

CHINESE ALCHEMY AND A FEW OF ITS TERMS AS USED BY IQBAL

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It is well established that alchemy existed at Alexandria, in India, in China, but recent research shows that it started in China and went as far as Alexandria. In China, alchemy is divisible into two phases, an esoteric or a spiritual system of acquiring immortality, and an exoteric or materialistic one which became the earliest form of pharmaceutical chemistry. The aim of alchemy in both these phases has been immortality. This specifies Chinese alchemy. Alchemy was founded by ascetics. In ancient times struggle for life was most severe and every male member of the community had to partake in hunting and exert physically as an active worker. The aged, being infirm, could not justify himself as a bread-earner and was excommunicated as a solitary denizen of a forest. Living alone the ascetic had to be his own grocer, his own cook and his own doctor. He needed, in the first instance, an energiser to be able to over-exert himself and keep himself alive. The Aryan ascetic discovered the ephedra plant of which the juice is Soma. Whitney,⁴⁷ who was a famous Indologist, writes that "the Aryans perceived that Soma had power to elevate the spirits under the influence of which the individual was prompted to and capable of deeds beyond his natural powers ; then they found in it something divine."Pharmacology of ephedrine⁴⁸ shows that as a typical energiser, it is antisomnolent and also an euphoriant. There is a similar energiser, still in use, with its euphoriant properties to make it popular and it is Khat of Yemeni Arabs, or *Catha edulis*. While Soma became god Soma,

⁴⁷ Quoted in J. Garrett, *Classical Dictionary of India* (Madras, 1871), p. 592.

⁴⁸ S. Mandihassan, "Soma, in the Light of Comparative Pharmacology, Etymology and Archaeology," *Janus* (1974), 61 : 91.

the god of herbal-ism among the Aryans, Khat became the Flower of Paradise among the Muslims since they could not deify the plant.

The original drugs the Chinese ascetics used as energisers are unknown to me. But their god of immortality emerges from a Peach, while a corresponding deity, called the Red Pine Master, is depicted covered with leaves to substitute a coat as though he personifies verbalism. Such an illustration is reproduced in Needham's classic on Science and Civilization in China.⁴⁹ Then living on an energiser the aged ascetic could support himself single-handed. He felt as though youth had returned and this led him to imagine further that he could retain youth for ever. But behind all such dreaming was the actual feeling of well-being conferred by the energiser. Later on plants were substituted by minerals, above all arsenic and mercury, and in China both herbal magic and mineral magic were exploited by ascetics needing rejuvenation and dreaming of immortality. Realising what the solitary old ascetic needed most we can conceive with what objective he must have founded alchemy. To quote Nicholson,⁵⁰ "Let us begin at the end. What is the far-off goal on which his eyes are fixed? The answer to that question will discover the true character" of alchemy, with both its phases. The founder was physically weak, yet he had to over-exert. This clearly meant that his ideal would be the robust health of youth with no hesitation to discharge any work needing physical energy. At the same time his appearance should reveal no wrinkle on the face as indicative of infirmity of old age. Naturally, if he can regain youth he can retain it for ever, and knowing no debility, disease or death, he would be immortal to become the Ideal Man. A synonym of ideal Man would be True Man, since a man living for ever would be true to his life, whereas a mortal, with ephemeral existence, could be looked upon as not having lived at all. Now, there is in Chinese also the term, Chen-Jen, True Man, for one who has acquired immortality. In ancient civilization Real

⁴⁹ J. Needham, *Science and Civilization In China* (1976), Vol. 5, Pt. 3, p. 10, fig. 1342, the Red Pine Master, p. 41, fig. 1349. Ascension of the alchemist. See also note 10.

⁵⁰ R.A. Nicholson, *Secrets of the Self* (Lahore, Ashraf, 4th ed., 1950), p. viii.

