may however be concluded that they formed an integral part of the background to Han thought, perpetuating a tradition that affected the training and intellectual outlook of Han officials. Recognition of the importance of these texts is seen in their inclusion among the Five Classics, and the appointment of Academicians to specialise in their exposition (136 B.C), and in the citations that appear from time to time in statements attributed to officials.² If an analogy may be risked, it may be asked whether the influence of these classical or scriptural texts was in any way parallel with that of the ritualistic portions of the Old Testament in Victorian England. Attitudes

The I-li or Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, 2 vols. (London: Probsthain, 1917); and (c) S. Couvreur, *Le Li Ki ou Mémoires sur les bienséances et les cérémonies*, 2 vols. (Ho Kien Fou, 1913)

² For the relevance of these books to Han times, see Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China* (Princeton University Press and The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1975), pp. 7, 15; Tjan Tjoe Som, *Po hu t'ung: the comprehensive discussions in the White Tiger Hall* 2 vols (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1949, 1952), vol. 1 pp. 82f.; and

may well have varied from fundamentalist acceptance to critical scepticism or rejection; but at each extreme, the texts bore great intellectual significance.

Sources which date from the imperial period include two chapters of the *Shih-chi*, each with an appended supplement by Ch'u Shao-sun 褚少孫 (?104–30).³ Chapter 127 sets out to vindicate the profession of diviners and their standards of honesty. Chapter 128 gives a short historical note on the practice, followed by a considerable body of technical information concerning the qualities and properties of turtles, and a few anecdotes. The chapter also includes catalogues of the types of crack that appear on the shells during divination and the types of question that may be put to this source of occult wisdom.

Records of actual incidents of divination, or of regular occasions for its performance, occur in the *Shih-chi*, *Han shu* and *Hou-Han shu*. References to the officials whose duties were concerned with these practices and with the use of stalks are seen both in these works and in fragmentary texts such as the *Han kuan* 漢官.⁴ In addition, the extent of criticism, usually adverse, to which the practices gave rise suggests that they were matters of regular occurrence which thinking minds could not ignore. Such criticism is seen, for example, in the *Huai-nan-tzu*, *Yen-t'ieh lun*, *Han shu* (chapter 30), *Lun-heng* and *Ch'ien-fu lun*, and in the writings of Chung-ch'ang T'ung 仲長統; they are thus spread in time from perhaps 150 BC to AD 200.

2. *The powers of the turtle and the yarrow stalks: faith in the practice*

Some of the available evidence suggests the existence of a deep-rooted belief in Han times that divination by turtle shells⁵ or stalks was an ancient traditional practice, and that it was the continuation of an age-old hallowed rite. In discussing the stress placed on various forms of religious observance, the *Li-chi*⁶ refers to the reliance that

Fujikawa Masakazu 藤川正數, *Kandai ni okeru reigaku no kenkyū* 漢代における禮學の研究 (Tokyo: Kazama shobō, 1968).

³ For Ch'u Shao-sun, see Timoteus Pokora, 'Ch'u Shao-sun—narrator of stories in the *Shih-chi*' (*Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, volume 41, 1981, 403–30).

⁴ *Han kuan liu chung* 漢官六種 (*SPPY* ed.) 1a; Chen Tsu-lung 陳祚龍, *Index du Han-kouan ts'i-tchung* 漢官七種通檢 (Paris: Institut des hautes études chinoises de l'Université de Paris, 1962), 1b.

⁵ For the identification of *kuei* as turtle, see David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History; the Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 8f., 157f.

⁶ *Li-chi* 22.16b; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 525.

the kings of old had placed on divination by these means, and there are similar references in the *Shih-chi*. In one passage the latter text mentions that the holy kings of the past had always performed this precautionary rite before establishing their regime, accepting their charge to rule or initiating a major project.⁷ At a later stage we hear of a senior official of government citing such examples by way of admonition. This was when Fu Chan 伏湛, appointed Minister of Finance (*Ta ssu-t'u* 大司徒) shortly after Kuang-wu-ti's accession (AD 25), was advising the new emperor of the dangers of personally leading a campaign against a rebel. Fu Chan drew specific attention to King Wen's example of divination by both methods in comparable circumstances.⁸

In an important passage, the *Li-chi* refers to the powers of the shells and the stalks as instruments which may communicate the will of the holy spirits of heaven and earth.⁹ Elsewhere the same book refers specifically to the way in which the rise or fall of a state may stand revealed in these objects' signs;¹⁰ as this passage occurs in the *Chung-yung* chapter, its message found a prominent place in the regular curriculum of Chinese education during the imperial era. A reference in the *Ta Tai li-chi*¹¹ points out that the powers of prognostication that the turtle, the most refined of all creatures, possesses depend on the application of fire. In regulations for setting out items of equipment or other goods for banquets, or those brought as items of tribute, the turtle was sometimes given priority, owing it was claimed, to its gift of prior knowledge.¹² In a completely different type of writing that may well date from pre-imperial times, turtles are cited as possessing prophylactic powers against deafness or curses.¹³

A number of references may be found in Han writings to the belief that the turtles' ability to prophesy depends on their great age and their accumulated store of wisdom. A general statement in the *Huai-nan-tzu* explains that turtles are used for prognostication and that other types of bone are not used for this purpose, owing to the turtles' longevity; elsewhere in this book this is stated to be 3000

⁷ SC 128.2; see also SC 127.8

⁸ HHS 26 (biog. 16). 2a

⁹ *Li-chi* 54.26a; Couvreur vol. II, p. 510

¹⁰ *Li-chi* 53.4a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 462

¹¹ *Ta Tai li-chi* 5 ('Tseng-tzu t'ien yüan'). 8b

¹² *Li-chi* 24.14a and 25.12a; Couvreur vol. I, pp. 568, 578

¹³ *Shan-hai ching* 1, p. c 3 and 5, p. 168; Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: traduction annotée du Shanhai jing* (Paris: Institut des hautes études chinoises de l'Université de Paris, 1983), vol. 1 pp. 7, 345

years.¹⁴ In a note to the *Li-chi*, Liu Hsiang 劉向 is recorded as remarking on the age of the turtles' utterances, and adding that they acquire numinous powers (*ling* 靈) after living for 1000 years.¹⁵ The same reason is cited in the *Lun-heng*, in an answer given by K'ung-tzu to Tzu lu 子路, and again in the *Po-hu t'ung*.¹⁶

The *Shih-chi* writes that turtles with divine (*shen* 神) powers are to be found in the waters of the Yangtse River. They are taken alive regularly each year in Lu-chiang 廬江 commandery; as many as twenty specimens measure one foot and two inches, such a length being attained only after 1000 years; while those of a mere 7 or 8 inches, when caught by the local inhabitants, are prized highly.¹⁷ Another passage adds that the inhabitants of the Yangtse region regularly breed turtles and consume them in the belief that they are able to induce the onset of vital energy (*ch'i* 氣), and that they are beneficial for problems of decrepitude and old age.¹⁸ That considerable importance was attached to the acquisition of turtles may be seen in the injunction to fishermen to catch them, as specified for the last month of summer in the *Ordinances of the Months* (*Yüeh ling* 月令).¹⁹

Turtles, or creatures that resemble them, are credited with somewhat different forms of power in an early source which draws on folklore. Such references will be found in the first and fifth chapters of the *Shan-hai ching*, parts of which have been ascribed to the end of the fourth century BC, but which perhaps reached their present form towards the end of the Former Han period. Two passages mention a particular type of animal like a turtle which may be worn as a prophylactic against deafness and calluses; another creature may be used as a preventative against fire.²⁰ Consumption of parts of a special type of three-legged turtle will act as an antidote for major diseases and tumours; consumption of parts of another three-legged turtle, described as *pieh* 鼈, will provide protection against imprecation or disease.²¹

¹⁴ *HNT* 14.8b and 17.5b

¹⁵ *Li-chi* 3.15b; for the value of those turtles imbued with *ling* as against others, see *HNT* 16.12a; see also *CCFL* 9 (34). 11a

¹⁶ *LH* 24 ('Pu shih'), p. 995; *PHT B* ('Shih kuei') 16b (6.4a, b); Tjan, vol. II, p. 523

¹⁷ *SC* 128.9, 10

¹⁸ *SC* 128.6

¹⁹ *Li-chi* 16.9a; Couvreur vol. I, p. 367; *LSCC* 6.1b; *HNT* 5.8b; see also *Chou li* 4.20a; Biot vol. I, p. 90

²⁰ *SHC* 1, p. 3; 5, p. 138 and 5, p. 177; Mathieu, pp. 7, 282, 367

²¹ *SHC* 5, pp. 144, 168; Mathieu vol. I, pp. 295, 345. For the practice of *ku* (im-

In some of the passages that are cited above the divine powers of the yarrow plant are explained by the same reason as that given for the turtle, i.e., its age. However, the multiplicity of stalks stemming from the single root, and the length of the stalks is another reason why the plant is credited with special characteristics. Both the turtle and the yarrow feature in a passage which was added to the *Shih-chi* by Ch'u Shao-sun and wherein a considerable degree of folklore and tradition surround their mysteries.

Ch'u Shao-sun reports²² that among the records that he found in the office of the Director of Divination (*t'ai pu* 太卜) he came across the statement that 'below there is the pine-root (*fu-ling* 伏靈),²³ above there is the dodder (*t'u-su* 兔絲);²⁴ above there are the massed yarrow stalks, below there is the holy turtle'. He explains the term *fu-ling* as something lying below the dodder plant, being shaped in appearance like a bird in flight. When the new rain has ceased falling and the skies are clear and calm without winds, the dodder is cropped by night and removed. The area is forthwith illuminated with the use of a fire-basket, and at the moment when the flames of the fire-basket are extinguished the spot is marked and surrounded with 40 feet of new cloth. At dawn the spot is immediately excavated to collect the *fu-ling*. This is found after penetrating to a depth of four to seven feet, but it will not be found at a depth of over seven feet.

Ch'u Shao-sun continues: 'The *fu-ling* is the root of the thousand year old pine tree. Eat it and you will not die. I am informed that below those yarrow plants which produce their full 100 stalks there will inevitably be a holy turtle on guard. On top there will invariably be blue clouds as a cover. Traditionally it was said that when the world is at peace and the way of true sovereignty is being practised, the yarrow stalks grow to a length of ten feet, and the luxuriant plant will produce its full hundred stalks. But those who collect the plant nowadays are not able to attain the standard of the past. Those who cannot find plants with 100 stalks 10 foot long even find it difficult to get them with 80 stalks 8 foot long. Members of the public who like to have recourse to the lines of the hexagrams collect plants with 60 stalks or more measuring 6 feet and find that they are fit to be used'.

Ch'u Shao-sun quotes the saying that material wealth will fall to

precation) see Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974) chapter 2.

²² *SC* 128.7f.

