Antisyphilitic Mercury Drugs in Early Modern China and Japan

DOI 10.1515/asia-2015-1044

Abstract: Toxic mercury chloride compounds, including preparations and mixtures of corrosive sublimate (HgCl₂) and calomel (Hg₂Cl₂), were widely used in early modern Chinese and Japanese medicine. Some of these drugs had been manufactured in East Asia for more than a thousand years, while others were produced using newer recipes developed in East Asia after the arrival of syphilis or introduced through contact with European medical knowledge. This paper traces the history of the uses and methods of production of sublimated mercury chloride drugs in early modern East Asia, showing how the Chinese doctor Chen Sicheng's invention of the drug shengshengru (J. seiseinyū) 生生乳 in the seventeenth century exerted a strong influence over eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japanese doctors' treatment of syphilis. Japanese doctors' efforts to produce and use seiseinyū provided a foundation of technical knowledge that was important for their later reception of European-style mercury chloride drugs.

Keywords: East Asian medicine, Tokugawa Japan, pharmaceuticals, syphilis, Dutch studies (rangaku)

1 Introduction

The arrival of syphilis in East Asia during the early sixteenth century presented a new set of challenges to the region's doctors and encouraged experimentation with new forms of therapy. The spread of syphilis1 thus stimulated a number of

1 My use of the term “syphilis” in this paper is intended as a pragmatic translation for a group of related terms (yangmeichuang/yoobao 湯梅霜, meichuang/baiso 梅霜/白霜, meidu/baidoku 梅毒/白毒, etc.) referring to a new disease category that emerged in East Asia during the sixteenth century. Many of the patients diagnosed by early modern doctors as suffering from “syphilis” would not have been thus diagnosed according to modern biomedical definitions of the disease. However, there is ample evidence from skeletal remains that syphilitic infection, like other forms of venereal disease, was common in early modern Japan. (See Johnston 2009 for a discussion of the literature on this subject.)

*Corresponding author: Daniel Trambaiolo, Department of Japanese Studies, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China, E-mail: trambaio@hku.hk
medical innovations, including a resurgence of interest in the use of mercurial drugs such as corrosive sublimate and calomel. Chinese doctors began to use these drugs to treat syphilis during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and Japanese doctors soon followed their example. The emergence of new ways of thinking about disease and healing during this period and the introduction of medical ideas and imported pharmaceuticals from Europe stimulated focused investigations into these drugs’ names and uses.

Long before the arrival of syphilis, mercury and its compounds had enjoyed a continuous history of spiritual and medical significance in East Asia. In ancient China, cinnabar and mercury were associated with ideas and practices related to life, death, transformation and healing. Traces of cinnabar have been found in Chinese burial sites from as early as the Shang period (2nd millennium BCE), and although historical accounts referring to “rivers of mercury” flowing through the tomb of the first Qin emperor (260–210 BCE) may have been exaggerated, archaeological surveys have confirmed the presence of elevated levels of mercury in the soil around the tomb site. High levels of mercury were also discovered in the hair and internal organs of a Han-dynasty nobelwoman buried at Mawangdui (ca. 168 BCE), most likely as a consequence of cinnabar consumption during her lifetime. A collection of medical recipes in another tomb at Mawangdui included several formulas containing cinnabar or mercury, intended for the treatment of a variety of skin conditions.

Mercury and its compounds played a central role in the development of Daoist traditions of thought and practice between the third and eighth centuries CE. It was not only the mysterious physical properties of the silvery liquid that fascinated the early Daoist alchemists, but also the variety of transformations that it could undergo. Liquid mercury could easily be produced by heating the bright red mineral ore cinnabar (HgS); this mercury could then be further transformed into other visually distinct substances such as the orange-red oxide (HgO) and the white chlorides (HgCl₂, Hg₂Cl₂). This diversity of transformative possibilities greatly appealed to the early Daoists, who saw transformation (hua 化) as a fundamental principle of the cosmos and thought of the transformations that took place within the alchemical apparatus as manifestations of a broader cosmic order. Their discovery of mercury’s capacity for transformation helped reinforce their belief in its spiritual significance and its value as a component in elixirs of longevity or immortality.

---


---

8 Pregadio/Skar 2000.
9 The question of whether or not syphilis was present in Eurasia before the establishment of trans-Atlantic contacts remains controversial, but a recent review has found no indisputable evidence for pre-Columbian syphilis in the Old World and concluded that a New World origin remains the most plausible hypothesis (Harper et al. 2011).
11 On early Chinese references to the new disease, see Chen 1994: 206.
12 Dohl 1922: 121–122.
designation for the new disease, "bayberry sores" (C. yangmei chuang 桑梅疮), referred to the physical appearance of patients' skin lesions. Some writers believed that the disease was spread by sexual contact, but others claimed it could arise from lifestyle or environmental causes such as inappropriate diet or atmospheric moisture.

