

## LEAD AND MERCURY EACH AS PRIME MATTER IN ALCHEMY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Prime Matter is matter-cum-energy. The first substance identified as such was lead. When gently heated it becomes red and redness means soul or energy so that lead was potentially red or soul-like and as such dual natured. Mercury also becomes red and can return to white metal. It was thus dual natured and was the second substance recognized as Prime Matter. First lead alone and then lead and mercury were considered as the source of all metals.*

It is proposed to keep discussions within limits and accordingly controversial aspects of the subjects are being avoided. We can then assume that alchemy arose in China where it had a long past as a cult of longevity. Here the most important figure comes as the aged ascetic whose urge was to gain enough strength to be able to collect foodstuffs from all over the forest. He then tried substances that would put strength into his weak limbs. There had been a theory in ancient times that “like makes like”. Finding jade to be a hard stone even weather proof he pounded it and took it as drug to make him strong and stone hard. Jade then became a drug a longevity and later on could even confer resurrection, the dead being buried with pieces of jade in their mouth. Nothing corresponding is known elsewhere which indicates how and where alchemy began. Later came the discovery of gold. This proved to be one substance on earth which is fire-proof. It then superseded jade which was only weather-proof. The both jade and gold became drugs of longevity. That gold in China was first used as drug is revealed by its inscribed character. An article dealing with jade and gold as drugs (1981) tries to establish this.

In ancient times life was very unhygienic. Hence death rate was high and life-span not longer than 50 years when most people still remain sufficiently active. Thus Veith (1963;4) was told by a mangyan tribes – man in the Philippines that “few among us reach the age of 50 years”. Same must have been the case among the early Aryans for in Rigveda there are innumerable prayers for longevity. There the actual term used is immortality but this has been explained as the life-span of 100 years. Rigveda, Valakhilya IX-7 prays to “lengthen our days that we may see long life”. And this is precisely expressed as in the prayer VII. 66.16 that “hundred autumns may we see that bright” “Eye, (the sun)”. Strange enough the oldest treatise on Chinese medicine Nei Ching Su Wen, which would be as old as Rigveda or 2000 B.C., quoted by Fulder (1980; 63), also “opines that good health means living to 100 years”. It is quite natural on the part of a man of fifty to aspire living up to ripe old age. We can now assume that even in China the middle aged wished to live up to 80 and longer and eagerly sought for drugs of longevity. Here again he acted according to the theory, like makes like.

Longevity meant the stalk of soul in the human system should be rich enough to keep man alive for a long period of time. What then was soul or rather what substances were rich in it so that their strength could pass into the system of the consumer. Civilization began with man as hunter. He came to believe that life = Body + Blood and Blood = Soul and Redness its active principle and as such soul-concentrate. Then red substances were rich in soul-content and became drugs of longevity. Since alchemy arose in China it reveals how peach, which is blood – red at the core, became a drug of longevity so much so that Shou – Hshing, the god of longevity, emerges from the peach. Nothing speaks better in favour of redness as soul than peach having become the source from which the god of longevity has emerged. In Mesopotamia it was pomegranate with blood – red seeds. The tree was worshipped obviously as Tree-of-life and such a scene is depicted on an ancient seal which has been offered by Frankfort (1939; fig 33a). The point to observe is the relative importance of the fruit. Old Testament, Genesis 3 : 22 speaks precisely “of the Fruit of the tree of life”. Even among the Aryans there was ephedra as Soma, and ephedra bears blood-red berries. Soma juice became a drink of longevity-cum-immortality and the plant deified as the plant-god Soma. We can now equate god Soma=Shou-Hshing. Such identity is traceable to Soma juice and Peach each as agency conferring longevity. We admit then that redness was soul-concentrate or soul in material form. Here Frankfort (1946:14) explains that the ancient thinker conceived every form of reality as something concrete. Life itself acquired “a concrete character”, so much so that there was “a chance to gain eternal life simply by eating life-as-substance (and) Gilgamesh (the Babylonian hero) was shown the plant-of-life”. If life was a substance soul cannot

