A NOTE ON NARCOTICS IN ANCIENT GREECE AND IN ANCIENT CHINA[1]

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I. *Narcotics in the Odyssey.*

The word φαρμακου occurs in the Odyssey sixteen times. In the passage quoted below it signifies a remedial, sedative or narcotic drug. In other passages it refers either to a poison, smeared on arrows or mixed with food; or to a magic or enchanted drug. The passage quoted occurs in the fourth book of the Odyssey, lines 219 to 230 inclusive; the scene is in the palace of Menelaos at Sparta, years after the sack of Ilium. Telemachos, son of Odysseus, and Peisistratos, son of Nestor, have set out from Ithaca to find Odysseus if he be still alive, and have come to inquire of Menelaos and Helen. It is at the close of the day, and all are weary:

"Then Helen, born of Zeus, planned otherwise. Straightway into the wine of which they were drinking she cast a drug to assuage suffering and to dispel anger, and to cause forgetfulness of all ills. Whosoever should drink this down, when mingled in the bowl, would not, in the course of that day, let a tear fall down over his cheeks; not even if, before his face, his brother or his beloved son they should slay with the sword, and with his own eyes he should behold it. Such cunning drugs had the daughter of Zeus, potent drugs, which Polydamna, the wife of Thor, had given her; a woman of Egypt, for there the ploughed earth, giver of food, bears greatest store of drugs; many that are potent when mixed and many that are baneful.[2]"

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[1] Read at the Meeting of the Section of Historical and Cultural Medicine November 1, 1933.

[2] Modified from the translation by A. T. Murray in the Loeb Classical Library.

II. *Narcotics as Used by Pien Ch'iao and Hua T'o of China.*

1. *Pien Ch'iao.*

In Volume 105 of the *Annals of History,* a great Chinese classic, there occurs a long biographical note about Pien Ch'iao, a physician of distinction who lived about 255 B.C., in the city of Cheng in the prefecture of P'u Hai (possibly in the modern province of Honan). No name stands higher than his in the annals of Chinese medicine, and the honor paid to him is wholly comparable to that which the Western World pays to the memory of Hippocrates. The passage quoted is found in the writings of Lieh Tze, a later historian (Lieh Tze T'ang Wen P'ien).

"Two men, Lu Kung-hu and Chao Ch'i-ying, fell ill and came together to seek treatment from Pien Ch'iao. After treating them, when both were recovered, he said, calling them by name, " The illness from which you suffered previously came to your organs from external influences and was susceptible to medical treatment. You now have a malady which attacks both of you together. Do you wish it treated?" Both men asked that he first give them the results of his examination.

Pien Ch'iao addressed Kung Hu and said, "Your will is strong but your spirit is weak; hence you are strong in one respect and weak in another. The will of Ch'i Ying is weak, but his spirit is strong. If your hearts were exchanged, there would be an equilibrium and the result would be good."

So then Pien Ch'iao caused the two men to drink a drugged wine, which made them insensible, as if dead, for three days. He cut open their chests, investigated and exchanged their hearts and replaced them, employing potent drugs. When they recovered consciousness, both men were as at the first, took their leave and went home.*"

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* Modified from the translation by E. Faber.

2. *Hua T'o.*

Probably the most famous surgeon in Chinese medical history was Hua T'o, born about 190 A.D. There is a description of his use of a narcotic wine in the *Annals of the Three Kingdoms,* but a more concise description is to be found in the section on Medicine, number 525, in the Ku Chin T'u Shu Chi Ch'eng. The latter text is followed below:

"Hua T'o used but few drugs. His perception was accurate for the smallest quantities so that he never used scales for weighing medicines. Needles and cautery he used in but few places. If the disease proved resistant to acupuncture and if drugs proved unavailing, he then first caused the patient to swallow wine containing an anaesthetic effervescent powder, which produced intoxication and complete insensibility. He then cut open the belly or the back, as the case might be, cut and withdrew (the diseased organ), then adjusting everything. If the malady were in the bowels or the stomach, he cut these open, cleansed them thoroughly, and completely removed the evil traces of disease. Thereafter he sutured the wound and applied a potent ointment. In four or five days healing was well under way. Within a month all was restored to a normal state."