Since the new disease was distinct from any previously described in the East Asian medical tradition, the selection of appropriate methods of pharmacotherapy required a certain amount of improvisation. However, within a few decades after the disease's arrival, Chinese and Japanese doctors had settled on two main types of drug therapy that they continued to use against syphilis until the late nineteenth century: the rhizome of the smilax plant (C. tufuling; J. dohukuryō 土茯苓 or sankirai 山地来), and mercurial drugs such as corrosive sublimate.

The sixteenth-century Chinese scholar Li Shizhen 李時珍 summarized centuries of accumulated knowledge about the production and medicinal uses of sublimated mercury chlorides in his Bencao gangmu 本草綱目 (Systematic Materia Medica, 1596). He listed corrosive sublimate under the heading shuiyin-fen 水銀粉 rather than the more common qingfen (J. keifun 軽粉), but his description of its production was similar to descriptions found in other sources. Liquid mercury, alum, and cooking salt were mixed together into a paste and spread onto the bottom of a reaction vessel that was then sealed and heated over a fire while its lid was cooled with water. After breaking open the vessel, the white corrosive sublimate could be scraped off the inner surface of the lid. Calomel (C. jieshuang) was prepared from corrosive sublimate by further rounds of sublimation, sometimes with the inclusion of additional mercury or sulphur in the reaction vessel. Corrosive sublimate and calomel were used for a similar range of medicinal purposes in the treatment of skin infections, syphilitic symptoms, accumulated phlegm, watery swellings, and pedicatri anxiety.

In Japan, just as in China, the bright red color of cinnabar gave it special social and ritual significance from an early date. The earliest Chinese written account of Japanese customs (ca. 280 CE) noted that Japanese women used cinnabar as a cosmetic to adorn their bodies. Cinnabar was mined at a number of sites, of which Ise was the most prominent. Production of sublimated mercury chlorides in Japan using Chinese techniques and local materials began at least as early as the eighth century.

---

13 See Nappi 2009 for discussion of this treatise and its historical context.
14 Li 1982 [1596]: Juan 9, vol. 1, 527–530.
15 Li 1982 [1596]: Juan 9, vol. 1, 530–531.
16 Sōda 1965: 3.
18 Kairara 1911 [1709]: 84. The historical chronicle cited in this source is the Shoku Nihongi 続日本紀 (797 CE).
19 Endō 1681: 1:3a.
20 Hiraga 1763: 2:1b; Ono 1803: 5:3a-b. For further discussion, see Sōda 1980: 10–12.

As one of the most important sources within Japan of cinnabar and mercury, Ise became a major center for the production of mercury chlorides. Sublimated mercury chloride was manufactured there for use as a whitening cosmetic known as ise oshiroi 伊勢白粉, which was recorded as a tribute item from the province of Ise in a late eighth-century historical chronicle. However, by the seventeenth century the cinnabar mines around Ise were largely exhausted, and Japanese production of sublimated mercury chlorides came to depend on supplies of mercury imported by Chinese or Dutch merchants. This shift in the source of mercury made it easier for producers in the region of Kyoto and Osaka to compete with those in Ise, but producers in Ise continued to enjoy certain advantages, such as their technical knowledge of production methods and their ready access to supplies of clay for making reaction vessels.

Japanese pharmacological literature offered a variety of opinions about which sources of keifun were most suitable for medicinal use. In the late seventeenth century, Endō Genri 遠藤元理 included corrosive sublimate (keifun 軽粉) in his list of "Japanese medicines for which it is necessary to distinguish between high and low quality"; he claimed that the best came from Kyoto, while that from Ise was somewhat inferior. However, later writers such as Hiraga Gennai 平賀源内 and Ono Ranzan 小野蘭山 asserted that the best keifun came from Ise. Japanese doctors also made use of corrosive sublimate imported by Dutch merchants: at the end of the seventeenth century, the German visitor Engelbert Kaempfer noted that certain Japanese persistently pressed newly arrived foreigners for sublimate mercury and pay a high price for it. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the increasing use of new Chinese and European mercurial drugs encouraged Japanese doctors to familiarize themselves with the ways these drugs were manufactured.

2 Doctor and patient perspectives on the harshness of mercury chloride drugs

Japanese doctors began to make use of sublimated mercury chlorides as anti-syphilitic remedies not long after the arrival of syphilis in their country. Manase
Dōsan 直線道三, the most influential Japanese doctor of the late sixteenth century, used corrosive sublimate (harayagusu はらや薬) to treat “Chinese sores” (tōgasa 唐瘡) in the final decades of the sixteenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, Japanese doctors were treating syphilis using a variety of sublimated mercury chloride drugs: soppuru and karumera prepared according to European methods, kēfūn and funsō prepared according to Chinese methods, and a variant of kēfūn called seiseinyū 生生乳.