be otherwise and we must recognize that Redness=Soul=A substance. Here Berthelot (1970, 18) informs that “the Greek (A1) chemists maintained that the metals were like men they have a body and a soul. But soul, for the majority of ancient philosophers, was nothing else than find and subtle (form of) Matter. “This leaves us in no doubt that in ancient times Redness=Soul and Red substances were rich in soul-content. We can now appreciate the urge for longevity taking the practical form of search for red substances as drugs. And we have come to know them as peach, in China, pomegranate in Mesopotamia, and ephedra bearing red berries among the Aryans. A typical drug of longevity in Chinese alchemy would be Wu Tu Hsiung Huang which the Chinese alchemist Ko-Hung briefly characterizes as “red as a Cock’s comb lustrous (when) powdered” Wu and Davis (1935: 264). Thus arose search for substances one redder than the previous one. At the same time it was recognized that “Drugs of vegetable origin will putrefy when placed in the ground and then cannot preserve themselves” – Ko Hung, translated by Feifel (1944: 10). Hence preferences were given to red minerals, which became the precursors of synthetic drugs with which alchemy began.

The first red mineral they encountered was the ore of minimum, red oxide of lead. Being a mineral it was subjected to purification by fire when they recovered Lead. It at once became a drug of longevity and was taken orally. Just as gold was granulated and consumed as drug, lead must have been treated likewise. The importance of lead then begins with its use as drug of longevity and anything else is an extension of its recognition as being potentially soul. Sivin (1968 : 192) cites a recipe where “lead is purified and made into pills”. There has been such a thing as “liquid – jade” which

Sivin interprets as “suspension of jade powder”. Likewise there has been “liquid gold” so that even lead, like gold and jade before, was probably consumed also as a finely granulated powder.

Let us now consider the properties of lead. When gently heated it became red and when red-lead was strongly heated it became white lead. Here was a substance with redness in potential form. It was then looked upon as being body-cum-soul which was interpreted as matter-cum-energy. Being both body and soul it was conceived as the source of all metals, which thereby implied that lead was Prime Matter. We are now required to explain Prime Matter.

Whatever exists can only be as the content of the universe. In the universe all its multiplicity can be reduced to entities of two categories, forms of matter and forms of energy. Then what can be conceived as “the seed of universe” must also be matter-cum-energy but in potential form. In other words it is energized matter or matter itself functioning as energy. Science admits that light is corpuscular which means light is both matter and energy. Prime Matter likewise would be a substance which is both matter-cum-energy. It can then donate energy or matter each as required. The Chinese looking for a term connoting a dual-natured entity hit upon breath as its emblem, and Chhi=Breath, Breath is Air which is the finest form of matter. Then breath is air in motion whence Movement becomes a form of energy. Above all Breath is an emanation of life-form. All considered, Breath or Chhi in Chinese came to be recognized as matter-cum-energy and as such as visualisable source of all existence. We can then identify it with Cosmic soul. But this in turn takes it to its latent form as Cosmic Egg. Prime Matter, as matter, would be Cosmic egg while, as energy, Cosmic-

Soul, the former as static, the latter as dynamic. The Chinese term for the latent form of Prime Matter would be Thai-Chi, the one and the absolute, the unknowable source of existence or Cosmic egg. Then its manifest form would be Chhi, matter-cum-energy. But we cannot go wrong if we equate Prime-Matter = Chhi = Matter-cum-energy = Cosmic soul.