²³ Literally hidden or latent magic

²⁴ Literally, hare's silk

those who procure the named (or famous) turtles; their families will invariably grow to be very rich, to the extent of a fortune up to ten million. The names of the eight famous turtles are then given, following major elements of the universe that are usually seen in the heavens, i.e., the turtle of the north dipper, the south pole, the five stars, the eight winds, the twenty-eight lodges, the sun and moon, the nine regions, and finally the turtle of jade.²⁵ 'In each case the turtle's pattern comprises written signs beneath the plastron; the message that the written signs convey gives the turtle its designation and I have simply summarised what is indicated without copying the pattern'. After citing examples of other objects of great value, the text proceeds: 'Whoever succeeds in finding the 100 stalk yarrow plant, and of acquiring it together with the turtle below, and uses these objects for purposes of divination will be correct in all his pronouncements such that he can determine good or bad fortune'.

From these considerations it may be suggested that the value of the turtles and their particular qualities was linked with the idea of permanency, as seen in the turtle's own age and the connection with the heavenly bodies, whose lives outlast those of generations of human beings. The source of truth, the vehicle for divination must be seen to transcend the brevity of human life, and it will be found in creatures believed to live longer than any others, named after the most permanent objects that man encounters. The turtle both contains an accumulated store of knowledge and wisdom, and may be viewed as a timeless source of truth that stands above human transience.

While there are hints of a hierarchy whereby divination by turtle-shells was regarded as being superior to that by yarrow-stalks, the evidence is somewhat conflicting. According to one passage,²⁶ while the Son of Heaven does not divine with stalks, the leaders of the states (*chu hou* 諸侯) do so; but they do not use the stalks when they are outside their own states, except when they are determining a place of residence. The statement that the Son of Heaven does not use turtles to determine the situation of the ancestral shrine is explained on the grounds that he has already carried out divination by this means in order to establish the seat of his kingdom.

From the foregoing references it would appear that divination by turtle had acquired a higher place than that of yarrow stalks. In the *Chou li* however we may read that 'for major decisions of state, divination should be done first by stalks and then by turtle

²⁵ *SC* 128.9; in some texts this is given as the king's jade.

²⁶ *Li-chi* 54.27b; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 512

shells.²⁷ The *I-li* includes detailed prescriptions for divination by turtle to determine a suitable time for burial; there follow the rules laid down for the use of stalks to determine the appropriate place for burial.²⁸

3. Officials concerned with divination

In describing the needs and purposes of the religious observances of the kings of old, the *Li-chi* notes how those sovereigns would be preceded by the shamans, with officials responsible for astrology following behind; and they would be accompanied on all sides by diviners who operated with both shells and stalks, and by musicians and their supporters. In another passage, specialists with the use of shells are mentioned in the same category as specialists responsible for prayer, archery, riding and medical care.²⁹

The *Chou li* includes a regular establishment of officials or dignitaries whose duties were concerned with divination. They are set out in hierarchical manner along with other officials who were responsible for other types of religious activity (e.g., music, sacrifices, funeral ceremonies), under the general title of 'Offices of the Spring'.³⁰ The Director of Divination (*T'ai-pu* 太卜) was supported by two counsellors (*ta-fu* 大夫), four masters of divination (*pu shih* 卜師); eight diviners (*pu jen* 卜人) of middle rank and sixteen diviners of lowest rank; two store keepers (*fu* 府); two scribes (*shih* 史); four assistants (*hsü* 胥) and forty attendants (*t'u* 徒). In addition there were two officials designated 'turtle men' (*kuei jen* 龜人), supported by two store keepers, two scribes, four craftsmen (*kung* 工), four assistants and forty attendants. There was also a complement of two *chui jen* 菑人, with one scribe and eight attendants, who were responsible for burning the necessary materials, and eight prognosticators (*chan jen* 占人), with their supporting staff, who were concerned with divination and its results both by means of turtle shells and yarrow stalks. For the specific use of yarrow stalks, the text lists two specialists (*shih jen* 筮人) supported by one store keeper, two scribes and eight attendants.

There is no immediate or certain means of relating this highly idealised establishment to the actual practice of the centuries before

²⁷ *Chou li* 24.24a; Biot, vol. II, p. 81; for the relative trust to be placed in the shells and the stalks, see *Shu ching* ('Hung fan'), Bernhard Karlgren, 'The Book of Documents' (*BMFEA*, 22, 1950), 33.

²⁸ *I-li* 37.15b, 17a; Couvreur, pp. 474, 477; Steele, vol. II pp. 73, 75.

²⁹ *Li-chi* 13.7a, b and 22.17a; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 304, 526

³⁰ *Chou li* 17.12b; Biot, vol. I, p. 409

the imperial era, but it can hardly be expected that the account is entirely realistic. While the passage may owe something to the Chinese addiction for hierarchical schemes for the organisation of man and his affairs, it may possibly also reflect a real characteristic of the arrangements that were sometimes made, i.e. a duplication of participants in the ceremonies, in order to prevent abuse or the exploitation of mantic practices for ignoble ends.

A second passage in the *Chou li*³¹ is concerned with the duties of these officials. The *t'ai-pu* was responsible for the three methods of augury (*san chao* 三兆), depending on the resemblance of the cracks in the shells to the patterns of jade, pottery or the land.³² He was also responsible for the three methods of the 'Changes' (*i* 易), i.e. Lien-shan 連山, Kuei-tsang 歸藏 and Chou-i 周易. The masters of divination were responsible for 'opening the four auguries of the turtles', i.e. *fang chao* 方兆, *kung chao* 功兆, *i chao* 義兆 and *kung chao* 弓兆. The turtle men were responsible for the six varieties of turtle, each with its own distinct name. The specialists in yarrow were responsible for the three methods of the Changes, thereby discriminating between the names of the nine types of yarrow.

Information regarding the post of *t'ai-pu* or *t'ai-pu ling* (令) during imperial times is not entirely clear, and the evidence is partly contradictory. In the list of officials that is given for Former Han, the *t'ai-pu ling* and his assistant (*ch'eng* 丞) duly feature as subordinates of the *T'ai-ch'ang* (太常 superintendent of ceremonial), who had been known under the title of *feng-ch'ang* 奉常 until 144 BC. In this list the director of divination is treated in precisely the same way as five other senior officials who were responsible for specialist tasks, i.e. the directors of music (*t'ai-yüeh ling* 太樂令), prayer (*t'ai-chu ling* 太祝令), butchery (*t'ai-tsai ling* 太宰令), astrology (*t'ai-shih ling* 太史令) and medical care (*t'ai-i ling* 太醫令). These officials were usually of the grade of 600 bushels (*shih* 石).³³

According to the descriptive notice in this list the *t'ai-pu* was first established in 104 BC.³⁴ A passage in the *Shih-chi*³⁵ which refers to the establishment of the *t'ai-pu* from the beginning of Han was misinterpreted by some commentators to signify that the post had been established at the time of Wen-ti's accession in 180 BC. However another passage of the *Shih-chi* refers to Han's inheritance of

³¹ *Chou li* 24.10a; Biot, vol. II, pp. 69f.

³² I.e. *yü chao* 玉兆 *wa chao* 瓦兆 and *yüan chao* 原兆

³³ *HS* 19A. 6b; Hans Bielenstein, *The bureaucracy of Han times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 19.

³⁴ *HS* 19A. 7b

³⁵ *SC* 127.2

the office of *t'ai-pu* from Ch'in;³⁶ elsewhere we are told that the second Ch'in emperor once (207 BC) summoned the *t'ai-pu* to practice divination with the use of the hexagrams.³⁷ An unnamed *Chiang-chün t'ai-pu* was captured in one of the incidents whereby Kao ti consolidated his control of the empire in c. 197 BC, but this man presumably did not hold his title from the central imperial government.³⁸ The advice of the *t'ai-pu* and his subordinates was sought in 90 BC on the question of whether an attack on the Hsiung-nu would be auspicious, and in AD 3 in connection with the position or status that should be accorded to Wang Mang's daughter.³⁹

According to the treatise on officials in the *Hsü Han chih*,⁴⁰ the *t'ai-pu ling* (600 *shih* grade) was later suppressed, at a date which is not specified, and the post was combined with that of director of astronomy (*t'ai-shih ling* 太史令). A fragment of one of the lost treatises on officials of the Han empire includes three specialists on divination with turtles (*kuei pu* 龜卜) among the subordinates of the *t'ai-shih ling*.⁴¹ These posts and officials are, needless to say, to be distinguished from the occupation of professional diviner which was open to members of the public.⁴²

4. Early writings on divination

A further indication of the attention paid to these types of divination by educated men of the day may be seen in the writings known to have existed on the subject at the close of the Former Han period. The bibliographical list that is included in the *Han shu* names a total of 15 works under the category of *Shih kuei* 著龜; of these, five included the word *kuei* in the title. It may safely be assumed that they were concerned with divination by turtle, and they amounted

³⁶ SC 128.3

³⁷ SC 87.43; Derk Bodde, *China's First Unifier: a study of the Ch'in dynasty as seen in the life of Li Ssu* (280?–208 B.C.) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1938), pp. 52–3. For references to diviners who were apparently not part of the official establishment, see A.F.P. Hulsewé, *Remnants of Ch'in law* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), pp. 85, 176–77 (A 94 and D 173)

³⁸ SC 95.10; in this somewhat doubtful passage, *T'ai pu* is taken by one commentator (Takigawa) as the name of a general; see also HS 41.5a

³⁹ HS 96b.18b; A.F.P. Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979) p. 171; HS 97B.23a

⁴⁰ HHS (tr.) 25.3a; Bielenstein, *Han bureaucracy*, pp. 19, 22 and 163 note 66

⁴¹ HHS (tr.) 25.1b (note); *Han kuan liu chung* 1a; Chen Tsu-lung, *Index du Han-kouan ts'i-tchung*, *Han kuan* 1b; Bielenstein, *Han bureaucracy*, p. 22.

⁴² See, e.g., HHS 12 (biog. 2). 1a and HHS 48 (biog. 38). 4b for examples of individuals who acted as *pu hsiang kung* 卜相工

altogether to 158 *chüan*.⁴³ One other item, which was entitled *Shih shu* 著書 ran to 28 *chüan*; it is followed in the *Han-shu*'s list by several entries for works that concerned the Changes of the hexagrams.

There is also at least one indication of further literary work in which divination formed a topic of discussion. In AD 136 Fu Wu-chi 伏無忌 and Huang Ching 黃景 were ordered to undertake the collation of a number of writings, including the Five Classical Texts, various philosophical works and *i shu* 藝術. This latter term was taken by the T'ang commentator to the *Hou-Han shu* to include technical works on calligraphy, mathematics, archery, horse-riding, together with medicine, esoteric cults (*fang* 方) and divination by turtle shells and yarrow stalks.⁴⁴

5. Evaluation and criticism

A number of opinions regarding the practice and validity of divination may be found in literature dating from the Han period and immediately previously. These vary from deliberate recommendation, acceptance or guarded toleration to positive censure. Criticism is expressed on the grounds that the practice is inexpedient or ineffective, or because it is neither rational nor consistent. A few writers protest for moralist reasons; some criticise the way in which the practice was misused or abused, or attracted undue reliance.