Citizen was the free man who was also adult; minors and slaves had no civil rights and were therefore no real citizens. Thus Real Man would be another synonym of True Man, one sociologically considered, the other biologically. Let us now turn to the denizen of Heaven as conceived in Islam as also in other religions. He must be perfect in all respects to be able to live as an immortal in heaven. Then True Man or Real Man spiritually considered becomes Perfect Man. The word “perfection” is often used in the literature on alchemy but always axiomatically and thus left vague. Perfection signifies a quality or stage of immunity to any change for the worse. Taking an example, copper, as metal, is imperfect, since it rusts and can ultimately disintegrate into dust. On the contrary, gold is perfect being rust, proof, even fire-proof. In fact, we do use terms like “golden words” of a sage when we understand that they deserve to be remembered for ever and by every man. We mean they are to be everlasting. In the light of the above discussion we can form the series of equivalent terms as: Ideal Man=True Man=Perfect Man=Golden Man. Of these synonyms in Chinese there are the terms Chen-Jen=True Man or Perfect Man, and Chin-Jen=Golden Man.

Then if we are to select one of these two terms, Golden Man appeals as the more impressive being akin to Golden Words. Now, the term “Golden Man” was translated into Greek as Chrusanthropos and is found in the literature which nevertheless has been totally ignored and, where recorded, its significance has been declared unknown, as by Waley.⁵¹ Thus the goal of alchemy had been immortality and the mortal who had acquired immortality was designated Golden Man, in Chinese as also in Greek.

Now comes the question how he could acquire immortality. We shall first discuss the easier or the exoteric system of Chinese alchemy. Man conceived Life=Growth, and could easily differentiate between perennial

⁵¹ A. Waley, "Notes on Chinese Alchemy," *Bn. School Or. Stu.*, London, Vol. VI (1932), Chrusozomion on p. 12 and Chrusanthropos on p. 13.

plants and minerals. He concluded that the life-essence, according to its quantity, increases the life-span.

Now, in Animism even plants and minerals carried soul or life-donating principle and this was common to all forms of existence, be it a herb or a mineral. In this light plants became stores of soul with herbal-juice as a life-prolonging agent. Moreover, some plants were so rich in Soul-content that their juice could donate perfect growth or maximum possible growth to its acceptor. If man consumed it, his life-span would go on increasing for ever and herbal magic all over the world has offered some such herb of immortality. There is, however, a weak point which has been overlooked. The human body, as the container of life-essence, has been ignored. Hence came the suggestion of taking a metal and calcining it with some magical herb. The herbal soul would reincarnate in a despited metal, on claiming both, and give rise to an Incarnation Body, a herbal soul in a metallic body, as a herbo-metallic complex. Since the herbal juice is a growth donor, the metal complex, containing it, could be induced to grow to perfection, which means it would become gold. Then the calcined metal would grow into gold. In the light of its impressive effect, the herbal juice, which was used, could be called gold-making juice. Then the juice-made gold, or synthetic gold, as metal, would make the human body as strong and everlasting as gold as a substance is, and further, being juice-incorporate, it would keep on increasing life-span just as the herbal soul does in a perennial plant. Accordingly, better than any plant and better than gold itself, synthetic gold, as herbo-auriferous complex, would be the ideal drug of immortality. Thus arose alchemy as an off-shoot of herbalism and at once explains why metallic gold, already available, was not preferred. The drug of immortality had to be dual-natured thereby independently making the corporeal system of man strong and everlasting, as also the life-essence or soul ever-growing. Making synthetic gold was to prepare no metallic gold but a herbo-auroferic complex. Here the more important item was naturally the herb, or rather its juice, as the gold-making juice.

In Chinese there is the term Chin-I, dialectic Kim-lya, literally Gold-Juice, signifying Gold-making Juice. This was Arabicised as Kīmiyā' and was translated into Greek as Chrusozonion. Like the term Chrusanthropos nearly all histories of alchemy further ignore the term Chrusozomion. Waley⁵² alone, who records it, does not do justice to herbalism as the precursor of alchemy. By now we can recognise gold-making juice as perfect juice and this be-cause it can make a base metal perfect gold, when ordinary gold itself is not perfect. This requires realising the difference between freshly prepared gold, saturated with growth force, and bullion gold, as fossil gold, buried thousands of years beneath the earth. When ordinary gold is mixed with mercury an amalgam is formed which, when heated, separates into the two substances. On the contrary, when alchemical gold is inoculated into mercury, the former donates its power of growth to mercury and this, in turn, begins to grow to perfection, thereby becoming gold. Such gold behaves like a ferment, making its substrate like itself, on account of which alchemist prefers to call his gold ferment gold. A Buddhist-Chinese text dated A.D. 659 as quoted by Waley⁵³ states that "a speck of gold not larger than a grain of corn was produced after twelve years. However, there is nothing now to prevent making a mountain of gold." This makes ferment gold = perfect gold. A ferment is a living substance and to realise this we have to compare two formulae, (1) Life=Growth, (2) Life=Growth, + Reproductively.