Japanese doctors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often justified their use of these drugs through the innovative ideas of “Ancient Formulas” (kōhō 古方) medicine. Advocates of Ancient Formulas claimed that their new style of medicine represented an authentic form of the art that had once flourished in ancient China but had subsequently been lost as later doctors recklessly followed their own arbitrary opinions and departed from the ancient Way. The therapeutic methods of this style of medicine were based on the writings of the third-century doctor Zhang Zhongjing 張仲景, whose Shanghan lun 傷寒論 (Discourse on Cold Damage) was the oldest surviving collection of medical formulas in the East Asian tradition and thus an important source of evidence about the practice of medicine in ancient China.

Zhang Zhongjing’s formulas did not include corrosive sublimate or any other sublimated mercury drug; the techniques for manufacturing these drugs had not yet been invented at the time he wrote his treatise. Nevertheless, Japanese advocates of Ancient Formulas medicine felt that the harsh effects of these drugs on patients’ bodies paralleled the harshness of many of Zhang Zhongjing’s formulas and that by using these drugs they were following the spirit of Zhang Zhongjing’s style of medical practice. The influential Ancient Formulas doctor Yoshimasu Tōdō 吉益東洞 argued that Zhang Zhongjing’s therapeutic style was based on vomiting, sweating and purging therapies because the violent effects of drugs (menken 転訛) were essential to expel the poison of disease. This idea of menken became a central element of Japanese medical discourse on the efficacy of sublimated mercurial drugs.

Kako Kakushū 加古角洲, an early nineteenth-century doctor who based his ideas closely on those of Yoshimasu Tōdō, argued that syphilis needed to be understood in terms of Tōdō’s doctrine that “all diseases arise from a single poison” (manbyō ichidoku 萬病一毒). He therefore criticized his contemporaries’ reliance on specific anti-syphilitic drugs such as salmí rhizome and Five Treasures Elixir (gohōtan 五宝丹) and adopted an aggressive approach to treatment based on sweating, vomiting, purging, mercurial, and arsenical formulas.

He understood the efficacy of mercurial drugs in terms of their general ability to “melt and transform deeply buried stiff and stagnant poisons.”

Consistent with his belief that the nature of syphilis was not radically different from that of other diseases, Kako Kakushū argued that the use of drugs like kēfūn and seiseinyū should not be restricted to syphils patients alone. His contemporary Ishibashi Masaaki 石橋正泰 similarly argued that seiseinyū could be used as an effective treatment for patients suffering from longstanding bodily pain, malignant swellings, or malignant sores that had proven resistant to other forms of treatment: in such cases, he claimed, treatment should be based on the manifest symptoms rather than on speculation about underlying causes, and it was thus needless to discuss whether or not the patient’s suffering was truly due to “syphilis.” This type of reasoning provided a principled justification for the use of mercurial drugs to treat a wide variety of illnesses.

Nevertheless, the use of these drugs in practice remained closely associated with syphilitic categories of diagnosis. Most patients remained wary of the harsh effects of mercurial drugs, and the understanding of syphils as a disease whose symptoms were both severe and difficult to treat motivated patients to submit to much harsher courses of therapy than they would otherwise have been willing to accept.

The experience of Japanese syphilis patients is vividly reflected in the following account recorded by the nineteenth-century Osaka doctor Funakoshi Kinkai 船越錫海, who devoted himself to syphilis medicine after his own experience of suffering from the disease:

My parents also contracted this disease and did not live out their natural span: my father departed this world at the age of twenty-nine and my mother at forty-four. I too suffered from this disease for several years during my youth. I used all sorts of medicines without the slightest success. I therefore described the details of my illness to a doctor and begged him: “Rather than suffering like this for a long time, I would consider a quick death as a blessing. Even the harshest of drugs holds no terrors for me. Please, give me a harsh treatment of the sort that only one in ten people survive.”

The doctor replied: “In that case, from among the kēfūn medicines you should use Seven Treasures Pills (shichihōgan 七宝丸).” He told me to take one week’s worth of pills. By the fourth day, the insides of my mouth were swollen and painful. Thinking it would be difficult to consume the remaining three days’ worth of pills with my mouth in pain, I took all the remaining pills on the morning of the fifth day. Beginning that night, my mouth began to fester severely, and each day I spit out two shō 三十 of saliva. It continued like this.

---

24 Kako 1808: fugen, 1b–3a.
25 Kako 1808: furoku, 16a; cf. also 6a–7a.
26 Ishibashi 1810: 19a–20a; furoku, 2a.
for more than thirty days. My mouth gradually recovered, but the disease poison did not diminish. The doctor said: "This is because the strength of the drugs was insufficient. You should take more Seven Treasures Pills." I therefore attacked the disease from the eleventh month until the sixth month of the following year, all without the slightest success.

By this time my body was debilitated and exhausted, just skin and bones. I ceased to consume drugs and ate meat for about sixty days. My strength recovered and my flesh grew back, but the sores grew increasingly severe. After this I tried inhaling medicines (kagigusuri 梁毒) and after about six or seven days I began to spit out saliva. After more than fifty days, I partly recovered from the poison of the sores. But I did not recover fully, so I stopped this as well. After I ceased treatment, the disease poison gradually increased, and by the third month of the following year my suffering and pain were double what they had been originally."

