Li Po and Alchemy


The dated Buddhist inscription referred to above was written at Yen-chou, near [Li Po's] Shantung home, in the summer of of 749. Though it is a memorial inscription in honor of a Buddhist monk, it is interesting chiefly in connection with Taoism, and with a particular aspect of Taoism, namely alchemy. It was indeed an alchemist, Sun T'ai-ch'ung, who procured for Li Po the no doubt renumerative job of writing this inscription. At Court fierce competition for Imperial favors involved Buddhists and Taoists in continual and most unedifying conflict; but in the provinces they seem to have got on very tolerably, and Li Po, evidently without a sense of incongruity, devotes a part of his epitaph on the monk Tao-tsung to a eulogy of the alchemist Sun.

It is possible that Li Po first met Sun T'ai-ch'ung some years previously at Ch'ang-an for, as we shall see, Sun was at the capital in 744. He was a super-alchemist who claimed to be able to make the Elixir of Life without using any of the usual ingredients. In view of the repeated failure of Chinese alchemists since the first century B.C. to make an effective elixir out of tangible substances, it may seem to us that Sun was imprudent in putting an additional strain on the credulity of the public by announcing that his elixir "made itself," with the aid of the Taoist divinity T'ai-i (The Supreme Unity). But, given that no drug does exist which confers immortality, interest in elixirs could only be stimulated by improvements in the technique of advertisement and showmanship. If Sun had merely announced that, like hundreds of others, he had made the Elixir of Life, no notice would have been taken. But when in 744 he announced that he could make a "spontaneous Elixir" the Mayor of Lo-yang passed on this claim to the Government and the Chief Minister Li Lin-fu, accompanied by a eunuch who acted as the Emperor's personal representative, was sent to Sun's retreat on the Sung Shan (near Lo-yang) to investigate. His report to the Throne, written for him by Sun T'i [Died 761 or 762, at an advanced age --- A.W.] a Duty Officer in the Palace Secretariat famous for his skill in framing documents of this kind, is still preserved. According to this report: "Water was placed in the stove and charcoal at one side. The stove was then sealed up and we went away. Several months later the paste of the seals was found, when touched with the finger, to be hard set and the seals quite intact. Then in the presence of the officials of the district and other persons, the door of the stove was opened. The charcoal was found all to be reduced to ashes which were collected in a place apart. Without human intervention, the Elixir had duly come into being. At first it emitted rays of all the five colors, but finally it assumed the appearance of a Sun, shining at the edge of the stove." The alchemist was ordered to convey this blazing object to Ch'ang-an and as a reward for his successful experiment was given a sinecure in the Department of Waterways. The Emperor, according to Li Po, swallowed this luminous pill and received in consequence "ten thousand longevities and a blessedness equal to that of Heaven."

It would be useless to speculate how Sun T'ai-ch'ung effected his miracle. It is often said that alchemy is the cradle of chemistry. In the present case it is clear that Sun must, in the course of his alchemic researches, have discovered or made some phosphorescent substance. He must also have developed a
technique for breaking and replacing seals without leaving any trace of his handiwork.

Alchemists, on such occasions, were in a stronger position than might appear. So long as their client was alive no one could assert that the experiment had failed; if he died it was always open to the alchemist to has that the client had countered the effects of the Elixir by sexual or other physical exercises. Alchemists did, however, sometimes get into trouble. For example, when the Emperor Hsien Tsung died suddenly in 820, Liu Pi, an alchemist who had supplied him with the Elixir, was flogged and executed. The Elixir delivered to the Emperor Hsüan Tsung by Li Po's friend, though it did not confer immortality upon him, at any rate did him no harm, for he lived on in good health for about twenty years, and finally died (in 762) at the considerable age of 77.

