ASBESTOS AND SALAMANDER,
AN ESSAY IN CHINESE AND HELLENISTIC FOLK-LORE.

BY

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It is my object, not to write a history of asbestos and its application with reference to human culture, but to unravel the curious traditions entertained by the Chinese regarding this marvellous production of nature, and to correlate their notions of it with the corresponding thoughts of the ancients, the Syrians and Arabs, and of mediæval Europe. Without due consideration of the Western folk-lore, the Chinese traditions, the elements of which are thoroughly based on Occidental ideas, would forever remain a sealed book. We are indebted to A. Wylie for a most scholarly study, Asbestos in China, which contains an almost complete array of Chinese sources relative to the subject; in fact, without his energetic pioneer-labor, the present investigation could not have been carried to the point to which it has now attained. My obligations to him for his able research-work are acknowledged in each and every case. The present state of science, however, has permitted me to go far beyond the results which Wylie was able to reach a generation ago. Wylie merely noted in the most general way that the accounts

1 Chinese Researches, section iii, pp. 141—154 (Shanghai, 1897).
2 L. c., p. 149.
of the Chinese corroborate the statements of ancient classical writers, mainly emphasizing the point that the Chinese, in the same manner as the ancients, mention handkerchiefs or napkins woven from asbestos. No attempt, however, was made by him to explain all the curious lore that was lavishly accumulated on top of this subject. Here Wylie merely offered the remark, "The speculations of native writers as to the material of which it was made will probably not be thought equally worthy of credit with the bare recital of facts which came under their notice. In early times they appear not to have suspected that it was a mineral product, but have contented themselves with applying to the animal and vegetable kingdoms respectively for a solution of the difficulty." From the viewpoint of comparative folk-lore and Chinese relations with the West, these speculative theories which partially take their root in Hellenism certainly present most attractive material for study. Further, Wylie's representation of the matter suffers from various defects. It is not well arranged in chronological or any other order, and the sources are not sifted critically. Moreover, as admitted by himself, he did not succeed in identifying most of the geographical terms to be found in the Chinese texts. At present this task is greatly facilitated, chiefly thanks to P. Pelliot's learned researches, which form the basis of many an important conclusion reached on the following pages. The geographical point of view is indispensable in this case, as only in this manner is it possible to trace the routes over which ideas have wandered.

By "asbestos" we understand the fibrous varieties of tremolite, actinolite, and other kinds of amphibole, the fibres of which are sometimes very long, fine, flexible, and easily separable by the fingers,

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1 L. c., p. 144.
2 Also Hirth (China and the Roman Orient, p. 252) confessed that he was unable at the time when he wrote (1885) to identify these names.