The *Hsi-tz'u-chuan* 繫辭傳 of the *Book of Changes* includes the statement that four principles of the holy sages are included in the *Changes*. According to one of these, 'in divination by turtles or stalks, they respected their prognostications', and this passage is repeated in the *Hou-Han shu*, being quoted as from Confucius.⁴⁵ As might be expected, a somewhat different point of view is expressed in the *Han-fei-tzu*. In a famous passage which sets out the ways whereby a state can be brought to ruin, we may read that one derives from 'dependence on the choice of a suitable season or day, service to the demons and holy spirits, trust in divination by turtle or stalks together with the accompanying devotion to prayer and sacrifice'.⁴⁶

⁴³ HS 30.73a *et seq.* The works listed are (a) *Kuei shu* 龜書 52 *chüan*; (b) *Hsia kuei* 夏龜 26 *chüan*; (c) *Nan kuei shu* 南龜書 28 *chüan*; (d) *Chü kuei* 巨龜 36 *chüan*; and (e) *Tsa kuei* 雜龜 16 *chüan*. Shen Ch'in-han 沈欽韓 (1775–1832) suggests that the information cited by Ch'u Shao-sun in his addendum to SC 128 is a summary of the item listed here as *Kuei shu*, whose length is sometimes given as 53 *chüan*.

⁴⁴ HHS 26 (biog. 16). 4a

⁴⁵ *Hsi tz'u chuan* (Chou i, SPPY, 7.7b); HHS 82A (biog. 72A). 1a; Ngo van xuyet, *Divination, magie et politique dans la Chine ancienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976), p. 73

⁴⁶ Liang Ch'i-hsiung 梁啓雄, *Han tzu ch'ien-chieh* 韓子淺解 (Peking: Chung-hua

Another chapter of the same work, which is concerned with military fortunes, stresses the inconsistent nature of the messages that may be imparted from shells and stalks, and the absurdity of depending upon them to the exclusion of practical or tactical considerations.⁴⁷

A poem of the *Ch'u-tz'u*, which may be dated to the middle of the third century BC, records an anecdote in which an opinion is expressed regarding the validity and correct use of divination. We read that Ch'ü Yüan 屈原 once consulted a named diviner, who was master of the techniques of both shells and stalks, and who set about preparing these media in order to answer Ch'ü Yüan's questions. However these proved to be concerned with matters of a high nature, which involved ethical problems and principles; the diviner is quoted as explaining that such matters lay beyond the scope of the turtle and the yarrow.⁴⁸

The *Huai-nan-tzu* refers to divination on a number of occasions, and as that text derived from a collection of a number of authors' writings, it is hardly surprising that the passages are not entirely consistent. The eighth chapter refers to the primaeval state of purity in which conformity with the order of nature assures the regular fulfilment of cosmic cycles. This was an era when the human intellect was not being used for deceitful purposes; there was no resort to a choice of days that would be fortunate for a proposed action, and no scheming. The passage continues:

The *feng*-[*huang*] and the [*chi*]-*lin* make their appearance; the yarrow stalks and the turtles bear their signs of augury; honey-dew falls; the bamboo seeds are fully formed; *liu-huang* 流黃 jade is found; scarlet plants grow; there is no room for contrivances or deceit of heart and mind.⁴⁹

The passage would seem to imply that human error lies in the

shu-chü, 1960), 15 ('Wang cheng') p. 113; W.K. Liao, *The complete works of Han Fei Tzu*, 2 vols (London: Probsthain, 1939, 1959), vol. 1, p. 134.

⁴⁷ *Han tzu ch'ien-chieh* 19 ('Shih hsieh') p. 131; Liao, vol. 1, pp. 156f.

⁴⁸ *Ch'u tz'u pu chu* 6.1a (*SPPY*); David Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u: the songs of the south* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 88f. (Revised ed., Penguin Classics, 1985, pp. 203f.)

⁴⁹ *HNT* 8.1b. For the auspicious nature of the bamboo's production of seeds, see *Chin shu* (*Chin shu chiao-chu* 晉書附注 ed.) 28.32a, which records such a rare event for AD 292. *Liu huang* is explained as jade in Kao Yu's commentary to *HNT*; elsewhere it is mentioned as a species of bamboo which was of sufficient rarity to warrant annual presentation as tribute (*Hsi ching tsa chi* 2.6a, *SPTK* ed.). For *chu ts'ao* as a plant of good omen, see *Ta Tai li chi* 8 ('Ming t'ang') 11a (*SPTK*), *HS* 99A.7b (Homer H. Dubs, *History of the Former Han Dynasty* vol. III (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1955), p. 151; *PHT* B ('Feng shan') 2b, 3b (5.2b, 3b), Tjan, vol. I, pp. 241, 243, 335 note 330 and 341 note 358; and *LH* 5 ('I-hsu') 209; Forke, vol. II, p. 165.

deliberate attempt to exploit sources of wisdom, such as the yarrow stalks and the turtles' shells; when left to themselves, these will spontaneously produce their signs. In another passage⁵⁰ the *Huai-nan-tzu* describes the value and virtues of a world governed according to the order of nature, free of conscious contrivance of competitive greed, in which a state of harmony is achieved. The passage then traces the 'fall' from the golden age of Huang-ti 黃帝, itself inferior to the order imposed by Fu Hsi 伏羲. When chaos set in, the balance of nature was restored by the efforts of Nü Kua 女媧. At this time all achievements were attained unconsciously and without pride, the order of nature taking the dominant place over human intelligence. The next stage was seen in the enormities and abuses practised by Chieh 桀 king of Hsia 夏; these resulted in a complete loss of harmony and balance, such that the Queen Mother of the West withdrew her blessing on the cosmos, by the deliberate rupture of her symbolic headdress. It was in this period that excessive use had been made of divination, with the result that it was useless, the turtles being spoilt by over use.

A further passage in the *Huai-nan-tzu*⁵¹ refers to divination by turtles and stalks as one of a number of professional means of enquiring into the order of nature; the process is mentioned along with comprehension of the principles of Yin Yang and the Five Phases, watching for the progress made by vital energy (*ch'i* 氣) and awaiting the movements of the heavenly bodies. The subject also occurs in the famous chapter of the same work which declares the glories of heaven to be an institution of the order of nature, in contrast with the limited power of human skills. The passage points out that the majesty and might of heaven and earth lie beyond measurement in human terms. It alludes to the invisible power of spiritual beings and forces, along with the practice of prayer and worship so as to seek good fortune, the great invocation designed to bring about a fall of rain, and divination by shells and stalks in order to decide major issues. As a proof-text to the passage, the author cites from the *Book of Songs*.⁵²

Divination by shells and stalks, the *Li-chi* tells us, was the means whereby the holy kings of old secured the people's faith in the choice of the correct season or day for an action, their respect for the demons and holy spirits, and their fear of the laws; it was the means of re-

⁵⁰ *HNT* 6.9b et seq.

⁵¹ *HNT* 15.21a

⁵² *HNT* 20.3a; Bernhard Karlgren, *The Book of Odes* (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950), p. 218.

solving perplexities and settling doubts. This principle explained the old saying that if you consult the stalks when in doubt, nothing wrong is imputed to your action; if your proposed activity is to follow an indication of the right day for undertaking it, of course carry it out.⁵³

The diviners' profession is defended at considerable length in an entertaining passage of the *Shih-chi*.⁵⁴ This begins by observing that from the remote past an appeal had always been made to divination by turtles and stalks on the occasions when monarchs rose to power. The practice occurred especially during the Chou period and could even be witnessed during Ch'in, and also when the king of Tai 代 (Han Wen-ti) was received at the capital city.⁵⁵

The *Shih-chi* then proceeds to recount an anecdote in which Ssu-ma Chi-chu 司馬季主, of Ch'u 楚, who was practising his profession in the eastern market of Ch'ang-an, received a visit from two senior and well-established officials, namely Sung Chung 宋忠, counsellor of the palace, and Chia I 賈誼 who is described as an academician. The two men paid their visit to 'Diviner's Lane' at the suggestion of Chia I; he had pointed out to his colleague that there was a long tradition of holy men who were to be found not in the court but among specialists in divination or medicine. He suggested that as they were both well acquainted with high-ranking officials of the government it would be a good idea to examine what talent there might be among those who practised the occult arts. It was in such circumstances that the two officials made their way by carriage to the market place, on a day when it had been raining and there were few persons about. They found Ssu-ma Chi-chu engaged in discussing weighty matters with a few pupils, such as the order of nature of heaven and earth, the cyclical motions of the sun and the moon, and the fundamental principles of Yin Yang, and good and bad fortune. Ssu-ma Chi-chu treated his new visitors with the courtesies due to their position and continued his discourse, ranging from cosmology to astronomy, ethics and signs of auspicious and inauspicious events. The two visitors were somewhat taken aback to realise that they were in the presence of somebody who was worthy of deep respect, and they expressed their surprise at the humble way of life that he practised. Ssu-ma Chi-chu then expostulated, asking his visitors where their real values lay. They replied by remarking on the low esteem in which diviners were generally held, being

⁵³ *Li-chi* 3.18b; Couvreur I, pp. 61-2

⁵⁴ *SC* 127.2a; various views have been expressed regarding the authorship of this chapter of *SC* (see commentary)

⁵⁵ *HS* 4.2a; Dubs, vol. I, p. 225.

believed to stoop to anything by way of flattery or deceit in order to promote their own interests. In his answer, Ssu-ma Chi-chu turned the tables. He talked of integrity as a quality belonging to men of true worth who do not compromise their values or honour for the sake of taking office or ingratiating themselves with the mighty. He believed that those persons who held his visitors' respect were in reality masters of flattery and seekers of self-interest. In their search for honours or official stipends they were no different from armed robbers, being determined to pursue their own objectives to the detriment of the public interest.

After some further bitter criticism of the inherent deceit and hypocrisy of public life, Ssu-ma Chi-chu turned to the case of the diviners. He said that of necessity they were concerned with considerations of cosmology, cyclical sequences and ethical matters; they pronounced on the advantages of a situation, or the fortune likely to attend a project, only after manipulating their stalks and their instruments. It had been the ancient practice of kings to consult the turtle before entering into their inheritance, and families would seek prognostication on a child's chances of fortune before deciding to bring it up. The proof of the practice's validity could be seen in the state of order of the world since Fu Hsi 伏羲 had composed the eight trigrams or Wen king of Chou had operated the 384 lines of the hexagrams; or in the conquests and sovereignty achieved by Kou Chien 句踐 king or Yüeh 越, who took king Wen's eight trigrams as his model.

Ssu-ma Chi-chu then referred to the respect that diviners had for due form. They would deliver their message only after performing an act of purification and after due attention had been paid to setting their ceremonial hats and belts straight. The gifts that they conferred might be seen in the way in which it was after their utterances that the holy beings would accept the sacrifices made in their honour, that loyal ministers of state would serve their masters, dutiful sons sustain their parents or kind parents nurture their children. Other blessings might well follow from the diviners' activities; the sick might be cured; those facing death might yet live; disasters might be avoided, or affairs brought to fruition; or marriages might be arranged. Contriving blessings of such types could hardly be valued at a mere few hundreds of coins.

