

Introduction

Mercury (Hg) is a rare element unique in its liquid state and ability to easily fuse with other metals. It is one of the key ingredients in alchemy and traditional medicines across Eurasia, with many similarities in mercury use and theory across the continent. Through the thematic analysis of regional philosophies and practices, this study attempts to show how these similarities may result from a long history of influence and exchange between five major cultural centers.

Five Centers of Mercurial Philosophy

China & Daoism

- First used in alchemy and curative tonics ca. 4th century BCE
- Used in elixirs of transmutation and purification for immortal perfection
- Metallic Hg and cinnabar as complementary female-yin/male-yang pair
- Origin of Hg's paired use with sulfur and idea of a 'philosopher's stone'

The Mediterranean & Alexandrian Medicine

- Key element in the origins of Western alchemy ca. 1st century CE
- Seen as the base constituent element of all metals
- Involved in rituals of transformation, purification and divine communion
- Use of elemental and humoral medical theories

India & Hindu Tantrism

- Used in medicine since at least the 7th century CE, when Indian alchemists were studying in the Chinese Imperial court
- Superior substance capable of balancing the humors and internal elements
- Associated with rejuvenation, transmutation, and perfection
- Identified as Shiva's seed, paired with the essence of Shakti (sulfur)

The Arabic World & Jabirian Alchemy

- Inherited Alexandrian medical theory ca. 7th century CE
- Influenced by Indian medicine and alchemy ca. 6th-9th century CE
- Chinese influence on alchemical theory ca. 9th century CE
- Jabirian notion in which all metals made of Hg and sulfur in varying ratios
- Origin of topical use of Hg to treat skin conditions

Western Europe & Paracelsian Alchemy

- Inherited Arabic medical and alchemical theory ca. 12th century CE
- Paracelsus adds salt to the sulfur-mercury theory (*tria prima*)
- Philosopher's stone as the divine androgyne and essence of life
- Hg as a main ingredient in wide variety of European medicines



Discussion

Some commonly shared ideas across these five centers include:

- Hg's association with divinity, transformation, purity and perfection
- Use of the sulfur-mercury, humoral, and elemental theories
- Emphasis on the metaphoric sexual union in alchemy to achieve perfect curative restoration

These similarities, in addition to shared histories and congruent timelines, point toward the gradual development of a hybrid medical and alchemical mercurial tradition, likely originating independently in China and the Mediterranean, fusing in India and the Arabic world before finally traveling back to Western Europe.

Select References

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Evidence for Exchange

- Shared symbolic associations and interpretations
- Shared practical uses and combinations
- Shared sources, theories and models
- Shared history between regions
- Congruent timelines for the emergence of ideas

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