3 Chen Sicheng 陳司成 and seiseinyū

The Chinese treatise that had the greatest influence over eighteenth-century Japanese doctors’ use of antisyphilitic mercury chloride compounds was Chen Sicheng’s Meichuang milu 微窗秘錄 (Secret Record of Syphilis, 1636). Chen belonged to a family from Haining that had been practising medicine since the time of his eighth-generation ancestor, a minor official involved in the administration of the government salt monopoly. 28 His interest in syphilis developed after a friend contracted the disease while staying in the town of Hulin for the provincial-level civil service examinations. Later in life, when Chen found himself without the money needed to pursue an official career and decided to devote himself exclusively to the study and practice of medicine, his travels as a doctor provided him with ample opportunities to refine his understanding of syphilis, and his Meichuang milu represented the culmination of twenty years of observation and reflection. 29

Chen Sicheng’s treatise was largely forgotten in China after its initial printing, but it was reprinted twice in Japan during the eighteenth century (1725, 1774) and exercised considerable influence over Japanese doctors’ treatment of syphilis. Chen’s treatise included recipes for several different types of “Poison-Transforming Pill” (huaduwan 化毒丸) containing a mercurial drug of his own invention called shengshengru 生生乳 that was manufactured by a procedure similar to that for corrosive sublimate but using a number of additional ingredients (most notably the Arsenal mineral yushi 赤石; on the identity of this mineral, see discussion below). Known in Japanese as seiseinyū, this drug became one of the most popular antisyphilitic drugs of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Japan.

Chen Sicheng claimed that the action of seiseinyū was milder than that of corrosive sublimate, but not all Japanese medical writers agreed. In the early nineteenth century, Ishibashi Masaaki, influenced by Ancient Formulas ideas, agreed that seiseinyū was a slower and milder drug and argued that corrosive sublimate and seiseinyū could each be useful under appropriate circumstances. 30 By contrast, Asai Nankō 浅井南皋, a doctor who opposed Ancient Formulas medicine, had little patience for the idea that the mica and arsenic in seiseinyū could disperse the poison of mercury to yield a milder drug; he insinuated that Chen had exaggerated the differences among these drugs as a ploy to extract greater profits from his patients. 31 Hirano Genryō 平野元亮, the author of an early nineteenth-century popular medical manual, was also sceptical about the claims made by advocates of seiseinyū for its mildness, arguing that its arsenical content made it too risky to use except by direct application onto sores or by inhalation as a vapour. 32

Although the harshness of mercurial drugs was thought to be an essential aspect of their efficacy, doctors and patients alike were wary of the risks of causing harm. Hirano Genryō proposed that doctors should seek to bring the disease-poison and drug-poison into a state of balanced conflict (tsurait 對抗), since therapy could fail either by being too mild or by being too harsh. 33 He insisted that it was important to achieve the physiological response of menken 模愘 indicated by stimulation of salivation but criticized the assumption that salivation alone was sufficient to release the poison of syphilis from the body; he warned that patients in the early stages of illness often made the mistake of using remedies that were too mild and later overcompensated for their earlier caution by turning to excessively violent mercurial treatments. 34 Conversely, he also warned that the symptoms of poisoning by mercurial drugs were sufficiently similar to those of syphilis itself that patients often mistook the effects

27 Funakoshi 1843, quoted in Dohi 1921: 129.
28 Chen 1994 [1636]: 5.
29 Chen 1994 [1636]: 1.
30 Ishibashi 1810, Ib; Appendix, 1a–b.
31 Asai 1808: 2r9a–20a.
33 Hirano 2006 [1835]: Vol. 2, 26. Hirano’s writing style often juxtaposed Chinese characters with Japanese phonetic glosses (furigana) that would normally carry a slightly different meaning, leaving to the reader the task of reconciling the contrasting meanings. In this case, the Chinese characters imply conflict, while the Japanese phonetic gloss implies balance.
of the drug for the progression of the disease and thus increased their dosage when they should have been decreasing it.\textsuperscript{35}

The mercurial remedies that patients used during the later stages of syphilis were colloquially known as “down the hatch medicines” (nagekomigusuri 投げ込み 薬), as they were swallowed rapidly to reduce direct contact with the membranes of the oral cavity and lessen the associated risk of causing gum decay and loss of teeth. Drug preparations such as Chen Sicheng’s Poison-Transforming Pills were coated in a layer of cinnabar that would retain its integrity while being swallowed but disintegrate as it passed through the digestive tract.\textsuperscript{36} Japanese doctors adopted a variety of similar means of achieving the same goal. Ishibashi Masaaki recommended that medicines containing keifun or seiseinyu should be wrapped in a thick coating of gold or silver foil and swallowed without chewing, with special care and attention being necessary when giving these medicines to children younger than six or seven.\textsuperscript{37} The eclectic doctor Tachibana Nankei 橘南綱 recommended that such medicines should be swallowed in a single gulp and followed by buns (manju 餅頭) or jellies (yokan 羊羹) to help physically push any remaining traces of the toxic drugs out of the oral cavity and into the stomach.\textsuperscript{38}

