

Some Parallels Between the *Fêng-Shên-Yên-I* and the *Shahnameh*
and the Possible Influence
of the Former Upon the
Persian Epic

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That many of the characters in the *Shahnameh* have their counterparts in Saka legend has long been known by scholars, as has also the fact that there exist Chinese parallels of many of the episodes in that epic. That Firdausi was himself aware of these admits of little doubt. It has been noted by students of the *Shahnameh* that in every legend with a parallel in the Chinese he has invariably included some lines unquestionably referring to China.

When the Sakas, whose country originally extended from Bactria to Gandhar, were displaced by the Yüeh-chi (*c.* 160 B.C., according to Chinese sources), they moved in two directions, to the south and east and to the west (the Herat, Seistan, Kashgar, and Bactria area). Parts of the former group appear to have wandered down to Northwest India, the main body remaining in the Kashgar and Khotan region. It appears likely that both India and Persia were influenced, at least to some extent, by Saka dialects.¹

It was in the west, too, that the Sakas came in contact with the Parthians, two of whose kings were slain in battles against them. There is a strong probability that it was the Parthians who gave to the *Shahnameh* the basic form in which it was later recorded by the Sassanians and, still later, came into the hands of Firdausi. The Parthian *gôsôn* (poet-musicians) not only contributed to the epic many of its heroic-feudal characteristics but in all probability also preserved and perpetuated the ancient legends of the Kavis of eastern Persia, the Kayan-

1. Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, p. 164.

ians of the *Shahnameh*.²

Lying as it did between China and Persia, Sakistan (Seistan) was ideally located to exert an influence upon both. Just as it can be shown to have affected the language and the folklore of the latter, so too it must have had an impact upon China through the marriage alliances contracted between the Chinese emperor and his vassal kings and the kings of the Sakas and other nomad tribes. Before the Arab conquest there was a great deal of maritime contact between China and Persia through the Indian Ocean and the China Sea.³ And Saka influence upon the Chinese can be partially accounted for also by the fact that the former claimed a kinship of sorts with the Chinese people.

Ballad composers and singers and tellers of tales were largely instrumental in disseminating Saka legends to other areas, a process which can, of course, be paralleled in other culture contacts. The intermingling of Saka and Chinese legend would appear to have been proceeding with greatest vigor during the reign of the Chou dynasty. Wu Wang, the founder of this dynasty, gained the throne largely through the aid of non-Chinese tribes, probably including the Sakas.⁴

Most of the Chinese parallels and analogues of the legends in Firdausi can be traced to a Chinese classic, the *Fêng-Shên-Yên-I*,⁵ though others must be sought in Taoist writings and elsewhere. For example, the Chinese legend of No-cha and Li Ching (=Sohrab and Rustem) is given in considerable detail in Doré⁶ and also in Werner.⁷

It is with a few of the better known of these parallels that the present paper will be concerned: the birth of Zal and Rustem, the combat between Rustem and Sohrab, the story of Kawoos and Sudabeh, the Div-i-Safid legend, and the "fungus of immortality."

According to the *Shahnameh*, Zal, the father of Rustem, was born with white hair on his head and body. The father, humiliated by the strange appearance of his son, has him ex-

2. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

3. *Journal Asiatique* (April-June, 1924).

4. Hirth, *History of Ancient China*, pp. 65-70; Parker, *A Thousand Years of the Tartars*, p. 5.

5. This Chinese classic was translated, but only partially, by the 19th century German scholar Wilhelm Grube under the title *Die Metamorphosen Götter*.

6. *Superstitions en Chine*, Pt. II, Vol. IX, 553-5, 569-81.

7. *Myths and Legends of the Chinese*, pp. 315-19.

posed and the child is saved only through the kindness of the bird Simurgh, who takes him to her nest on the summit of Mount Elburz and there rears him.⁸ Sahn, Zal's father, is later stricken with remorse and, aided by a dream, seeks and eventually finds his son. The Chinese legend of Hau-ki is very similar. The child comes forth from the mother "like a lamb" (? a reference to white woolly hair) and the embarrassed father has the infant exposed in a lane, where it is protected by the sheep and the oxen. Next, the child is placed in a forest, where he is cared for by woodcutters. Finally, he is exposed on ice, when a bird protects and warms him with its wings.⁹ Oddly

8. The motif of an abandoned child's being protected and reared by an animal is, of course, frequently encountered. Some of the better-known examples are the following: Peleus and Neleus, twin sons of Tyro, were suckled by a mare and a bitch; Aegisthus was suckled by a goat, Telephus by a doe; Antilochus and Siegfried were also suckled by a doe; Romulus and Remus were fed by a she-wolf as were also Leucastus and Parrhasius, Wolfdietrich, and Cormac mac Airt; Paris and Atalanta, Ourson, and the Slav heroes Valigora and Vyrvidab were suckled by a she-bear; Hippothous, the twins Amphion and Zethus, and the Serbian Milosh Obilitch were suckled by a mare; Iamus, son of Apollo and Evadne, was suckled by two "gray-eyed snakes"; Artachsir, Zeus, and Nebuchadnezzar are said to have been suckled by a goat.