Li Po was, so far as I know, the first Chinese poet to show familiarity with the literature of alchemy and its technical terms, and to devote whole poems to the subject; earlier poets had merely made occasional allusions to the quest for an elixir of life as a pursuit confined to Taoist recluses. Li Po's knowledge of alchemy is based chiefly on the T's'uo T'ung Ch'i, a work first referred to about 500 or earlier, but supposed (rightly, to judge by the rhyme-system used) to date from about the 2nd century A.D. and to be the earliest surviving treatise on alchemy in East or West. It discusses alchemy largely in terms and concepts derived from the Book of Changes and so brings alchemy within the orb of Confucian studies. So far as is known Li Po is the first Chinese writer to quote passages from this book, which in later times became not only the standby of poets wishing to make elegantly vague allusions to alchemy, but also one of the bases of Neo-Confucian cosmology in the 12th century. Li Po's poem "On Making the Great Elixir" is (except for its concluding lines) practically a summary of the T's'an T'ung Ch'i. It begins by describing the polarity which pervades the Universe. The mating of opposites is a natural law; the processes of alchemy (which consist essentially in such matings) are, he says, as much part of Nature as the alternating mastery of sunshine and moonlight. "The Virgin rides in the River Coach (i.e. the mercury lies on the lead); the gold plays the part of the yoke-bar." Then after bringing in a number of picturesque alchemical terms --- the Red Bird (i.e. fire), the White Tiger (spirit of Metal and of the West), he announces that the Great Elixir "that is inseparable from Tao itself" lies ready in all its splendor. Everything, he continues, is now in the adept's power; "he can caress the sun; Paradise itself is but an ell away."

In the Kingdom of Death his name has dropped from the rolls
The Southern Pole-Star lists him in its Book of Lives.

The poet then claims that he too should be counted as belonging, in his own way, to the category "magician." His genius, he says, is such that he could easily, if he had chosen to do so, have played a conspicuous part in the public affairs of his day, but he has deliberately cast away such a career in scorn, and he invites Liu Kuan-t'i, the friend to whom the poem is addressd, to give up all thought of carving out a career for himself at Ch'ang-an and go with him "in a chariot bron aloft swifter than wind or lightning by the phoenix and dragon" to the Jade Emperor's Fairy Palace in the Ninth Heaven.

In such passages Li Po is, I think, not merely paying tribute to a fanciful mythology. The quest he speaks
of is the yu (travelling, wandering) of the early Taoist philosophers, which was a spiritual not a bodily journey. The purpose of the poem seems to be first to dazzle his friend by a romantic picture of alchemy at work, and then to suggest that the pursuit of Taoist illumination, with a companion such as Li Po himself (who is as much of a magician as any alchemist) would be far preferable to a struggle for power in the turbulent arena of public life. There are numerous incidental references to alchemy in Li Po's works, but the only other poem dealing with it specifically is one that he wrote to be put up as an inscription on the alchemical furnace of a certain Mr. Ts'ui who was Prefect of Yung-ch'iu near Kaifeng. To understand the poem one must know the following story: A certain Wang Ch'iao, after holding a position at Court, was sent to be Prefect at Shê, about a hundred miles south-east of Lo-yang. Wang was a magician and, though so far away, he still continued to appear at Court at Lo-yang regularly on the first day of each month. It was noticed that his attendances were always heralded by the arrival of two wild geese, flying in from the south. One day the wild geese were snared and when the snared was opened, it was found to contain two slippers, which the Imperial store-keepers identified as having been issued to Wang Ch'iao when he was at Court. Li Po's inscription, of which I merely give the prose sense, runs:

``When a man of high character is entrusted with the government of a district his first concern is to put all practical affairs out of his head. Whether he spends his time absorbing magic drugs or seeking for Immortals nothing in the place where he rules can ever go amiss. The Prefect of Shê has sealed up his furnace and may well wander off to Fairyland with the Immortal Red Pine for his companion. He has received secret instruction from his master; the spirits are on his side. Holy Man, do not worry! Your fire needs no tending. But it seems indeed that you are more than a mere alchemist; for the elixir can only cause those that swallow it to grow wings. On what strange art did your miracle of the two wild geese depend?''

Li Po is of course politely comparing Mr. Ts'ui, Prefect of Yung-Ch'iu, to Wang Ch'iao, Prefect of Shê. At time when the Confucians were in power no official would have thought it wise to confess that he practised alchemy. But this was a period when Confucian influence was at a low ebb and Taoism had become, for the time being, practically the established religion of China.