Other doctors developed supplementary forms of treatment specifically to mitigate the harmful effects of mercurial drugs. Tachibana Nankei listed a number of remedies that could be taken in case the toxicity of the drug proved harsher than expected, ranging from sophisticated formulas containing Coptis rhizome (oren 黃連), licorice root, pomegranate skins, and various other herbal ingredients, to a simple paste made from green beans boiled in water, which he recommended should be prepared in advance and kept on hand whenever these drugs were to be used.\textsuperscript{39} Kako Kakushū 華子就 possessed a secret family recipe for moderating the violence of seiseinyu or soppiru.\textsuperscript{40} Ishibashi Masaaki argued that although the violent effect (menken) of the mercury drugs was inseparable from their therapeutic value, it also carried the danger of causing further decay of the flesh; he therefore advised patients to alternate mercury drugs with croton or rhubarb-based purgatives. Since it was difficult to predict how these drugs would act in combination, each patient had to be observed individually in order to give the appropriate treatment.\textsuperscript{41}

Certain hot springs were also thought to be useful for dispelling the poison of mercurial therapies from the body; since these springs were generally different from those that were used for treating syphilis itself, patients seeking this type of cure often needed to travel extensively between different hot springs and cities.\textsuperscript{42} Developing a practical understanding of how to apply antisyphilitic mercurial drugs thus sometimes necessitated finding cures for the effects of the drugs themselves.

\section*{4 Manufacturing mercurial medicines}

The popularity of Chen Sicheng’s book in eighteenth-century Japan led to a demand for seiseinyu, but even at the beginning of the nineteenth century there was still little publicly available information about how to produce it.\textsuperscript{43} Doctors who knew how to produce seiseinyu tended to keep their knowledge secret, and when they passed on their knowledge it was by personal instruction rather than through publication of instruction manuals.\textsuperscript{44} Ishibashi Masaaki wrote in 1810 that keifun from Ise was inexpensive and widely available in medicine stores, but seiseinyu was prohibitively expensive for all but the richest patients. Even for those who could afford it, the commercially available product was uneven in quality. Patients lacked clear knowledge of how to assess the quality of the drugs they were purchasing, and they therefore ran the risk of using drugs that had been improperly prepared. According to Ishibashi, the high prices at which medicine stores were able to sell seiseinyu reflected not the cost of its ingredients but rather the limited diffusion of knowledge about how to select these ingredients and transform them into a useable drug.\textsuperscript{45}

Chen Sicheng’s recipe for seiseinyu included a number of further ingredients in addition to the mercury, alum, and cooking salt used for producing keifun:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Hirnn 2006 [1835]: Vol. 2, 18–23. According to Genryū, many people afflicted with syphilis misidentified their symptoms in the early stages of the disease as relating to a blood stagnation disorder and therefore relied on topical lotions and oils to “suck out the pus” or on surgical procedures such as scraping out infected material by means of a probe inserted into the male urinary tract.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Chen 1994 [1636]: 45–68.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ishibashi 1810: 2a.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Tachibana 1797: 107.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Tachibana 1797: 111–115.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Kako 1808: fu roku, 9b–10b.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ishibashi 1810: 1b–2a, 8b, 24b.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Suzuki 2005: 90.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ishibashi 1810: daiji, 1a. This claim seems to suggest that the earlier printed treatises of Kurosawa Shōeki (1780) and Ota Shin’an (1784) achieved only a limited diffusion. Ishibashi did not refer explicitly to any of the published Japanese treatises that described the production of seiseinyu, noting only that the production method was “described in several books” (Ishibashi 1810: hanrei, 1a) and he alluded to Chen Sicheng’s treatise only indirectly (Ishibashi 1810: 3a).
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ishibashi 1810: preface, 1a–b.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ishibashi 1810: daiji, 1a-b; 21a.
\end{itemize}
niter, green vitriol, mica, green salt, and the arsenic mineral yoseki 砒石. Japanese doctors regarded the inclusion of this toxic arsenic mineral as the defining characteristic of seiseinyū and debated its significance for the drug's efficacy. It is not clear why Chen Sicheng chose to include an arsenic mineral in his new drug. Some early modern European sources mention an alleged practice of adulterating corrosive sublimate with arsenic, but it is unclear if this practice was ever widespread, and it appears to have been regarded only as an adulteration rather than as a method of conferring desired qualities on a drug.  

Rather than deriving inspiration from European sources, Chen most likely speculated independently that the poison of arsenic might balance the poison of mercury and reduce the toxicity of keifun while maintaining its efficacy against disease.

