

The Alchemy of Healthy Aging: “Sparking the Shen”

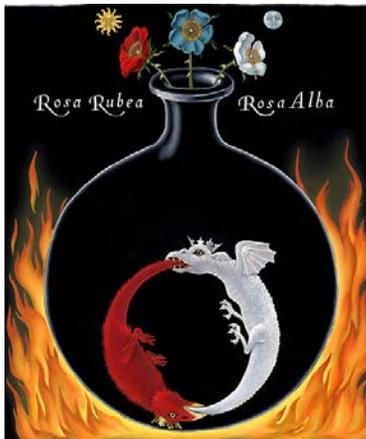
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Introduction:

The proto-scientific pursuit of alchemy is one of the more profound legacies of the ancient world, one that encompasses several philosophical traditions spanning some four millennia and three continents. One suggested stream of etymology of the modern English word alchemy points to its origins in ancient Egypt; from the Arabic word, “al-kimia”, derived from “al-Khem”. Contact between China and the Arabic world may have resulted in the transmission of alchemical writings to the East; in the early Tang Dynasty (8th century CE), the word “kiem-yak” was used to describe the “golden liquor” that was the essence of immortality.

Khem was the ancient Arabic word for Egypt, and specifically referred to the rich, black soil of the Nile Delta, the fertile muck from which sprang the entirety of Egyptian civilization. The annual rebirth of life from this *prima materia*, flooded by the abundant waters of the Nile at the time of the heliacal rising of the star Sirius, provides us both with a central image of, and philosophical motivation for, the alchemical art; that of the resurrection of both body and spirit.

Western vs. Eastern Alchemy



The image of the alchemist that persists in the West is that of a single individual, working assiduously in their laboratory to produce, through the redemption of spirit from matter, the *lapis philosophorum*, the Philosopher’s Stone, an object that was thought to grant to its possessor infinite power and ultimately, the gift of ageless immortality. It should be noted, however, that a very large percentage of these so-called alchemists were mere “puffers”, those whose sole investment in the process was that of the desire to transmute lead into gold, and thereby accumulate vast wealth. Nevertheless, we may generalize by saying that Western alchemy may be described as consisting of an external process of transforming matter, the stages of which can be seen, according to Carl Jung, to mirror an inner psychological evolution of the alchemist.

Based upon Taoist philosophy, Chinese alchemy originated from an impulse similar to that of its Western counterpart. In the Han Dynasty, 3rd century BCE, “Wei dan”, or external alchemy, involved not only the consumption of toxic minerals and substances, but also techniques such as visualization of the I Ching, animals and nature concepts. Both of these practices stoked the alchemical fire by means of breathing into the lower Dantien, and “lacing” the Qi upwards through the Jiaos. Ge Hong, one of the first Chinese alchemists, believed that the minerals contained within themselves the seeds of transformation.

In contrast, the later Sung Dynasty practice of “Nei dan”, or inner alchemy, sought immortality by energetic disciplines, including meditation, transcending the element of time and the mastery of emotions. The idea was to liberate the spiritual essence of the alchemist from the material body, while still remaining in physical form.

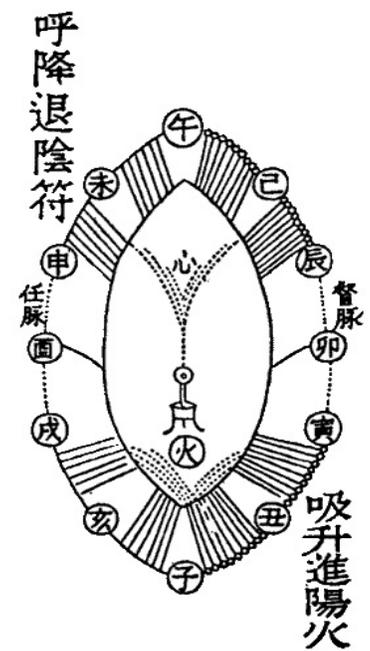
Whereas the European alchemist attempted to transform and refine an external substance, the *prima materia*, generally by heating it in a sealed vessel, or retort, the Chinese alchemist viewed the body itself both as *prima materia* and the vessel of its redemption. Therefore, by

incorporating these two approaches, the alchemical model of facial acupuncture embraces and encourages the transformation of both patient and practitioner.

The Prima Materia of Facial Alchemy: The Facial Landscape

The face, the most emotive part of the body, provides eloquent testimony as to the benefits of healthy aging. Everything is visible in the face; the seven emotions, discoloration, trauma and abuse all reveal themselves to us as we catch a glimpse of the inner workings of the individual's constitutional functioning. This is reflective of a time-honored axiom of Chinese medicine: "The Shen leads the Qi." An unbalanced spirit or psyche can disturb the energy, a disharmony which can be discerned from an examination of the facial expression. When out of balance, emotions can directly permeate the organ systems, causing illness. They are the most important causes of internal constitutional dysfunction, and reveal themselves to us in the facial terrain, which has evolved through untold eons of time to express those same emotional states.

Unlike the sealed vessel, the retort, of Western alchemy, the body, the alchemical vessel of the Eastern model, has a "window" into its otherwise hidden depths; the face. The facial landscape, with its intricate interplay of nerves, muscles and blood vessels, more readily displays for us changes such as increased Shen, radiance in the complexion, improvements in scars, facial wrinkles, etc., and also in the patient's general emotional/spiritual disposition. These recognizable results of a facial acupuncture treatment provide visible evidence that may not be as readily obtained from a purely constitutional treatment. This permits the alchemist-practitioner to witness the dynamics of alchemical transformation at first hand, simply by observing the patient's face. This capacity of the face to make manifest the ebb and flow of our inner feeling life, as well as provide a barometer for our well being, expresses to us an interesting variation upon one of the most ancient and fundamental of alchemical maxims, attributed to the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, the tutelary spirit of alchemy, and inscribed upon the legendary Emerald Tablet - "as above, so below" - which we might reformulate, in this context, as "as within, so without."



As practitioners of facial alchemy, we can aid, balance and treat the underlying constitutional imbalances that can impact the appearance of our patients' faces. We can address digestive issues, GYN problems, heart problems, or help them process emotions such as grief that may undermine their health.

Conclusion

An alchemical approach to facial acupuncture engages patients at a deeper level, honors the face's transformative potential, and provides us with the key to an authentic process of physical and spiritual renewal.

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