The master continued his defence of the profession and its practice by citing apposite quotations from Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, and by pointing out the great value of diviners' activities that were in no way bound by material considerations. He then pointed out the existence of a number of apparent imperfections in the world of

nature which had been put right by the spontaneous reactions of, e.g., the stars; and he noted the continual rhythm of sun and moon. However, there was no assured permanency in the teachings of the kings of old; in such circumstances it would surely be misguided to expect that diviners' utterances would always be free of doubt. On the other hand those who lived by their wits and their power of argument in public life never hesitated to cite precedents from the past as a means of bringing pressure to bear on their monarchs or of seeking to gratify their will; their road to success lay way by of exaggeration. By contrast diviners served as guides to the perplexed and mentors for the foolish, gradually striving to assist their sovereigns by clarifying the nature of heaven, and with no thought of honours or fame.

One of the spokesmen whose views are set down in the *Yen-t'ieh lun*, which was completed perhaps c. 60 BC, was not so well inclined towards divination. In the chapter which compares past and present practice, topic by topic, divination as witnessed in the first century BC fares no better at the hands of the critic than material aspects of daily life, which are castigated for being too extravagant. We read:⁵⁶

In ancient times virtuous conduct was practised in the search for happiness, and as a result generosity accompanied sacrifice and prayer; ethical ideals marked the search for good fortune, and as a result it was rare for divination to be performed by turtle or yarrow. But in the prevailing laxity of conduct to-day it is to the demons (*kuei* 鬼) that men look for good luck; and while being careless in regard to proper conduct, they pay particular attention to prayer and sacrifice. Slack in their attitude towards their parents, people put a high value on status; and in their extreme fecklessness they put their trust in the fortune that the right day will bring . . .

Similar thoughts are expressed in a comment that follows entries for books on divination in the *Han shu*. Divination by turtle and stalks was practised by the holy men of old, we read, and citations from the *Book of Documents* and the *Hsi-tz'u chuan* of the *Book of Changes* illustrate this statement.⁵⁷ In the age of decline, however, there were those who frequently resorted to the shells or the stalks without taking proper care over precautionary measures such as the vigil. As a result there was no response from the holy spirits; and however often a question was repeated to the yarrow stalks no message was forthcoming.

Elsewhere, however, the *Han shu* includes a defence of the profession that was put forward by one of its serving members. This was

⁵⁶ *TTL* 6 (29), p. 204

⁵⁷ *HS* 30.74b; see *Shu ching*, as cited in note 27 above; *Hsi tz'u chuan* 7.9a

Yen Chün-p'ing 嚴君平, who practised with the yarrow stalks in Ch'eng-tu, during Ch'eng-ti's reign (33–7). He is reported as saying that, although diviners who used turtle shells or stalks were members of a somewhat despised profession, they had the means of bringing a civilising influence to bear on members of the public. When questions of evil intentions or improper actions were raised, they exploited the shells and the stalks to recite the advantages or disadvantages of a project. When talking to children, their answer depended on the principles of their duty to their parents, and they likewise spoke on a basis of fraternal duty or loyalty, when answering men with brothers or advising servants of the empire. In this way members of the profession were able to give a lead to good conduct, and it was noticeable that over a half of those who heard their advice heeded it.⁵⁸

Scepticism became more pronounced during the Later Han period. In AD 85 Chang-ti offered K'ung Hsi 孔僖, a descendant of Confucius who had been engaged in the work of collation in the Tung kuan 東觀, an appointment as magistrate of Lin-chin 臨晉. One of his friends consulted the stalks to see whether he should accept the position and pronounced that he should refuse to do so. K'ung Hsi's reaction was indignant, as he insisted that good or bad fortune depend on the individual and not on divination.⁵⁹ At much the same time Wang Ching 王景 had been struck by the inconsistencies that were apparent in writings that concerned the use of turtle shells and yarrow stalks; his interest at least shows that he thought the subject worthy of considered treatment.⁶⁰

Perhaps the most vociferous criticism of divination was expressed by Wang Ch'ung 王充 (AD 27–c. 100), whose attitude appears at first sight to be ambivalent. He gives due credit to the principle that material features exist which, if examined, will give an indication of good or bad fortune to come; at the same time he rejects outright a dogmatic belief that particular objects such as turtle shells or yarrow stalks are imbued with numinous powers or holy qualities. In fact, however, Wang Ch'ung is consistent with his own principles. By recognising that events of the universe take place according to a natural order, he also believes that the early stages of a particular process may themselves be signs of the following stages. In this sense indications of good or bad fortune may be implicitly present in some features or phenomena of the natural world. This point is brought

⁵⁸ *HS* 72.2a.

⁵⁹ *HHS* 79A (biog. 69A). 13a

⁶⁰ *HHS* 76 (biog. 66). 6b

out in one passage which concerns the predictions that may be made from the winds.⁶¹ It may also be seen in the following passage:⁶²

Those who are kings take the whole world as their family. When the members of a family are about to engage in matters that may be subject to good or bad fortune, signs of such fortune are seen beforehand by human beings. Those who understand them prognosticate from them, and thereby comprehend when good or bad fortune is due to come. It is not the case that objects that are imbued with good or bad fortune possess understanding and therefore stage their arrival for the benefit of human beings who are fortunate or unfortunate.

This is comparable with the signs in the turtle shells or the numerical cast of the stalks. There are constantly elements of good or bad fortune in the signs and in the cast. When a man who is fortunate divines by turtle or practises divination by the stalks he falls in with signs that are fortunate; a man who is not fortunate falls in with signs that are unfortunate; it is not the case that the turtle shells or the yarrow stalks possess divine or numinous qualities such that they comprehend human fortune or misfortune and produce signs or a numerical combination by way of notification of such fortune. Those who sit idly by practising divination by turtle or stalks with no previous experience of [one character not understood] may just the same receive good or bad fortune.

So we find that good or bad fortune exists constantly in the world of heaven and earth, and the advent of adjects bearing signs of good or bad fortune will of itself fall in with human beings of good or bad fortune.

The same points are brought out in some of Wang Ch'ung's most forceful chapters,⁶³ where he attacks the commonly held belief that turtle shells and yarrow stalks form instruments of making enquiry from heaven and earth respectively. Wang Ch'ung sets out to show that neither object possesses divine properties or the means of communicating with human beings. He repeats his thesis that it is quite fortuitous for successful men to encounter good signs or for unsuccessful men to meet the reverse.

A famous contemporary of Wang Ch'ung, however, evidently allowed that there was some value in divination. This was Chang Heng 張衡 (78–139) who drew a sharp distinction between a number of practices, including divination by both methods, and a trust in the prognostication literature (*ch'an* 讖), which he regarded as pernicious and invalid. He referred to the subject both in his diatribe against *ch'an* writings and in his prose-poem on the sublime (*ssu hsüan fu* 思玄賦).⁶⁴

During the second century AD criticism shifted somewhat from intellectual to practical grounds. This was a time when considerable protest was being voiced against the unstable conditions of Han

⁶¹ *LH* 15 ('Pien tung'), pp. 649f; Forke, vol. I, pp. 105f.

⁶² *LH* 17 ('Chih jui'), p. 749; Forke vol. II, pp. 313f.

⁶³ E.g., *LH* 24 ('Pu shih'), pp. 994f; Forke, vol. I, pp. 182f.

⁶⁴ *HHS* 59 (biog. 49). 9b, 14b.

society and the lack of impartiality in public life. In a special chapter on the subject of divination, Wang Fu 王符 (90–165) traced the history of the practice from early and remote times when it was judged to be respectable and evoked the praise of masters such as Confucius. Its value and quality lay in the check that it imposed on arbitrary decisions by monarchs and in its encouragement of higher moral standards.⁶⁵ However, Wang Fu stressed that it was essential for divination to be used for its proper purposes, and not for matters that were not really subject to doubt. It was in this respect that he castigated the contemporary abuse of turtle shells and yarrow stalks, and their use for improper purposes, for praying, as it were, to the wrong deity.⁶⁶ Wang Fu's criticism should be seen in the context of his chapters that concerned related subjects, such as shamanism, judgements dependent on physiognomy, and prognostication from dreams.⁶⁷ Here again he was stressing the moral improvement that such practices could enjoin and the inherent dangers of excessive reliance or misuse.

The cause was taken up in an essay attributed to by Chung-ch'ang T'ung 仲長統 (b. 180), in the generation that followed Wang Fu, that concerns the way of heaven. Chung-ch'ang T'ung emphasised the need to pay full attention to human values and achievements in dynastic matters, as against an excessive trust in unseen powers. 'Those who claim an understanding of the way of heaven without a comprehension of human values are comparable with shamans, physicians, diviners or prayer makers, they are low grade men of folly'. Chung-ch'ang T'ung then proceeds to extend his plea for impartial treatment, and for appointments to office to be made on practical grounds. If a monarch insists on indulging private whims and allows his favouritism full force to the exclusion of attention to public interests, whatever steps that he takes will not serve to avert ruin, however auspicious the omens, however littered his shrines may be with turtle shells or yarrow stalks.⁶⁸

6. *Forms, procedures and types of question*

Reference has been made above to the injunction that is included in one of the poems of the *Ch'u-tz'u* to the effect that divination should

⁶⁵ See also *PHT*, as cited in note 16 above for the view that the value of divination lay in its demonstration that decisions of state were not being taken for personal or arbitrary motives.

⁶⁶ *CFL* 6 ('Pu lieh'), pp. 291f.

⁶⁷ *CFL* 6 ('Wu lieh'), pp. 301f.; *CFL* 6 ('Hsiang lieh'), pp. 308f.; *CFL* 6 ('Meng lieh'), pp. 315f.

⁶⁸ *Ch'ün-shu chih-yao* 羣書治要 (*SPTK* ed.) 45.26b–28a

not be used for questions that involve principles or ethics. That injunction takes its place in the context of writing that is of a mystical nature and which differs basically from that of other passages, which refer to the formal conditions and proper procedures for the practice. Guidance of that type occurs in texts such as the *Li-chi*, or, more specifically for the imperial period, in the *Shih-chi*. Attention will first be paid to texts such as the *Li-chi*.

According to one passage, whose interpretation may be in doubt, before consultation of the shells or the stalks it was necessary to ask whether the motive for doing so derived from a right and proper reason, or whether it was due to personal motives; only in the first case would it be right to put the question.⁶⁹ Elsewhere we are told that neither shells nor stalks should be consulted more than three times in connection with the same problem; if divination by one method fails to give a favourable answer, it is not proper to try with the other method.⁷⁰ The *Chou li* lists eight specific types of question that concern matters of state and which may properly be put to the turtle shells, i.e. military campaigns; the meaning of strange phenomena; the conferment of gifts; major plans and policies; the chances of a venture's success; the likelihood of the arrival of [expected individuals]; the possibility of rainfall; the likelihood of sickness.⁷¹ That the turtle shells are not to be consulted over the timing of the major sacrifices to heaven and earth is explained by the reason that such days are fixed regularly at the summer and winter solstices.⁷² However, this may have been a late, somewhat standardised arrangement. Elsewhere in the *Li-chi* we are told how the inspired kings (*ming wang* 明王) of the three dynasties always performed acts of divination before service to the powers of heaven and earth, and in this way they avoided infringing any prohibition of timing.⁷³ The same passage states that the son of heaven does not consult the turtle shells for determining the site of the major ancestral shrines.⁷⁴

The *Li-chi* provides that those who are about to consult the turtle must take the preparatory steps of bathing and donning their ceremonial jades at the waist, presumably by way of purification and in order to mark the solemnity of the occasion.⁷⁵ The same work

⁶⁹ *Li-chi* 35.6a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 6; the passage is sometimes taken to be an injunction against putting the same question for a second time.