9. Ptolemy (Soter) was also supposedly nurtured by an eagle, as were Gilgamesh, and the Persian Achaimenes. One recalls also the childhood classic "Babes in the Wood."

The Simurgh also renders other services. Following the Caesarean delivery of Rustem, the incision in Rodabeh's body is healed by being rubbed with one of its feathers. Later, it aids Rustem against his enemies, particularly the young Isfendiari. Li Ching is similarly aided by the "Rukh" (? Roc) against his son No-cha.

Birds play an important role in the folktales of most countries, giving advice to the hero or the heroine, acting as guides, disclosing the whereabouts of life-restoring plants, serving as messengers, etc. In balladry also, particularly in that of the Balkan area, they are as important to the action as are the human characters. In the Serbian "Ban Strahin" and "The Death of the Mother of the Yúgovichi" ravens bring news of the tragedy of Kósovo, in the latter ballad carrying to the mother the hand of her slain son. In the Hungarian "The Dishonoured Maiden" the heroine sends a swallow with a letter to her lover. The same motif is present also in the Hungarian "The Great Mountain Robber," "The Maid Who Was Sold" (here a borrowing from "The Dishonoured Maiden"), and the Spanish "Conde Claros de Montalvan." In one of the variants of the Hungarian "Clement Mason", "a beautiful white pigeon" tries to turn the wife back so that she will escape being immured by the waiting workmen. Bulgarian folksong offers several examples of the part played by a bird (usually a falcon or a cuckoo) in averting or revealing incest by making known the relationship of the couple.

enough, features connected with the births both of Zal and Rustem find a parallel in the birth of a famous historical personage of China. According to the Chinese account, Lao Tze, reputed founder of Taoism, was carried in his mother's womb for seventy-two years and when he was cut out of it (Caesarean section was necessary also for the birth of Rustem), his hair was already white.¹⁰

Both the *Shahnameh* and Chinese legend represent Sohrab and his Chinese counterpart as precocious. Firdausi tells us that when Sohrab was only a month old he was as large as a child of one year and that when he was ten no one in the land could withstand him in combat. At the age of seven, the Chinese boy was already six feet in height.¹¹

Another analogy is the matter of the bracelets. In the *Shahnameh*, Rustem gives his wife from his own arm a bracelet, which his son is to wear. In the Chinese account the child is born with the bracelet, which has miraculous powers as a weapon. In contrast, the Persian poet uses the bracelet only as a means of recognition.¹² It is noticeable that in the case of parallels or analogues, Chinese and Persian, the former invariably contain a greater degree of the supernatural and the miraculous.¹³

10. This is a common folktale motif. Abnormally long pregnancy and precocity are combined in a votive inscription on a temple stela at Epidaurus:

Kleo was with child for five years. After these five years she came to the god and slept in the Abaton. As soon as she left and got outside the temple precincts she bore a son, who, immediately after birth, washed himself at the fountain and walked about with his mother.

(McKenzie, *The Infancy of Medicine*, p. 34)

For other examples of unusually long gestation and of precocity, see Wilhelm, *Chinesische Märchen*, Nos. 15, 18, 29; Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, I, 82, 489; III, 497; V, 285; the *Kalevala* (Rune 1); *Zeitschrift des deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, LXXIX, 119 ff., citing among others Virgil's Fourth *Eclogue* (. . . *incipit, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem; matri longa decem tulerunt fastidia menses*) and the laugh of Zoroaster immediately following his birth.

11. The hero of a Slav folktale "when but three days old stepped out of his swaddling clothes and left his cradle . . . at the end of a month he could wield a sword, in two months he rode horseback, in three months he had grown a beautiful mustache of pure gold."

12. On the subject of recognition (by physical marks, amulets, etc.), see Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* (HO-H199). Recognition by a bracelet is H95.