A plant grows by itself and has life, but a ferment reveals more than vegetative growth; it can induce something else also to grow and such power is reproductivity. We have learnt how an amalgam, with ferment gold, became all gold, and above all that ferment gold itself is seed of gold. We accordingly find that gold-making juice was mono-elemental, or only a herbal soul, prolonging life, but ferment gold was perfect gold, dual-natured, making

⁵² Idem, "References to Alchemy in Buddhist Literature," Bn. School Or. Stu., London, Vol. VI, p. 1102. Ibid.

the body young and strong, and life ever-increasing, like that of 'a perennial plant or like a ferment. Above all it can reproduce its kind. Now, the consumer of perfect gold would also imbibe perfection, which it could not primarily do from a herb, even though this could make gold. Perfect Man, we have already discussed, was the aim of alchemy. To be perfect he had to assimilate I ferment gold or perfect gold. Then if a juice could be called gold-making juice, the gold-made immortal man could be called golden man. Thus arose the more popular synonym of Perfect Man as Golden Man. Admitting what perfect gold signifies, its consumer becomes Perfect Man. There is an entity growing more and more as growth-incorporate. There is another which confers growth upon an acceptor who thereby reproduces its kind. Briefly, instead of a single hideous giant, with all growth, we have more than one entity; each deservant of being called Perfect Man. Perfect gold was ferment gold, no mountain of gold; Perfect Man is a benefactor, the maker of others equally perfect. If God created man, the Perfect Man creates another as Perfect Man. Iqbal uses this term and its synonyms precisely in this sense.

It has been maintained by many historians of alchemy that alchemy arose at Alexandria and the Greek word *Chemeia* for alchemy signifies "Egyptian Art". Hopkins⁵⁴ in his book, *Alchemy Child of Greek Philosophy*, has done more than justice to alchemy as "Egyptian Art". He imagines that by technique it is Egyptian and by theory Greek. Now, the one technique which alchemy can boast of having developed most is distillation and, as far as I know, Egyptology reveals no case where even perfumes represent distillates. This point is perhaps the weakest link in the chain of reasoning which takes alchemy to Egypt, be it to Alexandria. Further, the theories supporting alchemy have been animism, dualism and monism. All these are as much Chinese as Greek so that altogether there is neither any special Egyptian technique nor incorporation of any special Greek doctrine. In fact, the Greek word *Chemeia* is the Greek transliteration of the Arabic word,

⁵⁴ H.G. Hopkins, *Alchemy Child of Greek Philosophy* (Columbia University Press, 1934).

Kīmiyā', undertaken by a Bucharic-speaking Copt, as explained in detail previously.⁵⁵ Finally there is a brief but positive ' method of showing the Chinese origin of Alexandrian alchemy. If the entire vocabulary of alchemy were to be reduced to just two terms, one would be the gold-making juice or Kīmiyā. This would prepare Perfect Gold. And Perfect Gold is the drug that changes a mortal into an immortal, one deserving of being called Perfect Man or Golden Man. Then the two terms would be Chin-I, gold-making juice, and Chin-Jen, Golden Man, or Chen-Jen, True Man or Perfect Man.⁵⁶ Both terms exist in Chinese and in Greek.

We now turn to the esoteric side of alchemy. These are breathing exercises and others similar to the Indian Yoga system. It has been explained that the Chinese look upon such a system as a branch of alchemy and this because the two are parallel paths leading to the same goal, or immortality. Now, the impact of Chinese dual-natured alchemy upon the Arabs, before Islam, produced a differential effect, the materialistic system was adopted first Later came esoteric alchemy.

We have now to discuss the terms equivalent to Perfect Man. Hussaini⁵⁷ has published a monograph on Ibn al-'Arabī whose sufism culminates in the conception of al-Insān al-Kāmil, the Perfect Man. Ibn al-'Arabī equates, Perfect Man— Prophet Muhammad. Unless this is explained we cannot understand what Perfect Man actually signifies in esoteric alchemy. Any agency that makes Perfect Gold, in the first instance, is a powerful donor of life-force, or soul-power and when matter receives impacts of a powerful soul it becomes soul-like. A man assimilating elixir, best as Perfect Gold, becomes sublime. Jildakī,⁵⁸ who is a renowned authority on Islamic alchemy, writes that elixir can confer the power of being able to fly about, as though

⁵⁵ S. Mandihassan, "Alchemy in the Light of Its Names in Arabic, Sanskrit and Greek," *Janus* (1960, 49-79).