⁷⁰ *Li-chi* 3.14b; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 61

⁷¹ *Chou li* 24.13b; Biot, vol. II, p. 72

⁷² *Li-chi* 5.24b; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 105

⁷³ *Li-chi* 54.26a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 510

⁷⁴ Couvreur explains this as being due to regulations which provided that this must be placed to the left side of the palace.

⁷⁵ *Li-chi* 10.2a; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 225

quotes a statement of the men of the south to the effect that those who lack constancy of character are not fit to act as diviners with shells or stalks.⁷⁶ In addition, the diviners' gifts must be put to honest use, the death penalty being due for various crimes, including false invocation of demons and holy spirits, insistence on making a choice of timing and reliance on shells or stalks and thereby throwing the populace into confusion.⁷⁷

In their determination to ensure that all religious rites are performed so as to maintain the prosperity of the realm, true kings surround themselves with a number of specialists such as shamans, astrologers and those who work with shells and stalks.⁷⁸ Some sovereigns treated these specialists with particular respect. 'Long ago the holy men established the true principles lying behind Yin and Yang and Heaven and Earth, and with these they formulated the Changes. The diviner bore the turtle in his hands and faced south, and the son of heaven, wearing formal robes and headgear, faced north. However inspired and intelligent his heart and mind may have been, he would invariably draw forward to determine his decision'.⁷⁹ The passage shows the great degree of respect that the ideal sovereign was believed to retain for the diviners, even to the extent of yielding to them the honoured position of facing the south. Elsewhere the duties of the specialists and the ruler in this connection are defined in general terms, with the diviner (*pu* 卜) deciding on the correct method of using the turtle, the astrologer or clerk (*shih* 史) determining the meaning of the ink and the ruler determining the signs.⁸⁰

The *Li-chi* includes detailed prescriptions for the notification of deaths and for funerals, varying for officials and dignitaries of different grades. When divination is performed to determine the place and time of burial for a counsellor of state (*ta-fu* 大夫), the diviners must wear prescribed items of clothing; the officiant who pronounces the prognostication must wear a fur hat. Similar prescriptions provide for the correct way in which yarrow stalks are used for the purpose. The same passage provides that at the burial of a counsellor of state, the *ta tsung-jen* 大宗人 assists the master of the house in the conduct of the ceremonies; the *hsiao tsung-jen* 小宗人 puts the charge to the turtle; and the diviner (*pu jen* 卜人) carries out the act of divination.⁸¹

⁷⁶ *Li-chi* 55.18a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 532

⁷⁷ *Li-chi* 13.9b; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 308

⁷⁸ *Li-chi* 22.17a; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 526

⁷⁹ *Li-chi* 48.15a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 314

⁸⁰ *Li-chi* 29.10a; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 682

⁸¹ *Li-chi* 40.11a; Couvreur, vol. II, pp. 122f.

When the shells or the stalks were consulted in order to determine the right date for a specific action, a distinction was drawn between those actions which followed from happy and unhappy events. Thus, for funerals, the first enquiries were made to settle a date in the distant rather than in the immediate future (i.e., enquiries concerned a date beyond the current period of ten days); but for actions that ensued from happy events the reverse procedure was correct, and the first steps that were taken were to fix a day within the current day period. In specifying this principle, the *Li-chi* cites the formulae that were to be used on these occasions: 'To determine the day, we rely on the constant truths invested in you, oh mighty turtle, oh mighty yarrow stalks'.⁸² A distinction of terminology was also maintained when divining over the details of a funeral, depending on the relationship of the chief mourner and the deceased person.⁸³

The *I-li* includes a detailed account of the rite of divination when this is performed to choose an appropriate place of burial. As may be expected, the text has been the subject of considerable comment from the time of Cheng Hsüan 鄭玄 (127–200) onwards, and a number of points of interpretation still remain in doubt. The following summary is in accordance with most of the opinions that have been expressed.⁸⁴

As a first step the official responsible for graves makes a survey of the land that may be selected for the purpose and for which enquiry is being made. The four corners are dug out, and the excavated earth is deposited outside the area, while earth that is excavated from the centre is placed on the south side of the plot. When the morning ceremony of lamentation has been completed, the chief mourners proceed to the south side of the site, facing north, and discard their headbands and belts. The diviner who is charged with the duty of putting the question takes his place at the right hand side, that is the place of honour, of the chief mourners. The diviner faces east; he draws off the upper part of the case in which the yarrow stalks have been contained and holds both parts in his hands. Facing south, he receives the charge, such as 'X who is in mourning for his father Y seeks by means of the stalks to find a suitable place of burial. He is contemplating the use of this dark spot as the place and wishes to know whether evil consequences will follow such a choice.'

The diviner agrees to accept the charge but he does not enunciate

⁸² *Li-chi* 3.14b; Couvreur, vol. I, pp. 60–1, the same formula occurs in *I-li* 47.3a; Couvreur, p. 582; Steele, vol. II, p. 159

⁸³ *Li-chi* 42.10a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 167

⁸⁴ *I-li* 12.27a; Couvreur, p. 474; Steele, vol. II, p. 73

it. Turning right about, he faces north and performs his act of divination pointing to the central plot, with the assistant who draws out the lines on his left. When an act of divination is completed, the pattern of lines is taken and shown to the diviner charged with the question; he receives it; inspects it; and returns it. The assistant who has drawn the lines faces east and the prognostication is made according to a number of methods.⁸⁵ He moves forward and announces this to the diviner charged with the question and the chief mourner. If the prognostication signifies 'proceed', the chief mourners don their headbands and belts, and perform their act of lamentation. If the prognostication signifies the reverse, divination is performed to choose a site for burial according to the ceremony carried out in the first instance. According to the *Li-chi*, for a second or subsequent burial in a grave wherein a corpse has already been buried (e.g., for a spouse) no divination is carried out by stalks; presumably this was because the site had already been prognosticated as favourable.⁸⁶

The *I-li* also includes a detailed description of the ceremony of divination for determining an appropriate day for burial. This was conducted with turtle shells, and much the same attention was paid to the niceties of the occasion and its procedures as in the case of consultation of the stalks to choose a suitable place. Considerable stress is laid on the positions adopted by the various participants and the way in which the turtle's plastron was handled. Again, should the answer be unfavourable, the ceremony was to be repeated.⁸⁷

A ceremony whose purpose was completely different, which is described in the opening passage of the *I-li*, concerned occasions when a young man was confirmed in his majority and put on adult headdress. But despite the differences in purpose, the ceremony had many features in common with that undertaken to choose the right situation for a grave, as has been described above. The yarrow stalks were first consulted to determine an auspicious day for the event. The stalks, mat and means of figuring out the hexagrams were laid out in the western portico; the diviner drew off the upper part of the case in which the stalks had been contained, and held both parts in his hands. When he had learnt what charge was to be put, he resumed his seat, facing west, with the assistant who drew out the

⁸⁵ The commentators suggest that these included use of *Lien-shan*, *Kuei-ts'ang* and *Chou i*.

⁸⁶ *Li-chi* 33.5b; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 760

⁸⁷ *I-li* 37.12a; Couvreur, pp. 477-80; Steele, vol. II pp. 75f; see also *I-li* 41.8b; Couvreur, p. 509, Steele, vol. II, p. 101; and *I-li* 44.2a, Couvreur, p. 541, Steele, vol. II p. 127.

lines on his left. When the act of divination had been completed, the drawn out hexagram was shown to the master of the house. It was inspected by the diviner and his assistants, who would report if it should be regarded as being favourable. If it showed that the day would not be favourable, the stalks were consulted to see whether a day somewhat later would be appropriate.⁸⁸

Divination with yarrow stalks was also practised on this occasion to choose who should be treated as the guest of honour. The *Li-chi* explains that divination for both these purposes was a means of showing respect to the assumption of majority by the young man in question; demonstration of such respect was in itself a means of stressing the importance of *li*.⁸⁹

Other regulations ensured that the instruments of divination were treated with the respect that was their due and were designed to prevent misuse or possible pollution. Along with a number of other objects that were used for symbolical purposes, turtle shells and yarrow stalks were not to be brought into a prince's palace.⁹⁰ As part of the respect due to a ruler, punishment was prescribed if the handling of sacred equipment had been so negligent that it had to be adjusted in his presence; e.g., there were penalties if it was necessary to correct the position of yarrow stalks that had been inverted, or that of turtles that had been turned on their side.⁹¹ This regulation presumably applied to occasions when an act of divination was about to take place in the ruler's presence.

Once, when Ch'ü Yüan 屈原 is reported to have consulted the diviner Chan Yin 詹尹, without any success, the latter had started the procedure by setting his stalks straight and brushing the plas-tron.⁹² We are also told that rapid movement must be avoided when carrying the turtles or yarrow stalks.⁹³ When they were being carried, they were to be handled in the same way as a number of other ritualistic objects, i.e. with the left hand raised higher than the right hand.⁹⁴ Ceremonial batons were to be discarded during acts of divination that concerned details of burial.⁹⁵ In addition, the insistence on strict procedures for religious ceremonies provided for the disposal of spoilt materials; robes and vessels or other equipment used

⁸⁸ *I-li* 1.1a; Couvreur, p. 1; Steele, vol. I, p. 1

⁸⁹ *Li-chi* 61.1b; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 637.

⁹⁰ *Li-chi* 4.9b; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 76

⁹¹ *Li-chi* 4.9a; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 76

⁹² *Ch'u tz'u* 6.1b; Hawkes, p. 89 (revised ed., p. 204)

⁹³ *Li-chi* 35.12b; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 13.

⁹⁴ *Li-chi* 35.16b; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 18

⁹⁵ *Li-chi* 44.14b; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 216

in sacrifices, if spoilt, were to be burnt or buried; spoilt plastra or stalks were also to be buried, along with sacrificial animals who had died naturally before the sacrifice for which they were intended.⁹⁶

It has been seen above that in defending his profession Ssu-ma Chi-chu referred to the care and attention paid by diviners to form and behaviour.⁹⁷ Ch'u Shao-sun re-iterated the point:⁹⁸

At the time when I was serving as a gentleman of the court I used to wander around Ch'ang-an to look at the sights. I used to see distinguished members of the diviners' profession and observed their deportment and gait. In the manner in which they adjusted their clothing and hats they were just like men up from the country, but they possessed the demeanour of men of quality. When they examined a person's character they were clever at understanding its nature. If a woman came for consultation with the turtle shells, the diviners would face her with a straight face and completely correct behaviour, never so much as showing a tooth by way of a smile.