As eighteenth and nineteenth-century Japanese writers often noted, the production of these drugs could itself be a dangerous procedure. Authors of printed manuals on the preparation of sublimated mercury compounds gave advice on the need to avoid the toxic fumes that might be emitted from the reaction vessel. Ishibashi Masaaki stressed the importance of sealing the vessel tightly, both to prevent loss of product and to minimize exposure to the fumes: “If anybody should encounter its qi, they will experience all sorts of violent effects (menken).”  

Ōta Shin’an 大田信庵 recommended that the procedure should be performed outdoors on a clear and windless day with screens on four sides to shelter the reaction vessel from breezes, that anyone tending to the reaction vessel should cover his mouth and block his nostrils with cloth bundles containing mugwort leaves (aigyo 艾葉) and Coptis rhizome (ōren 黃連), and that particular care was essential to prevent the fumes from coming into contact with the eyes. As a remedy for those who had accidentally come into contact with the “poison of the medicine” (yakudoku 藥毒), he recommended treatment with a decoction of Coptis rhizome and licorice root (kanzo 甘草), Coptis Rhizome White Tiger Decoction (ōren byakko to 黃連白虎湯), the juice of a radish (daikon 大根), or simply cold water.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, methods for producing seiseinyū were often deliberately maintained as lineage secrets and transmitted by individual doctors only to their own direct heirs. One such secret recipe was passed down in the lineage of the Saga doctor Haruhi Gen’an 春日元彦 from his ancestor Haruhi Genryō 春日元亮, who had supposedly obtained the recipe from a knowledgeable Dutch surgeon while visiting Nagasaki in 1711. Haruhi Gen’an claimed that even the Dutch had treated this recipe as a secret; Haruhi Genryō and his successors had restricted its transmission to a single member of each generation of their own lineage. When Haruhi Gen’an first set eyes on a printed version of Chen Sicheng’s treatise, he was shocked to discover that Chen’s recipe for seiseinyū was strikingly similar to his own family’s “secret” recipe. He concluded that the Meichuang milu 蜜房蜜露 had been falsely attributed to Chen Sicheng and that the Chinese had originally received the recipe from the Dutch. Gen’an’s willingness to accept this improbable conclusion highlights the growing importance in Japan of Dutch knowledge concerning antisyphilis mercurial drugs, a topic explored further below.

Even doctors who possessed a recipe for seiseinyū could only make use of it if they were able to obtain starting ingredients of appropriate quality, a problem that was not always easy to solve. According to the Haruhi lineage tradition, the best mica was imported from Europe, while the Korean product was an acceptable but inferior substitute. Niter was sold in medicine shops as “white niter” (shiro ensō 白えんしょう), for which the best product came from Ise, or “horse tooth niter” (baga sho 馬牙消), for which the best product had a sweet and sharp flavor and came from Etchū or Sanuki; the niter from seaside regions was supposedly inferior. Doctors also needed to exercise great care to obtain genuine green vitriol (ryokukan 緑薬) from China, since the Japanese product was toxic and the “Chinese green vitriol” sold by unscrupulous medicine merchants was often in fact blue vitriol (tanban 藍薬).  

The correct selection of arsenical mineral was widely seen as critical to the quality of the final product. Chen Sicheng’s recipe described this mineral as yushi (J. yoseki 砒石), a term that in China generally referred to the minerals arsenopyrite (FeAsS) and loellingite (FeAs2). However, the same term was also used in Japan as a name for arsenolite (AsO3, otherwise known as J. hiseki/ C. pishi 斑銅). Hanawa Hironori 塚巻政 広 listed the different varieties of yoseki available, ranging from the high-quality “peach-blossom” variety through  

49 Sōda 1985: 16–20. Sōda’s article includes a partial transcription of Haruhi Gen’an 春日元彦, Oranda shinden yōbaiso chiryo sho オラン新伝梅御療養 (Book on the Treatment of Syphilis Newly Transmitted from the Dutch; n.d., probably late eighteenth or early nineteenth century). The Dutch doctor, whose name is transcribed in the Japanese text as “Seimukettan,” has not been identified.  

50 Sōda 1985: 17.  

51 Sōda 1985: 18–20. Note that in English, the common names of blue vitriol (CuSO4) and green vitriol (FeSO4) give an exaggerated impression of the difference in color, as green vitriol is in fact bluish-green in color.  

yellow and white to the low-grade grey variety. Tachibana Nankei noted the availability of arsenic minerals from China and the Japanese varieties obtained as a by-product of the Iwami silver mines; although he understood that the latter was strictly *hiseki* rather than the *yoseki* listed in Chen Sicheng’s original recipe, he claimed it was the best product to use as an ingredient for *seiseinyu*.

Ishibashi Masaaki likewise recommended using arsenolite from Iwami, noting that it was commercially marketed in Edo as a rat poison.

This type of advice on the selection of ingredients illustrates both the potential and the dangers of the marketplace for Japanese doctors wishing to produce their own drugs in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was possible to purchase materials from the various provinces of Japan, Korea, China, or even Europe, but the ability to select appropriately from among these materials required doctors to make fine distinctions among different versions of the same product and to exercise vigilance against the possible deceptions of merchants.

