



HISTORY OF ALCHEMY AND MAGIC

Seminar Leader: **Jensen Lo**

House Leader: **Sho Hayashida**

Course Description

Alchemy (錬金術). You might've never heard of that before, or maybe you've read *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (賢者の石). Or maybe you've heard of the manga *Fullmetal Alchemist* (鋼の錬金術師). Or Frankenstein (フランケンシュタイン). These stories are all fiction, but the common link between them all of them is the presence of alchemy, which actually existed. So, what is alchemy? That's actually a very difficult question, and we'll try to spend our seminar getting a better idea of what it is. It's not quite science, it's not quite magic, not quite religion, but it's influenced by all of those things. We'll try to learn about what alchemy is...by thinking like alchemists! We'll look at pictures of ancient scrolls and try to decipher alchemical texts just like the alchemists did hundreds of years ago, and hopefully by the end of this seminar, we'll be able to answer this question: what can we learn about history by taking a different perspective, like the perspective of the alchemists? And how objective/subjective is history?

Schedule

Day 1: *What Is Alchemy?*

We will look at alchemy in popular culture and about the misconceptions of alchemy. Then, we'll start to explore the history of real alchemy and see how that is related to what we know of as alchemy today. We'll see how it's related to religion, science, and magic.

Day 2: *Religion, Alchemy, and Magic*

Alchemy was often caught between two opposing forces, religion and magic. On one hand, Christianity was a very important part of European society and alchemy had to accept Christian teachings as part of its ideas. But there was also that allure of magic, especially in the 17th century, secret knowledge that was banned by the Catholic Church. We will explore the relationship between the three by looking at a couple of alchemical texts or religious texts, like the story of Genesis from the Bible, and try to look at them like alchemists did. Is the Bible really telling us how God made the world in seven days? Or maybe it is a secret code on how to make the magical philosopher's stone?

Day 3: *The Ripley Scroll*

We will spend most of our time on this day on the analysis of the famous Ripley Scroll, a set of beautifully illustrated, alchemical scrolls, which claimed to tell alchemists how to make the philosopher's stone, a magical stone that could give immortality, and transmute metals to silver and gold. If we have some time left over, we will look at some other alchemical writings and maybe have some time to think about the final project.



Day 4: *Recap and Final Project Presentation*

Students will present on a alchemical scroll, an existing story, or an alchemist of their choice (see next section).

Final Exercise

Now that you've learned a lot about alchemy, it's time to put the knowledge to the test. Imagine that you, an alchemist, have been invited to give an informal presentation on your work to a group of your peers. And just like there are a variety of different types of alchemists, there are also many different types of projects to do. Here are a couple of possible projects:

- Illustrate an alchemical scroll and encode your own recipe inside
- Analyze an existing story and try to decipher its alchemical meaning
- There are 'alchemists' that spread their false lies on the internet. Research one of them, explain one of their ideas, and show why they are wrong.

Pre-Seminar Assignments and Reading

- I will provide a short reading about alchemy.

Message from the House Leader

Hi! I'm Sho, and I lived in Kanazawa for two years when I was in elementary school. I graduated from Kyushu University last March, and will be a Master course student in France from this coming September. My major is Aerospace Engineering and I'm especially interested in researching how to make a "Space Train between the Earth and the Moon" come true. I'm really looking forward to seeing you in our class this summer in Komatsu!

Message from the Seminar Leader

Hi! I'm Jensen, and I've just finished my freshman year at Princeton University. I was born in Bangkok, Thailand, but I've lived in the United States for the past 15 years. I play the cello and chess, and like to hike in my free time. I'm actually a physics major (not a history major at all!), but this topic really grabbed my attention, and I hope it will grab yours too! I'm looking forward to teaching you, and learning with you as well!