In Han times there were evidently different views regarding the correct procedure for storing or disposing of materials used in divination. The *Shih-chi*⁹⁹ includes the report that when it was desired to perform an act of divination in the Hsia and Yin periods, stalks and turtles were collected for the purpose; and once the activity was over they were discarded and removed, in the belief that turtles would lose their magical powers if they had been kept in store and that yarrow stalks, if kept for long, would no more retain their spiritual virtue. However, these affairs were ordered somewhat differently by the time of the office of diviners of the Chou period, when both the stalks and the shells were constantly preserved as being objects of great value. Ch'u Shao-sun wrote of the 'turtle house' that existed in his own time within the shrine dedicated to the memory of Kao-ti; it contained a highly valued collection of turtle shells that were thought to possess spiritual powers. In the same context he tells of the use of shells or their parts as a talisman. 'If you collect the bones of turtles' forelegs, pierce them through and wear them at the waist; or if you collect turtles, place them in the north-west corner of the house and hang them up; you may then penetrate the fastnesses of the mountains and the forests without losing your senses'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ *Li-chi* 3.12a; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 57

⁹⁷ *SC* 127.2a *et seq.*, as cited above

⁹⁸ Addendum to *SC* 127.12

⁹⁹ *SC* 128.3

¹⁰⁰ *SC* 128.10

In a special *p'ien* which is entitled *Shih kuei* 著龜,¹⁰¹ the *Po-hu t'ung* treats the subject partly by way of direct statement and partly in the form of question and answer. The text includes a more standardised degree of formulation than that seen hitherto; it repeats a number of principles that had been enunciated in earlier writings; and it explains some aspects of the procedures, usually by the simple device of citing from such texts.

Divination by both methods was practised, according to this source, from the son of heaven down to those of the rank of *shih* 士, its purpose being to demonstrate that decisions of state were not taken on an arbitrary basis. The materials to be used were graded according to size, and the use of different types was specified in accordance with the rank of the consultant. Thus the son of heaven used turtle plastra that measured 1 foot and 2 inches, and yarrow stalks that were nine foot long. Smaller shells and stalks were used by the nobility (*chu-hou* 諸侯), counsellors (*ta-fu* 大夫) and finally those who were of *shih* status, who had to be content with turtles of a mere six inches, and stalks of three feet. The prescribed measurements were in even figures for the turtle, as this belonged to the category of *yin*, but odd for the yarrow stalks, which belonged to *yang*. The number of diviners also varied according to the rank of the consultant, ranging from nine for the son of heaven to three for *shih*. Of all varieties of withered stalks and dried bones, yarrow stalks and turtle shells were chosen for use because they are the most long-lasting objects in the world. When the stalks were consulted in order to choose a suitable day for the ceremony of assuming adulthood, the ceremony took place outside the ancestral shrine; but in all cases it was apparently essential for the hexagrams to be delineated within the shrine, in so far as it was the ancestors who constituted the source of wisdom. This latter principle does not appear to have been mentioned in earlier texts, and is a somewhat noteworthy, and perhaps unusual, addition to the subject.

The *Po-hu t'ung* included the prescription that the correct position for divination with milfoil is on the west side facing east. The reason for burying shells and stalks after use is to prevent pollution of something that is honourable. For reasons which are stated but which are by no means clear, the text also lays down that if divination by stalks fails to reveal whether an action or proposal will be fortunate or unfortunate, divination is tried again by means of turtle shells.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *PHT* B. 16a *et seq.* (6.3b *et seq.*); Tjan, vol. II, pp. 522f.

¹⁰² Tjan renders as follows: 'The milfoil follows the way of the yang; it has

The process of manipulating forty-nine out of a total of fifty stalks is described in the *Hsi-tz'u chuan* of the *Book of Changes*, and the passage is cited with some variations in the *Lun-heng*. The stalks are divided into two lots, to symbolise heaven and earth; four lots are counted off to symbolise the four seasons, the remainder being retained between the fingers to symbolise an intercalary period or month.¹⁰³ A note to the *Huai-nan-tzu* that is ascribed to Kao Yu 高誘 alludes to the same method of using 49 stalks.¹⁰⁴ Operators who grasp (*ts'ao* 操) the turtle and the yarrow are described as setting the stalks straight (*tuan* 端) so as to make enquiry of their numbers.¹⁰⁵

7. Practice, incidents and occasions: the pre-imperial period

There is a wealth of information regarding the practice of divination in pre-imperial times. The selected references and incidents to which attention is drawn here have been chosen from the various compendia on *li*, in the belief that they would have been present as examples in the forefront of the minds of those concerned with divination during the Han period.¹⁰⁶ These incidents concern religious activities, the human life-cycle, family affairs or the selection of individuals for particular purposes or duties. In some cases the references may be somewhat anachronistic.

Traditionally the inspired kings of the three dynasties invariably divined by turtle or stalk when worshipping heaven and earth; for they did not dare to render their service to these almighty powers if, by reason of their own motivation, they might be impure.¹⁰⁷ While there were fixed times for the major services, it was necessary to consult the stalks to determine a date for the minor services, and the

many permutations, and by its permutations [things] come to completion' (vol. II, p. 525).

¹⁰³ *Hsi tz'u chuan* 7.7a; *LH* 24 ('Pu shih'), p. 997; Forke vol. I, 184. For a system used in connection with the 81 tetragrams of Yang Hsiung's system, see *HHS* 59 (biog. 49). 1b commentary.

¹⁰⁴ *HNT* 8.1b note.

¹⁰⁵ *HNT* 17.3a. See also *Ch'u tz'u* 6.1b (Hawkes p. 89) for the diviner who 'set out his divining stalks and dusted his tortoise shell' (trs Hawkes)

¹⁰⁶ In addition there are the many incidents reported in the *Tso chuan*, which merit consideration as a special study; they would be more likely to have been brought to attention in Later Han than in Former Han. I am indebted to Professor Zürcher for pointing out that eight records of divination (*pu*) in the *Ch'un-ch'iu* and *Tso chuan*, that are dated between 629 and 494 BC, are concerned exclusively with the ritual purity of the bull chosen for sacrifice at the bounds of the city (*chia*o).

¹⁰⁷ *Li-chi* 54.26a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 510

kings did not disobey the indications given by the turtle or the yarrow. The duties of the *ta tsai* 大宰 included divination to determine the right day for sacrifice to the Five Powers.¹⁰⁸ Similarly the *ta tsung po* 大宗伯 led his subordinate officials in acts of divination to choose the time for sacrifice to the more important spirits and demons (*shen kuei* 神鬼).¹⁰⁹ A further reference to divination prior to a major sacrifice states that this was a prerequisite to the inspection of schools.¹¹⁰

In determining the right day for performing the sacrifices at the perimeter of the city (*chiao* 郊), the charge to do so was announced in the ancestral shrine, and the act of divination with the turtle shell was performed in the shrine dedicated to the son of heaven's own father. In this way the son of heaven demonstrated his reverence for his remote ancestors and his love for his late parent.¹¹¹ The turtle shells were also consulted to decide whether a particular sacrificial animal had been so selected that good fortune would prevail.¹¹² Yarrow stalks were used in connection with minor offerings of animals made in honour of ancestors.¹¹³

Reference has been made above to the ways in which divination took place to determine the time or place of burial; in addition, the yarrow stalks were consulted to choose the individual who was to impersonate the corpse during the ceremony.¹¹⁴ Divination also featured in connection with marriage and its possible outcome, as, at a crucial point of the preliminary arrangements, the turtle shells were consulted to see whether marriage with a certain woman would be fortunate.¹¹⁵ This precaution may have had considerable significance in cases wherein the name of the woman was not known for certain.¹¹⁶

When Shih T'ai chung 石駘仲 died his principal consort had not born him an heir and it became necessary to choose one from among the six sons who had been born of other women; recourse was had to the shells for the purpose. This incident is recorded in the *Li-chi* in connection with the ceremonial that was involved, and in the

¹⁰⁸ *Chou li* 2.20a, b; Biot, vol. I, pp. 37-8

¹⁰⁹ *Chou li* 18.27b; Biot vol. I, p. 436; see also *Chou li* 19.18a, Biot vol. I, p. 455

¹¹⁰ *Li-chi* 36.5b; Couvreur vol. II, p. 32

¹¹¹ *Li-chi* 26.4a; Couvreur vol. I, 591; see also *CCFL* 15 (69). 6a for reference to divination on the occasions of the sacrifices at the boundary.

¹¹² *Li-chi* 48.1b; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 293

¹¹³ *I-li* 49.1a; Couvreur, p. 581; Steele, vol. II, p. 158

¹¹⁴ *I-li* 24.14b; Couvreur, p. 345; *I-li* 47.5a; Couvreur, p. 584, Steele, vol. II p. 159; *Li-chi* 33.9b, Couvreur, vol. I, p. 764.

¹¹⁵ *I-li* 6.9a, b; Couvreur, pp. 49-50; Steele, vol. I p. 21.

¹¹⁶ *Li-chi* 2.14a; Couvreur, vol. I p. 31; *Li-chi* 51.25a; Couvreur, vol. II p. 423

Lun-heng as part of an argument against divination on the grounds of its futility.¹¹⁷ A further passage in the *Li-chi* is interpreted as referring to divination with shells when it was necessary to decide who was to be the ruler of a state (e.g., during the enforced absence of an enthroned ruler owing to imprisonment outside his own realm).¹¹⁸ For somewhat less exalted positions, it was the turtle who decided to which official there was assigned the duty of carrying a ruler's newly born heir, and to which women there fell the responsibility of rearing the child.¹¹⁹ Prescriptions for the buildings used by the son of heaven and the nobility for sericulture laid down that those women whom the turtle declared to be fortunate were to be chosen to supervise the work.¹²⁰

Two other references to divination may be cited from the *Li-chi*. The first concerns the building of a city:¹²¹

The master said: when a man ascribes what is good to others but assumes personal responsibility for what is bad, members of the public will yield to each other the credit for performing good deeds. The *Book of Songs* has it: 'It was the king who examined the cracks; he planned this city of Hao 鎬; it was the turtle that set it right; it was Wu Wang who completed it'.¹²²

The second reference is of a more general nature:¹²³

The master said: the [mantic] instruments used by great men are treated with awe and respect. In general the son of heaven does not make use of yarrow stalks; the nobility use yarrow stalks when in their own domains. When he is embarked on a journey, the son of heaven makes use of yarrow stalks; unless they are within their own state the nobility do not make use of yarrow stalks; they consult the turtle in respect of a choice of residence or chambers; the son of heaven does not consult the turtle in order to determine the site of the principal ancestral shrine.

The master said: when the man of quality is showing respect he makes use of the sacrificial vessels. It is for this reason that [in paying visits to his superiors] he does not infringe the regulations that prescribe the day for doing so; nor does he go against the guidance of the shells and the stalks, for he thereby intends to show respect to his superiors. It is in this way that those of higher rank do not behave insultingly to those below and those below do not lack respect in relation with their superiors.

¹¹⁷ *Li-chi* 10.1b; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 225; *LH* 24 ('Pu shih'), p. 999; Forke, vol. I, p. 186

¹¹⁸ *Li-chi* 51.21a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 419

¹¹⁹ *Li-chi* 28.12a; Couvreur, vol. I, p. 663

¹²⁰ *Li-chi* 48.2a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 294

¹²¹ *Li-chi* 51.15a, Couvreur vol. II, p. 408

¹²² *Shih ching*, Ta ya 'Wen wang yu sheng'; Karlgren, *Book of Odes*, pp. 199–200; for the *Li-chi* reading *tu* 度, translated here as 'planned', the text of the *Shih ching* reads *che* 宅.