5 From *seiseinyu* to *soppuru*: European-style mercury drugs in Japan

Just as the reproduction and circulation of Chen Sicheng’s treatise in Japan stimulated a growing demand for *seiseinyu*, the translation and circulation of European medical treatises stimulated demand for European-style sublimated mercury drugs. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, translations of European medical treatises allowed a broader range of Japanese doctors to become acquainted with European doctors’ uses for corrosive sublimate (*soppuru* [Dutch *sublimaaat*] or *mōshokkōtan* 猛丸汞丹 [*fierce sublimated mercury elixir*]) and calomel (*karumera, dorushisu* [Latin *dulcis*], or *kanshokkōtan* 甘汞汞丹 [*sweet sublimated mercury elixir*]). Japanese doctors recognized the similarities between the ingredients and production processes for these drugs and those for the sublimated mercury drugs of the Chinese tradition, but they continued to regard the drugs prepared according to Dutch and Chinese methods as distinct substances.

Reliable knowledge of European methods for producing sublimated mercury chlorides began to circulate more widely through the influence of the Swedish physician and natural historian Carl Peter Thunberg, who visited Japan and met with the Nagasaki interpreter and physician Yoshio Kōgyū 吉雄耕牛 in 1775–1776. Subsequent *rangaku* scholars translated European pharmacological treatises and put these treatises’ recommendations into practice, providing a firmer basis of technical knowledge that by the early nineteenth century enabled Japanese doctors to substitute locally produced versions of these drugs for the expensive products imported from Europe.

Thunberg himself had brought a supply of corrosive sublimate from Holland to Japan, hoping to make a profit by selling it during his visit. However, in contrast to Kämpfer’s observation a century previously that the Japanese were always eager to purchase corrosive sublimate, Thunberg was unable to find buyers for his product. He ended up dividing it into small parcels and bestowing it as a gift on Japanese doctors with instructions to administer it as an aqueous solution with syrup, a method of consumption that was unfamiliar in Japan at the time but subsequently became standard among Japanese practitioners of European-style medicine.

Thunberg concluded from his experience that Japanese doctors were “totally ignorant of the use and application of this sure, but at the same time dangerous, medicine”; he claimed that they “had some idea, indeed, of salivation, but thought it too difficult and dangerous.” Apparently neither Thunberg nor the Japanese doctors with whom he interacted were able to recognize the underlying similarity between the drug Thunberg had brought with him from Europe and the Chinese-style drugs with which they were familiar. Subsequent generations of Japanese doctors became more aware of the parallels between European and Chinese methods for the sublimation of mercury chlorides, but they hesitated to conclude that the substances prepared according to Dutch and Chinese methods were mere variants of the same drug. Indeed, they sometimes made strong claims of functional difference. Writing in the early nineteenth century, Nakagawa Shūtetsu 中川俊亭 claimed that the corrosive sublimate he produced by European methods was ten times as effective as the *seiseinyu* his Japanese contemporaries produced by Chinese methods. Nakagawa even suggested that European-style corrosive sublimate could be used as a substitute for calomel when the latter was unavailable, implying that he regarded European-style

57 Takahashi 2002.
58 Screech 2005: 162. Eighteenth-century Japanese doctors were aware that mercurial drugs could induce salivation, but unlike their European contemporaries they did not necessarily view salivation as the primary mechanism of these drugs’ efficacy; instead, they saw it as just one of several ways in which the *menken* of mercurial drugs could become apparent.
calomel and corrosive sublimate as more closely equivalent to each other than to
the sublimated mercury drugs of the Chinese tradition.\footnote{59}

Japanese doctors sometimes found that they needed to modify the proce-
dures described in European pharmacological treatises in order to obtain a
satisfactory quality of product using the materials available to them in their
own country. Nakagawa Shūtei noted that calomel prepared in Europe was
subjected to as many as eight rounds of refinement through sublimation
due to the fierce nature of the corrosive sublimate used as starting material; through
his own investigations, he had found that the corrosive sublimate available in
Japan required only three or four rounds of sublimation to produce calomel of
an appropriate quality.\footnote{60} On the other hand, he straightforwardly rejected
the recipes found in some European treatises for the preparation of calomel through
the further sublimation of corrosive sublimate without addition of mercury,
which he believed was unlikely to produce a high-quality drug. Like many
Japanese doctors of his period, Nakagawa did not simply accept the authority
of European medical writings but systematically tested their claims against his
own practical experience.