⁵⁶ A Waley, "Notes on Chinese Alchemy," *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ S.A.Q. Hussaini, *The Pantheistic Monism of Ibn al-Arabi* (Lahore, Ashraf, 1970).

⁵⁸ M. Taslimi, "An Examination of the Work, *The End of Search*, by al-Jildakī," London University Inaug. Diss., 1954

man had become an angel. What this sublimity, applied to the human body, means is best visualised by the case of Jesus. He can be looked upon as Sublimity-incorporate. After his resurrection he could keep company with travellers who had gone far ahead. Yet he could eat with his disciples and show the wounds on his body to convince them that his flesh was the same as before, but naturally now so sublime that he could finally ascend to heaven in broad daylight.

Schep⁵⁹ has best explained the nature of Resurrection Body which is not to be taken for a ghost or a gaseous residium of the body of Jesus. Likewise Mi'rāj signifies ascension by the Holy Prophet, with his original body, which was sublime enough to ascend to heaven. Whereas Jesus left the world after ascension, the Prophet returned to earth. The moment we interpret Mi'rāj as ascension, Muhammad becomes Perfect Man, as Ibn al-'Arabī would have it. Now this conception of flesh becoming sublime enough to acquire the power of ascension existed in Chinese alchemy even before Jesus. In an article on Elixir,⁶⁰ I have reproduced before a scene depicted by the Chinese showing the ascension of an immortal. Needham⁶¹ adds another equally revealing ascension. Enough has been discussed to constitute the series of equivalents as, Chin-Jen (Golden Man)=Chen-Jen (True Man)=Insān al-Kāmil =Perfect Man. Iqbal has two further equivalent terms in Persian, Mard-i Haqq (True Man)=Mard-i Mū'min (The Believing Man).

Considering esoteric alchemy a little deeper we find it was adopted as sufism of which the earliest phase existed previous to Islam, like alchemy proper. The original two phases went almost together because their aim was identical. Even sufis of repute, like Ibn al-'Arabī and Dhun-Nūn Miṣrī, tried

⁵⁹ J.A. Schep, *The Nature of Resurrection Body* (Erdemans Pub. Co., 1964, U.S.A.).

⁶⁰ S. Mandihassan, "Elixir, Its Significance and Origin," *J. As. Soc. Pak.*, Dacca, VI, 39.

⁶¹ Needham, *op. cit.*

both, alchemy and Sufism, but found the latter as the surer method. We have then to establish the Chinese origin of the word *Kīmiyā'*. With regard: to the origin of sufism, Siddiqui⁶² mentions that foreign authorities on Sufism “Dozy and Nicholson,” among others, pronounce Sufism to be “purely non-Islamic” in origin. He, however, plead, to the contrary stating that “it is not necessary to go outside the Quran and Hadith to look for the frame of mind which produced the ascetic movement in Islam culminating in the birth of Sufism there are verses in the Quran (such as): Obey not him who, followeth his own lust and whose case has been abandoned (XVIII: 29).” If such passages incorporate “Sufism in the Qur'an” no wonder others have discovered enough to cover Science in the Quran in three volumes. However, one is called upon here to respect zeal but not erudition. In trying to show the origin of alchemy I focussed attention on its two indispensable terms, Gold-making juice and Golden Man or Perfect Man. A similar procedure will reduce discussion on the subject to its minimum. The origin of sufism, as a system of acquiring immortality, is being ignored in favour of terms specific to statism, being taken to their real origin. To begin with, there is the word *ṣūfī* itself. Here I cannot imagine a more authentic explanation than that of al-Qushayrī, mainly because Ibn Khaldūn⁶³ endorses it. We read that “No etymology or analogy can be found for this term [*ṣūfī*] in the Arabic language. Theories deriving the word Al-Safa', purity, or from As-Suffah, Bench, or from As-Saff, Row, are impossible from the point of view of linguistic analogy. The same applies to the derivation from Al-Suf, Wool, because the Sufis were not the only ones who wore wool (Qushyari: Kitabur Risalah).” The subs use a term *fanā' fil-shaikh*, implying that if you respect and love the teacher these lies the road to salvation identical is the position in Chinese Taoism where the candidate of immortality has to call out the name of his teacher to finally identify himself with him. The teacher was addressed as *Shih-Fu Shih* is character 9909 in Giles⁶⁴ and means “a Teacher, a Model,

⁶² M. Siddiqui, *Concept of Muslim Culture in Iqbal* (Islamabad, 1970), p. 48.