13. Grube, p. 162.

There is a striking similarity also in the love episodes. Sohrab captures the commander of a fortress, and at first the latter's daughter attempts to kill Sohrab for the subsequent death of her father. In the *Fêng-Shên-Yên-I* No-cha defeats Chiu-kung and injures the latter's left arm, whereupon the loser's daughter tries to exact vengeance for the injury.¹⁴

Both the Persian and the Chinese accounts contain the fight between father and son. In each story the elder hero is fighting on behalf of a tyrant, Rustem for King Kawoos, Li Ching (the Chinese Rustem) for Chou Wang (ruled from 1154 to 1123 B.C.). Both are worsted temporarily and have to seek supernatural aid. Rustem gains additional strength through prayer, Li Ching through the magic of a Taoist saint.¹⁵ The younger heroes come to different ends. Sohrab dies at the hands of his father; No-cha is resuscitated by one of the ubiquitous Taoist saints and is reconciled to his father, whom he later aids against the tyrant Chou Wang.¹⁶

In the Persian epic the princess Sudabeh, daughter of the King of Hamawaran, marries King Kawoos of Persia. She later falls in love with her stepson Siyawash, who rejects her ad-

14. *Ibid.*, p. 594. A daughter's revenge (or attempt at revenge) for the injury or death of a father is the subject of several ballads. A good example of the type is "The Avenging Daughters" (Olrik, *A Book of Danish Ballads*, No. 34, pp. 202-204).

15. Grube, pp. 193-195.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 194. The motif of father-son combat with a fatal ending is as old as the *telegoneia* of Homer. Other examples include the German *Hildebrandslied* (c. 800), the Greek story of Tsamados and his son, "Dietrich von Bern," "Ermanric's Death," the tragic Russian story of Il'ja and his son ("Boi Il'ja s synom"), the Estonian ballad "Kavvi-ali," the Irish story of Cu Chulainn, and a Gypsy ballad printed in Wlislocki, *Volksdichtungen der siebenbürgischen und südungarischen Zigeuner* (1890). The one most similar to the Sohrab-Rustem fight is probably the legend of Hildebrand. The hero is challenged to single combat by a young warrior. He discovers that the young man is his son Hudebrand, whom he has not seen for thirty years (!) and tries to avoid the fight. Hudebrand accuses him of cowardice and insists on the combat, only to be slain by the older and more experienced fighter. In both the story of Tsamados and his son and that of Il'ja and his it is the father who is the aggressor. In the Norse *Thidrekssaga* the combatants are reconciled.

It is interesting to note that in both the Persian and the Chinese account of the combat the blood of the slain youth causes an excessive growth of vegetation. One would expect the spot to be blighted and unproductive, as indeed it is in many tales and songs in which blood is shed.

vances.¹⁷ She then attempts to bring about his ruin by attributing to him the paternity of two monstrous children born of a witch. With difficulty he clears himself of the charge but is persecuted by the stepmother into exile and eventual destruction. To prove his innocence of the charge of treachery against his father, Siyawash is subjected to the ordeal of walking through a "mountain of fire," which he succeeds in doing unharmed. He is later beheaded by his father's enemies, to whom he has fled for refuge. In Chinese legend, Sudabeh is paralleled by Su Ta-Ki, a concubine of Chou. She conceives an illicit passion for the prince, Yin Kiao, and tries to seduce him. Failing in this and furious at his indifference, she resorts to slander in order to accomplish his ruin.¹⁸ Yin Kiao escapes death by the "fiery furnace" or "roasting oven" prepared for him by Chou Wang at the instigation of Su Ta-Ki but is later captured and beheaded by the enemies of his father. Both Sudabeh and Su Ta-Ki are eventually put to death, the former by Rustem and the latter by the military leader Tzeyu.

Although there appears to be no exact Chinese parallel to Rustem's slaying of the White Demon and the using his liver to cure the blindness of King Kawoos and his followers, the explanation of the efficacy of the treatment is found in ancient Chinese myth, in which the liver is said to be the "holder of light," hence obviously a logical cure for eye troubles.¹⁹

17. Among the analogues of this may be mentioned the legend of Bellerophon in the *Iliad*, the Egyptian story "The Two Brothers," the *Pálagopálakathánaka* of Jinakirti (15th century), and of course the Biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, Zuleika.

18. It is usually the wife who is the victim of calumny. Enemies accuse her of unchastity or substitute for her newborn child an animal or some monstrous birth. See, for example, the ancient Tai ballad "Not a Dog" (translated into English Rewi Alley and published in Peking in 1962).

19. de Groot, *Religious Systems of China*, IV, 72. Early peoples attributed various qualities and powers to the liver. To the ancient Greeks it was the seat of desire and accordingly a powerful charm for awakening desire when eaten. According to later beliefs, it was the principal seat of the soul, a protection against witchcraft, and an instrument of divination (hepatoscopy). Also, the liver is universally believed to be the part of the body in which courage resides; hence such expressions for cowardice as "white-livered," "lily-livered," and Hamlet's ". . . for it cannot be But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall" (II, ii).