¹²³ *Li-chi* 54.28a; Couvreur, vol. II, p. 512.

8. *Practice, incidents and occasions: the Ch'in and Han period*

In describing the types of crack that are formed on turtle shells, the addendum to chapter 128 of the *Shih-chi*¹²⁴ lists 23 topics that may form the subject of enquiry. These are illness and its outcome; the demonic nature of an illness; the possibility of the release of detained persons; the acquisition of wealth; success in the sale or purchase of slaves and livestock; the advisability of attacking robber bands; the advisability of undertaking journeys; the likelihood of encountering robbers either in an expedition to attack them or in one designed to find them; the reliability of reports of robber activity; the advisability of leaving official service on transfer; the advisability of remaining in office; the fortunate or unfortunate outcome of taking up a residence; prospects for the year's harvest; the chances of an outbreak of epidemic during the year; the likelihood of armed violence during the year; the results of an interview with highly placed persons; success in addressing requests to others; the chances of finding a lost person or persons; the results of fishing and hunting; the likelihood of meeting robbers when on a journey; the prospects of rain; the likelihood of rain ceasing.

It is evident that these were the types of question that were likely to be put to divination on a popular level, and many of the topics recur in the subjects that are mentioned in the newly found almanacs, and in prognostications that derived from comets or clouds. In other literary evidence the accounts of incidents of divination during the imperial age are of a more formal nature and arose from official motives rather than popular fears.

For consultation of the shells and the stalks during the imperial period, attention may be drawn to a passage in the *Ordinances of the months* (*Yüeh ling* 月令). This text may be seen in nearly identical form in no less than three works, i.e. the *Li-chi*, the *Lü shih ch'un-ch'iu* and the *Huai-nan-tzu*. As Professor Bodde has pointed out, the *Yüeh ling* may be accepted 'as a late but authentically pre-Han text'.¹²⁵ Its inclusion in three works of such different types and purposes as the three that are mentioned, and its importance in educational terms thanks to its incorporation in the *Li-chi* leave little doubt that these regulations carried a considerable significance in Han times.

The text tells us that on the day of the winter solstice the son of heaven personally leads his senior officials to greet the incoming year in the sacred site set apart for worship on the northern outskirts of

¹²⁴ *SC* 128.35f.

¹²⁵ Bodde, *Festivals*, p. 16

the city. On return he pays tribute to those who had died in his service and comforts their orphans and widows. It is in this month (*Meng tung* 孟冬) that he orders the director of astrology, divination, or prayer¹²⁶ to pray to the spirits and to prognosticate from the signs of the turtle shells and the yarrow stalks, so as to examine their good or evil fortune.

Divination by turtle shells features in the famous anecdote in which the second Ch'in emperor was worsted by Chao Kao 趙高. Astonished at the general agreement that an animal that was palpably a deer was a horse, the emperor sought guidance from the stalks to see if he was suffering from delusions. The record simply reports how the director of divination blamed the emperor's state of mind on his failure to carry out his religious duties with sufficient attention to holiness.¹²⁷

On at least two occasions in Former Han divination was practised, or is said to have been practised, in connection with accession to the imperial throne. In the preliminary measures prior to his enthronement in 180 BC as emperor, Liu Heng 劉恆, king of Tai 代, made the appropriate gestures of reluctance, modesty and reverence for occult powers. His final step was to consult the turtle, which duly produced a large horizontal stroke. This was interpreted favourably with the help of a citation from a long lost work; according to Chavannes, the outcome was clear: 'La grande transversale, c'est changer, changer. Je serai roi par la grâce du Ciel; (je serai comme) *K'i*, de la dynastie *Hia*, par ma gloire'. In addition to the intrinsic significance of the incident, it is of considerable interest to note the reference here to an established set of interpretations, not altogether unlike those that have survived in the *Chou i* for divination by means of yarrow stalks and hexagrams.¹²⁸

In the second instance it is perhaps even more clear that the purpose of divination on these occasions may have been to make a public display of proof that a newly selected sovereign was assuming his charge with the full blessing of occult powers. In 74 BC Liu Ho 劉賀, king of Ch'ang-i 昌邑, reigned as Han emperor for a mere 27 days before being deposed. His successor, Liu Ping-i 劉病已, was brought forward largely owing to the recommendation of Ping Chi 丙 (邴) 吉. This statesman reiterated the young man's virtues and urged that both the stalks and the shells should be consulted. We

¹²⁶ *Li-chi* 17.10b; Couvreur, vol. I pp. 392f. (reading *t'ai shih* 太史); *LSCC* 10.1b (reading *t'ai pu* 太卜); *HNT* 5.14a, b (reading *t'ai chu* 太祝)

¹²⁷ *SC* 83.43; Bodde, *China's First Unifier*, pp. 52–3.

¹²⁸ *SC* 10.4; Chavannes, *Mémoires historiques*, vol. II, p. 446; *HS* 4.2a; Dubs, *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, vol. I, p. 224.

are not told for certain whether these steps were taken; in the event Liu Ping-i duly acceded to the throne; he is best known under his posthumous title of Hsuan-ti.¹²⁹

Divination played an important part on a number of occasions when imperial policy or dynastic matters were concerned. It is said to have been used with considerable success in the search for those involved in a case of witchcraft, probably the one in which the empress Ch'en 陳 was implicated in 130 BC.¹³⁰ According to the *Huai-nan-tzu*,¹³¹ whenever a state faces an emergency, the ruler issues a summons to his general or generals with the command 'The destiny of Our hearth and home lies with you in person; Our state is facing an emergency and it is Our desire that you should take command and respond to the situation'. When he has received such a commission, a general gives orders to the officials responsible for prayer and to the director of divination to fast and keep vigil for three days; they should then proceed to the principal shrine, there to pierce the divinely inspired turtle so as to determine by divination a day that would be favourable for taking receipt of the drums and flags.

An edict of 89 BC¹³² referred to the ancient practice of divination by both methods on the part of ministers and counsellors of state, and their refusal to undertake a project if the guidance was unfavourable. On the occasion to which the edict referred, the stalks and the *Chou-i* had been consulted to reveal the meaning of a gesture whereby the Hsiung-nu had been tethering their horses close to the Han lines. The sign was duly interpreted as meaning that the Hsiung-nu would be defeated, and a whole variety of specialists who were consulted, including experts in the stalks and shells, pronounced that they themselves were satisfied. The turtle was then consulted for a second time,¹³³ to determine which of the generals should be put in command of the campaign; it was in these circumstances that Li Kuang-li 李廣利 was appointed Erh-shih 貳師 general.

There are also references to diviners, or divination, during the civil wars that preceded the Han restoration, possibly on a more personal level. Specialists in both types were among those who

¹²⁹ HS 74.8a; Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict*, pp. 75–81.

¹³⁰ SC 128.4. Takigawa notes that this incident refers to the case of the empress Ch'en and her daughter and not, as had been suggested, to the major incident of 91 BC. For the former case, see HS 59.2a; for the latter, see Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict*, chapter 2

¹³¹ HNT 15.22b

¹³² HS 96B.18a; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 170

¹³³ I.e., with the reading *pu* 卜 in place of *kua* 卦, as suggested by Wang Nien-sun 王念孫 (1744–1832)

interpreted a lady's dreams as an indication of an imminent armed uprising in AD 27.¹³⁴ In the following year, T'ien Jung 田戎, one of the self-established leaders who had arisen in those troubled times, is said to have consulted the turtle to decide whether or not he should surrender to Ts'en P'eng 岑彭; as there was a split in the sign he did not do so.¹³⁵

A few incidents may be cited in Han times wherein the shells or the stalks were consulted to solve problems of choice in a family. Specialists in these methods of divination are, it is true, conspicuously absent from mention among those whom Wu-ti consulted to fix an appropriate day for his wedding;¹³⁶ but a century or so later the force of tradition was re-asserted in the case of P'ing-ti's 平帝 marriage to Wang Mang's 王莽 daughter.¹³⁷ This was shortly after his accession, at the age of nine years; with the example of Huo Kuang 霍光 in mind,¹³⁸ Wang Mang succeeded in having his daughter espoused to the young emperor, in the teeth of some opposition. Some of the most senior officials of state were present to take part in the formal ceremony of choosing the bride, and among them were 49 subordinates of the directors of divination and astrology. These were robed in the formal dress and headgear prescribed by the compendia on ceremonial,¹³⁹ and they conducted divination by shell and stalk according to the rules of *li*. For the remaining stages of the procedure, Wang Mang took equal pains to ensure that due deference was paid to the traditional rites that these occasions demanded.

In AD 128 Liang Na 梁嬖, daughter of Liang Shang 梁商, was introduced into the imperial women's quarters at the age of 13.¹⁴⁰ Liang Shang had conceived the ambition of marrying her to the emperor, doubtless as a means of enhancing his own position, and by way of acquiring a reward for the services which his ancestors

¹³⁴ *HHS* 12 (biog. 2). 9b

¹³⁵ *HHS* 17 (biog. 7). 14a; Hans Bielenstein, *The Restoration of the Han Dynasty*, vol. II (*BMFEA* 31, 1959), pp. 26f.

¹³⁶ *SC* 127.14; for this incident, see Loewe, *Chinese ideas of life and death*, p. 100.

¹³⁷ *HS* 97B.22b *et seq.*, and *HS* 99A.9a. It is of considerable interest to note that in commenting on the latter passage Fu Ch'ien 服虔 (c. 125–195) explains how the five different types of crack produced on the shells can be related to the material elements of the *wu hsing*.

¹³⁸ For Huo Kuang's marriage of his granddaughter to Chao-ti, see Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict*, p. 115

¹³⁹ *HS* 97B, 23a commentary; *Li-chi* 26.5a and 31.7a; Couvreur, vol. I, pp. 592, 731

¹⁴⁰ *HHS* 6.6a, 10B.2b and 44 (biog. 34). 8a for Liang Na's admission as a *kuei jen* 貴人 and then as empress.

had rendered to the Han house. When the specialist in physiognomy had pronounced on the exceptional qualities that the girl possessed for the august position that was intended, the shells were consulted, and they yielded a message that was highly encouraging. When the stalks were consulted they produced the hexagram *k'un* 坤 moving into *pi* 比 which was regarded as being just as auspicious.