⁶³ F. Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah of ibn Khaldun* (19'8), III, 76. quotes al-Qushayrī.

⁶⁴ H.A Giles, *Chinese-English Dictionary* (1892).

to be taken as a pattern,” a benefactor in the person of a teacher. Fu is character 3736 and means Father. Then Shih-Fu=Master-Father. The Hindus would call him Guru. Now, in Ningpo dialect Shih-Fu becomes Sz-fu which was Arabside as Tṣuf or ṣūf. The term of endearment is the suffix “I,” in Arabic. Brother would be Akhu, but My Brother = Akhui.

Accordingly, My= Tṣuf would be Tṣuf-i=Sufi= My Guru. This etymology has been discussed in more details before.⁶⁵

Next comes the word Dervish. Its Chinese original connotes “a scholar who lives in retirement,” devoted to contemplation rather than to teaching and guiding, like the Gant or Sufi. Then the actual Chinese term would be Tao-Lu-Yin-Shih. Tao is character 10780 and means righteous Path, or madhhab in Arabic. Lu is 7365, a synonym of Tan, and thus duplicates the sense. Yin, 13276, is translated as “retired, to keep out of sight (of public)”. Shih, another word here, as character 9992, means a scholar. Then the four words mean, Tao (Religion)—Lu (Religion)—Yin (Retired)—Shih (Scholar), and signify, “religious scholar living in retirement”. In Szechwan dialect these words would sound as follows: Tau-Lu-Yin-Shi. On becoming a loan-term the words underwent mutation and abbreviation yielding: Dau-Ru-Yi-Shi, which can be condensed into Darvīshī. Here the suffix “i,” meaning “one,” in Persian, being dropped finally produced the word, Darvish, also explained before.⁶⁶

Thirdly comes the word Qalandar. The Chinese alchemist, Ko-Hung,⁶⁷ wrote that “among those who acquired (the right Path), Tao (madhhab), the mediocre among them will (not go to Heaven) but congregate on the Khun-Lun mountain,” the most elevated spot on earth itself. Thus Khun-Lun could be conceived as “Magicians' Mountain” where they can obtain herbs of

⁶⁵ . S. Mandihassan, "The Chinese Origin of the Words, Kimiya, Sufi, Dervish and Qalandar in the Light of Mysticism," J, Univ. Bombay (1956), 25 (2) : 124.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Lu-Chhiang Wu, "Ko Flung on the Gold Medicine," Am. Aca. Arts and Sc/. (1935), 70 : 248, Para 38.

immortality and remain as immortals. They would obviously occupy a lower status, than other spiritual elites. To the term Khun-Lun we have to add another as Tao-Erh. Tao is righteous Path, or madhhab as before, and Erb, as such, is given with character Erh, on p. 1068, as “Your reverence, the Taoist-Priest”. Then Khun-Lun (Magicians' Mountain) Tao Erh (Your Reverence) would signify, “a priest-like individual launching him-self on a magic-mountain”. Now Khun-Lua-Tao-Erh in the Szechwan dialect would be pronounced Khun-Lwen-Tau-Eris. Persians preferring Qāf and abbreviating the long term made h Qa-Lan-D-Er or Qalandar. In contrast to Dervish, a recluse who prefers to live unnoticed in an “ascetic's corner,” the Qalandar is a wandering ascetic, a vagabond among the ascetics. And Qalandar correspondingly in sufi literature always ranks lower than a Dervish. Usually, Qalandar is not a complementary term, whereas Dervish always is. Thus all the three important words Sufi, Dervish and Qalandar used by Iqbal are traceable to Chinese. Sufism is the Chinese system of acquiring salvation where reverence to the preceptor is the cardinal doctrine. Sufism in Islam rightly began when Ibn al-'Arabi equated, Muhammad =Perfect Man=Preceptor.