III. *A Discussion of the Possible Nature of the Pharmacals Described.*

Prior to 1918, there was not available any adequate discussion of the nature of the drug used by Helen of Sparta to bring sleep to her guests. Some thought it was *Cannabis indica* or hashish. In that year, however, Oswald Schmiedeberg (*Schriften der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft in Strassburg,* 36 Heft, 1918, "Ueber die Pharmaka in der Ilias und Odysee" p. 3, Das Pharmakon Nepenthes, p. 9) summed up the work of earlier investigators by saying that no other drug than opium would satisfy the description in the Odyssey. The drug used by Helen caused those who took it in wine to lose both somatic and psychic sensibility. He points out the difficulties in assuming that opium is the drug in question because of the reference to its having been brought from Egypt. In that country, he quotes Woenig as

saying, not a single picture of the poppy is found in ancient monuments except that, in the garland of the Princess Nsi Chousu, there appear to be flowers of *Papaver rhoeas.* Schmiedeberg goes back to the writings of Hippocrates and studies the passages where the poppy is mentioned, concluding from a study of these passages that there is no reason to believe that opium was not known to the ancient Greeks. We do not yet know whether there was any contact between the pre-Islamic Arabs and the people of the Homeric world. We know that opium was taken to China by the Arabs in the ninth century A.D. The knowledge of other Arab contacts is still entirely inadequate. Schmiedeberg concludes that Helen must have used dried opium and placed this in the wine that she gave to Telemachos and his companion.

In regard to the narcotic drugs used by Pien Ch'iao or Hua T'o, there is not yet available any exact source material. The former is reported as using *tu chiu* "toxic wine"; the latter used *ma-fu-san* "anesthetic powder." It is interesting to note that in the two Chinese passages adduced, as in the Greek passage, a wine was the vehicle for the drug used. When Pien Ch'iao used a "toxic wine," there is every reason to believe that he actually had recourse to a drugged wine. As indicated above, there are no records to show that opium was known in China when either of these surgeons lived.

Ma is the generic name for hemp (*Cannabis sativa*). The male plant is used for its fibre; the female plant for the medicinal properties of its seed kernels and flowers. The Chou Li (see footnote) states that the *ma* seed was prescribed for the Emperor as medicine. Probably the seed kernels alone were so used. In the passage quoted, however, *ma* unquestionably means "anesthetic." This use of the word is common throughout the country. A farmer reports that his hands and feet are numb, *ma mu.* Laufer (*Sino-Iranica,* p. 582) says that the Persian word *bang* describes a narcotic prepared from hemp seeds, which was used as a sub-

* The Chou Li: the "State Ceremonial of the Chou Dynasty" (1122-255 B.C.)

stitute for opium. The Sanskrit word is *bhanga.* "The Persian word is also traced to Avestan *banha,* a narcotic, but it seems to me preferable to assume direct derivation from Sanskrit in historical times."

Other drugs used for their narcotic effect include the following:

1. *Aconitum fischeri.* (In Europe, "monk's hood" or "wolf's bane"). The Chinese name is *Wu t'ou,* a plant used at least as far back as the end of the third century A.D. by the physician Ko P'u. Large quantities are shipped down the Yangtze River from Szechuan. The Sanskrit term is *visha,* probably *Aconitum ferox.*

2. *Arum pentaphyllum* and *Arum triphyllum.* The Chinese generic name is *Hu chang.* This plant was known to the Greeks as αρον. In England it is commonly called "cuckoo-pint" or "wake-robin."

3. *Datura alba.* In 1662, J. Davies, translating "Mandeslo's Travels" said, "The Indians call this drug *doutro* or *datula.* It is a drug that stupefies the senses. The Turks and Persians call it *datula."* Two species are described in India, *Datura fastuosa* and *Datura metel;* in Western Asia a species exists known as *Datura stramonium,* or the common thorn-apple. The drug is said to stupefy and poison. The Marathi name is *Dhatura,* while the Sanskrit uses both *Matula* and *Dhatula.* The Chinese have a drug which stupefies, called *Mant'o lo hua,* which is evidently a transcription from the Sanskrit *Matula.* The Encyclopedia of Pharmacals identifies it, however, as *Lycium chinense.*

The plant definitely identified as *Datura alba* is *Nao yang hua,* "the flower that makes sheep dizzy." Some identify this plant with *Hyoscyamus niger.*

4. *Hyoscyamus niger* (Henbane). Laufer (*loc. cit.*) makes it clear that *bang* in Persian refers to *Hyoscyamus,* but that the word is derived from the Sanskrit *bhanga,* which is *Cannabis sativa.*

Further researches, historical, botanical and pharmacological, are needed before there can be more complete identification of the narcotics used by ancient Chinese surgeons.