According to the *Shih-chi* it had been the practice to put the question before deciding whether a newly born infant should be reared.¹⁴¹ This was presumably intended for cases where the health of a child was precarious, or if it had been born with some deformity.¹⁴² Towards the beginning of Ling-ti's reign (168–189) we hear of one statesman citing the principle laid down for the Ch'un-ch'iu period that, in the absence of an heir, the eldest son of a collateral branch is chosen; if there are sons of equal age, the choice depends on their relative character; and in cases where such considerations are equal, the choice is determined by the shells and the stalks.¹⁴³ As a further example of divination which was undertaken to settle a personal question, there is a reference to the use of shells to fix a site for the burial of the emperor's mother (AD 194).¹⁴⁴

An anecdote that may be apocryphal refers to consultation of the turtle shells to determine the meaning of strange phenomena. This occurred after the birth of Liu Hsiu 劉秀, destined to be the first of the Later Han emperors. On the night of the day *chia-tzu* 甲子, in the twelfth month of the first year of Chien-p'ing 建平 (15 January 5 BC) the house was suffused with brilliant light. In some astonishment the infant's father had a specialist in divination by shells prognosticate the meaning of this strange event; it is hardly surprising to learn that he interpreted it as a sign of the greatest possible good fortune.¹⁴⁵ Divination is also mentioned in connection with the strange occurrences that took place shortly after Shun-ti's accession, when steps were being taken to re-instate Yang Chen 楊震 posthumously (c. 126). Orders had been given for his reburial with full honours, and some ten days before this took place, a flock of huge birds had roosted in front of the coffin and sung a lament, flying away only when the ceremony was completed.¹⁴⁶ Liu Ch'ang

¹⁴¹ *SC* 127.8

¹⁴² For the licence for infanticide in cases of certain types of illness or deformity, see A.F.P. Hulswé, *Remnants of Ch'in law* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), p. 139, item D 56

¹⁴³ *HHS* 64 (biog. 54). 11a

¹⁴⁴ *HHS* 10B.11b

¹⁴⁵ *HHS* 1B.23a, b; *LH* 2 ('Chi yen') 88; Forke, Vol. I, p. 180

¹⁴⁶ *HHS* 54 (biog. 44). 7a.

劉暢, king of Liang 梁 (accessed AD 79) frequently consulted the shells or the stalks to find out the meaning of the nightmares with which he was afflicted.¹⁴⁷

On taking up his appointment in Kuei-chi 會稽 in AD 53, Ti-wu Lun 第五倫 found that the population of the area was addicted to *yin ssu* 淫祀, i.e. improper religious practices, and that there was a general love of divination by shells and stalks.¹⁴⁸ Other evidence for the practice may be seen in the references to a few named diviners during Wang Mang's time or in Later Han. Wang K'uang 王況, a specialist in the use of shells, was one of those who had plotted against Wang Mang in AD 21.¹⁴⁹ In AD 23 an apparition which appeared in the palace was identified as Liu Hsin 劉歆 who had just committed suicide; Wang Mang ordered Wang Hsi 王喜, who had won a fine reputation as a diviner with hexagrams, to cast the stalks in this connection.¹⁵⁰ In the same year a diviner named Wang Lang 王郎 was falsely passed off as Ch'eng-ti's son Yü 興 and actually established as emperor.¹⁵¹ Hsü Chün 許峻 (style Chi-shan 季山) ancestor of Hsü Wan 許曼 is described as being expert at prognostication with shells; very often his pronouncements were vindicated in a conspicuous manner, to the extent that his contemporaries compared him with Ching Fang 京房.¹⁵² Liu Wan 劉琬, son of Liu Yü 瑜 (fl. 165) is mentioned as being skilled at casting the stalks in connection with disasters and strange phenomena.¹⁵³

Attention should also be paid to the few references in Chinese sources to the practice of divination by non-Chinese peoples. The *Shih-chi* carries the general statement that although the Man 蠻, I 夷, Ti 氏 and Ch'iang 羌 peoples have no ordered establishment of rulers and subjects, they nonetheless possess means of divination to decide matters that are in doubt, either with metal and stone, or with wood and trees.¹⁵⁴ More specifically, we hear of the practice of the southern tribes, as reported by Yung Chih 勇之 shortly after the successful campaigns fought against the Nan-yüeh and Min-yüeh 南, 閩越 in 111 BC. Yung Chih was a native of Nan-yüeh who is alleged to have discussed the religious habits of the Yüeh peoples.

¹⁴⁷ *HHS* 50 (biog. 40). 7a

¹⁴⁸ *HHS* 41 (biog. 31), 2b

¹⁴⁹ *HS* 99C. 12a; Dubs, vol. III, p. 408

¹⁵⁰ *HS* 99C.23b; Dubs, vol. III, p. 452; identified as the son of Wang Kuang 王光.

¹⁵¹ *HHS* 1A.8b

¹⁵² *HHS* 82B (biog. 72B). 2b; Ngo van xuyet, p. 111

¹⁵³ *HHS* 57 (biog. 47). 14a

¹⁵⁴ *SC* 128.3

In the course of his talk he mentioned that longevity attended those kings of the south who observed due reverence to the demons (*kuei* 鬼); laxity in doing so had however led to an early demise. Wu-ti was sufficiently well impressed to order the shamans from Yüeh to conduct their own forms of worship. In their prayers to the spirits of heaven and other deities they practised divination by means of chicken bones. It was owing to the faith that Wu-ti placed in these rites that religious forms of Yüeh and divination with chicken bones were introduced into China.¹⁵⁵ In commenting on this passage, Li Ch'i 李奇 (c. 200) explained that the chicken bones were used in the same way as turtle shells. Chang Shou-chieh 張守節 (fl. c. 737) was more explicit. He wrote that a chicken and a dog were taken, live, and prayers were uttered; thereafter the animals were killed and cooked, and sacrifice was offered. Two special bones alone were removed from the chicken; if they had a fissure or crack that resembled a human body, this was a sign of good fortune; but if the marks failed to show these signs, they were marks of bad fortune. Chang Shou-chieh concluded his note by observing that practices in Ling-nan 嶺南 were of this type in his own time.

The *Hou-Han shu* and the *San kuo chih* refer briefly to the mantic methods of other peoples. When the Fu-yü 夫餘 were concerned over questions of military matters, they sacrificed to heaven; they slaughtered an ox and divined by means of their hooves. If these were uncurled, and loose, this signified good fortune; if they were closed up they meant bad luck.¹⁵⁶ For the Japanese Islands we are simply told that the peoples of Wo 倭 heated bones in order to divine, thereby discovering what their fortune would be likely to be.¹⁵⁷

9. Summary

From the foregoing it may be seen that many Chinese of the Han period retained a deep faith in the powers of divination. Deliberate attempts to search for guidance in this way possessed a significance and a validity that was no less forceful than that of other intellectual or religious activities undertaken in like manner to plumb the secrets of the universe. The act of divination depended on a belief in the unitary nature of the universe. It sought communication with unseen powers through the medium of material objects that were

¹⁵⁵ *SC* 12.40; *SC* 28.80; Chavannes, vol. III, p. 507; *HS* 25B.1a

¹⁵⁶ *HHS* 85 (biog. 75). 4a; *SKC* 30.841

¹⁵⁷ *SKC* 30.856; *HHS* 85 (biog. 75). 12a; Ryūsaku Tsunoda, *Japan in the Chinese Dynastic Histories* (ed. L. Carrington Goodrich); South Pasadena; P.D. and Ione Perkins, 1951, p. 12.

thought to be inspired with numinous qualities. It could be used to ensure good fortune for the living and the dead; it could solve problems that affected human destiny on earth; it could serve as a means of ensuring that the holy spirits were being worshipped in an effective manner.

There persisted a strong tradition, established in pre-imperial times, that regulated the forms and procedures which attended consultation of the turtle shells and the yarrow stalks. Imperial governments included provision for dignitaries who performed the ceremonies correctly. Divination was practised at the court, and in order to decide questions of policy. It was also practised at a popular level with a view to obtaining assistance over personal matters. As the centuries passed there grew up some measure of criticism that divination was being practised too frequently or for the wrong purposes; that it was ineffective and that it lacked an intellectual basis; or that it exercised a detrimental effect on moral standards.

ABBREVIATIONS

- BMFEA** *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*
- CCFL** Tung Chung-shu 董仲舒 *Ch'un-ch'iu fan-lu* 春秋繁露. References are to Su Yü 蘇輿 *Ch'un-ch'iu fan-lu i-cheng* 義證 (preface by Wang Hsien-ch'ien 王先謙 dated 1914); facsimile reprint Taipei: Ho-lo t'u-shu ch'u-pan-she, 1974.
- CFL** Wang Fu 王符 *Ch'ien-fu lun* 潜夫論. References are to P'eng Tuo 彭鐸 (ed.) *Ch'ien-fu lun chien* 潜夫論 箋 Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1979.
- Forke** Alfred Forke, *Lun-heng*; Part I, *Philosophical essays of Wang Ch'ung*; Part II, *Miscellaneous essays of Wang Ch'ung*; 2 vols., Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh; London: Luzac; Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1907 and 1911; reprinted New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962
- HHS** Fan Yeh 范曄 and others, *Hou-Han shu* 後漢書 and *Hsü Han shu* 續. References are to Wang Hsien-ch'ien, *Hou-Han shu chi-chieh* 集解 Ch'ang-sha, 1915; facsimile reprint Taipei: I-wen yin-shu kuan, 1955
- HNT** Liu An 劉安, *Huai-nan-tzu* 淮南子. References are to Liu Wen-tien 劉文典 *Huai-nan hung-lieh chi-chieh* 鴻烈集解 Shanghai, 1926; facsimile reprint Taiwan: Shang-wu yin-shu kuan, 1969
- HS** Pan Ku 班固 and others, *Han shu* 漢書. References are to Wang Hsien-ch'ien, *Han shu pu-chu* 漢書補注 Ch'ang-sha, 1900. Facsimile reprint Taipei: I-wen yin-shu kuan, 1955.
- LH** Wang Ch'ung 王充 *Lun-heng* 論衡. References are to Huang Hui 黃暉 *Lun-heng chiao-shih* 校釋, Ch'ang-sha: Shang-wu yin-shu kuan 1938; facsimile reprint Taipei: Taiwan Shang-wu yin-shu kuan, 1969.
- LSCC** *Lü shih ch'un-ch'iu* 呂氏春秋; references are to the *SPPT* edition
- PHT** Pan Ku 班固 *Po-hu t'ung* 白虎通. References are to the text included in *Liang ching i-pien* 兩京遺編; this copy is more accurate than the

- one included in *SPTK*, but for convenience references to the latter edition are appended in parenthesis.
- SC* Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷 and others *Shih-chi* 史記; references are to Takigawa Kametarō 瀧川龜太郎, *Shiki kaichū kōshō* 會注考證 Tokyo, 1932-34; facsimile Peking: Wen-hsüeh ku-chi k'an-hang she, 1955
- SHC* *Shan-hai ching* 山海經; references are to Yüan K'o 袁珂, *Shan-hai ching chiao-chu* 校注, Shanghai: Shang-hai ku-chi ch'u-pan-she, 1980.
- SKC* *San kuo chih*; Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1959
- SPPY* *Ssu-pu-pei-yao*
- SPTK* *Ssu-pu-ts'ung-k'an*
- Tjan* Tjan Tjoe Som, *Po hu t'ung: the comprehensive discussions in the White Tiger Hall*. 2 vols; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1949, 1952
- YTL* *Yen-t'ieh lun* 鹽鐵論. References are to Wang Li-ch'i 王利器 *Yen-t'ieh lun chiao-chu* 校注. Shanghai: Ku-tien wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan-she, 1958