Almost 2000 years before the birth of Christ, the Egyptians used liver as a cure for night blindness, and its active principle *carotin* is used for that purpose even today. It will be remembered also that in the *Apocrypha* we have the story of Tobias, who, by burning the heart and the liver of a

One of the most sought-after objects in folk literature is something which will restore life or confer immortality: magic ointment,²⁰ herbs or leaves,²¹ magic fruit,²² or, most frequently, the Water of Life.²³ In the *Shahnameh*, King Noshirvan sends the court physician Barzoe on a mission to find the plant which confers immortality. Although amply supplied with money, the latter is unable to pay the exorbitant price demanded for it and returns to his disappointed master.²⁴ In Chinese legend it is Emperor Wu Ti of the Han Dynasty who sends an emissary, Hau Fu, on a similar mission. Hau Fu is likewise unsuccessful in bringing back the herb, though he is fortunate enough to catch sight of it. It would appear, however, that the herb (or another of a similar nature) is eventually obtained in the *Shahnameh*, since at the fatal wounding of Sohrab we find the father making the following plea to King Kawoos:

"Famed champion, bright spirit, bear a message from me to the king and tell him what has befallen us; how with my dagger I have pierced my son's heart. If he has any memory of my past deeds then let his heart be moved for a little on my behalf. It were fitting were he now without delay to send to me, mingled in a cup of wine, a portion of that panacea which he holds in his store for healing stricken bodies. It may be that by the virtue of his Majesty's destiny Sohrab may recover and, like me, become a supporter of his throne."²⁵

However, the plea meets with refusal. The ungrateful Kawoos sends the following curt message to Rustem:

"He that nurtures his own enemy spreads ill report about himself throughout the world."²⁶

No-cha, the Chinese Sohrab, is more fortunate. Revived by a Taoist adept, he performs even greater feats in the latter

fish expels the demon Asmodeus from the bridal chamber where he is troubling Tobias and his newly wedded wife Sara, and also cures the blindness of his father Tobit by applying the liver to his eyes.

20. E102. This and following numbers refer to Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk-Literature and Types of the Folk-Tale*.

21. E105, Type 612.

22. E106, Type 590.

23. E80, Types 550, 551.

24. Donald A. Mackenzie, *Myths of China and Japan*, pp. 114-16.

25. Reuben Levy, *The Epic of the Kings* (London, 1967), p. 79.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

part of his life.²⁷

Still other parallels between the Persian epic and Chinese myth might be adduced: the "eleven against eleven" combat, the Simurgh and the "Rukh," and the three encounters between Rustem (Li Ching) and Sohrab (No-cha), in the first two of which the fathers are spared. These, plus those dealt with in detail above, make it abundantly clear that Firdausi's great work owes much to the ancient myths and legends of China.

27. Man has always been intrigued by the idea of immortality, of resuscitation and rejuvenation, and many have been the attempts to learn the secrets that would confer them. The work of the early alchemists and philosophers was, in large measure, directed toward these goals. The ancient Chinese philosopher Ko Hung (Pao Pu Tzu) spent many years in the preparing of pills of immortality and left a recipe for the making of them. Ponce de Leon sought in vain for the fabled "Fountain of Youth."

It is not strange then that the theme should be so often encountered in legend and myth. Sometimes the life-restoring (or life-prolonging) object is a herb or a fruit, at others the feather of a wondrous bird or the Water of Life. One of the earliest references to a life-restoring plant is that in Apollodorus, iii, I, 3 (1st or 2nd century). Here the properties of the plant are learned through observing an animal's use of it to revive its mate. See also *Germania*, XXI, 38; Cox, *Aryan Mythology*, I, 160; *Anthropos*, XII-XIII, 1036 ff.; and Benfey's edition of the *Pantchatantra*, I, 454. Other references are to be found in Bolte-Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- u. Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, I, 128-29.

In Finnish mythology, Lemminkäinen is torn to pieces by the son Tuoni and his mother restores him to life by fitting "flesh to flesh, bone to bone, joints to joints, and veins to veins" (cf. the reassembling by Isis of the body of Osiris). However, he is unable to speak, so the mother sends Mehiläinen, the bee, beyond the ninth heaven for a miraculous balm. She applies this to his wounds, whereupon he wakes and exclaims, "I've slept for a long time."

Gilgamesh, epic hero and legendary king of the Sumerian city of Erech, seeks and obtains the watercress of immortality (called "Never Grow Old"), which grows on the sea bottom. While he sleeps, worn out by his exertions, a snake smells the odor of the plant and carries it away. It is through the eating of it that the snake sloughs off its old skin and thus renews its youth.

The Water of Life is the medium employed in a folktale told by gypsies (Groome, *Gypsy Folk-Tales*, pp. 90, 122) and in a Slavic fairy tale (Naake, *Slavonic Fairy Tales*, pp. 60, 107). In a Jewish tale the life-restoring agent is the "Water of Paradise" (Rappaport, *The Folklore of the Jews*, p. 176). Many other examples are to be found in Wünsche, *Die Sagen vom Lebensbaum und Lebenswasser*, p. 71 ff.

The Celtic hero Dagda has a club so large that it would have required eight men to carry it; it was therefore mounted on wheels. With one end he can kill nine men at a blow and with the other end restore them to life.