This critical attitude that Nakagawa and other doctors showed in their
reception of translated pharmacological knowledge was matched by the caution
with which they evaluated imported drug materials. As they could discover by
reading European pharmacological treatises, false or adulterated mercury chlor-
ide drugs were common even in Europe. It was natural to assume that this
problem would only be compounded by the great distance between Europe and
Japan, the lack of information about methods of production and evaluation, and
the elevated prices that imported drugs could command.\footnote{61} The development
of more reliable knowledge for the local production of these drugs within Japan
thus promised not only a way to obtain these drugs more cheaply, but also a
way to reduce the risk of encountering false or adulterated versions of drugs that
were highly toxic even in their purest forms.

Yet despite this problem of false and adulterated drugs, imported samples
continued to serve as points of reference against which the local product was
evaluated. The Hiroshima rangaku scholar Nakai Kōtaku 中井厚沢, who had
initially learned about Western methods for producing soppira during his studies
with Yoshio Kōgyū, noted that although the soppira produced according to
Yoshio’s method had similar efficacy (劍功) to the imported product, in appearance
the local product was “brittle like calomel (粉硝)" while the imported

product was “hard like a stone and comes in heavy quantities, sometimes even
in lumps larger than a chicken’s egg."\footnote{62} It was only later, after he had acquired
sufficient knowledge of Dutch to study a range of European pharmacological
treatises, that Nakai was able in his own practical investigations to produce
corrosive sublimate that more closely resembled the product imported from
Europe. The commercial circulation of European drugs as commodities and the
textual circulation of descriptions of these drugs’ methods of production were
thus complementary aspects of the development of local knowledge of produc-
tion techniques.

\section{6 Conclusion}

From the earliest uses of mercury chloride drugs against syphilis in China to the
proliferation of different varieties of these drugs in nineteenth-century Japan, the
methods of producing and using sublimated mercury chloride drugs were sub-
ject to continual experimentation and modification, as doctors and patients
sought to balance the perceived need for highly toxic drugs to eliminate disease
from the body against the fear of causing excessive harm. These drugs were
substances of intense commercial and intellectual interest, since the circulation
of medical treatises recommending the use of particular drugs often preceded
these drugs’ local availability and thus stimulated demand for their importation
or local production. At the same time, these drugs were also an important focus
of interaction between the European and Chinese medical traditions in
Tokugawa Japan, highlighting the central role of material exchange in the
cross-cultural encounters of early modern East Asia.

\section*{Bibliography}

Haven: Yale University Press.

Asai Nankō 浅井南高 (1808): \textit{Balsō hiroku hyōki 衞疾秘録総記} (Annotations on the \textit{Secret
Record on Syphilis}).

Barchusen, Johann Conrad (1718): \textit{Elementa chemiae: quibus sub juncta est confectura lapidis
philosophici imaginibus repræsentata}. Luduni Batavorum: Theodorum Haak.

\footnote{59} Nakagawa 1980 [1808]: 311.

\footnote{60} Nakagawa 1980 [1808]: 327–328.

\footnote{61} Nakagawa 1980 [1808]: 310–311.

\footnote{62} Nakai 1980 [1806]: 285–286. For a similar visual comparison of locally produced and
imported corrosive sublimate, see Nakagawa 1980 [1808]: 320.


Ishibashi Masaaki 石橋正明 (1918): *Baidoku yōhi* 藥毒要方 (Essential Formulas for Syphilis).


Kakihara Eiki 岩原英之 (1808): *Kotsu hatosyo* 口腔病症 (Outline of Vomiting Formulas).

Timothy Walker*

Medicinal Mercury in Early Modern Portuguese Records: Recipes and Methods from Eighteenth-Century Medical Guidebooks

DOI 10.1515/asia-2015-1045

Abstract: This chapter will present and explicate rare information regarding circumstances and techniques for the application of medicinal mercury in the Portuguese medical context during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Through the use of Portuguese medical texts (including translated excerpts), the chapter will provide insight into how early modern Portuguese practitioners processed and employed mercury to treat various ailments. Of interest, too, will be that these remedies were developed at several disparate locations throughout the Portuguese imperial world (China, India, Angola, Brazil, and Portugal), and often drew upon, and blended, indigenous medical substances from the region where each remedy originated. Regarding the use of mercury in South Asian medicine, medical scholars have noted that, from the sixteenth century onwards, much of the intra-Asian (and global) mercury trade was conducted through Portuguese merchants and agents. This work asserts that Portuguese merchants and shippers had unique access both to mercury at the commodity’s main sources in Spain and Peru (Almadén and Huancavelica, respectively), but also to established, developed colonial trade routes throughout the eastern hemisphere. Most of the information presented here is excerpted from two little-known eighteenth-century Portuguese primary sources: a Jesuit compilation medical and apothecary guide in manuscript, and a published physician’s treatise regarding fevers and other illnesses encountered during a posting of nearly a decade in Angola.

Keywords: Mercury, quicksilver, medicine; Portugal; Jesuit; colonial medicine

This article will present and explicate rare information regarding circumstances and techniques for the application of medicinal mercury in the early modern Portuguese medical context in the home country and in various colonial settings

*Corresponding author: Timothy Walker, Department of History, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, MA, USA. E-mail: twalker@umassd.edu