Returning to Lead, since it can become red and redness is soul, lead would be body-cum-soul or matter-cum-energy. When we consider gold, it remains as such however you may, heat it, showing it to be solely matter. Then lead alone is dual natured or white and potentially red. Being the first metal known to be such it became the Prime Matter, the seed of all metals. Further search for red minerals resulted in finding a brighter form of what was believed to be only minimum. It was however ore of cinnabar. It volatilized when subject to heat. It was then powdered, lavigated and taken orally as fine powder. It was called Tan and its inscribed character reveals that it was finally collected on a filter cloth as a purified natural substance and not a sublimated product. This has been explained (in 1984) showing its use before alchemy was founded. Minimum ore could be purified by fire and was melted. But when they unwittingly mixed ores of minimum and cinnabar and tried to purify it by fire they recovered not only lead as before but also mercury. Mercury gently heated became red, and red-mercury strongly heated sublimed as white mercury. The case was identical with lead, each was a metal or substance and each was potential red or soul. Mercury at once became a drug of longevity. However the earliest use of cinnabar must have been like powdered jade and gold, be it in much lesser quantity. With the isolation of mercury all attention was given to consume it as drug. It could

not be standardized as drops. Moreover on heating the mixed ore of minimum and cinnabar, they must have found their respective metals as amalgam. Thus came the simultaneous use of lead and mercury each as drug of longevity in its own right. Sivin (p. 187) gives the recipe of an elixir as amalgam of lead, where “lead is four times as much as mercury”. Incidentally it may be mentioned that such a medicament exists in Unani medicine in India where it is called Mercurial-Pill. This throws light upon Chinese alchemy having spread itself claiming to offer drugs of longevity.

Now there is a regular book entitled *Materia Prima*, by Biedermann (1973). But the contents handle alchemy as a kind of mythology whence one cannot pin point what substances were recognized as Prime Matter, Jung (1968, 317) in his chapter on “*Prima Materia*” mentions that “*Ruland’s Lexicon* (1612) gives no less than fifty synonyms” so that Prime Matter cannot be specified. He however writes (On p. 340) that “*J. Grasseus* quotes the view that the Prime Matter is the Lead, Plumburn of the Philosophers, also called the lead of the air”. This we do recognize as the first of its kind.

## Summary

Alchemy is an extension of the cult of longevity. In China they used jade, and gold to strength the corporeal system. To increase the expectancy of life they took substances incorporating redness when Redness was believed to be soul-concentrate. Peach is blood-red at the core. It became a drug of longevity so much so that the god of longevity emerges from it. Vegetable substances however were perishable; then red inorganic substances were sought. Ore of minimum was the first to be exploited. Purifying by fire it gave lead. Lead gently heated became red and

red-lead heated strongly became white lead. Since redness meant soul, lead capable of becoming red was conceived as body-and-soul, or matter obviously as body and potentially soul as it could become red. Lead became a drug of longevity. It was first consumed as such, later amalgamated with mercury. Later they discovered ores of cinnabar. This could not stand heating and was powdered, lavigated filtered and taken orally. It was also mixed unwittingly with ores of minimum when they recovered lead and mercury. This gave pure mercury and also amalgam of lead. Amalgam of lead became a convenient form of taking mercury and lead together as a powerful medicament of longevity. Mercury when heated gently became red and red mercury heated to sublimation gave, white mercury. This meant each was both, body and soul, or matter and energy as one. Now existence consists of entities of two categories, of forms of matter and forms of energy. Then the source of existence must also be dual natured, as matter-cum-energy. The term for such an entity is Prime Matter, the absolute source of existence. This would be like Cosmic Egg, a static phase. As dynamic phase it would be Cosmic Soul, with matter and energy interacting. This would be Chhi in Chinese, meaning Breath, when breath is air as matter and movement of air as energy. Briefly Prime Matter = Cosmic eggs, as static but Chhi = Cosmic soul as dynamic. For practical purposes we can equate Prime Matter = Chhi = Matter – cum – energy. Since lead could become red and white as matter-cum-energy it was the first substance to be recognized as Prime Matter. Next came mercury likewise becoming red and white. It is the second substance to be recognized as Prime Matter. Gold on the contrary remains unchanged as pure matter and has not been recognized as Prime Matter.

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