
The Perfume Culture of China and Taiwan:

*A Personal Report.*¹

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Chinese perfumery arts have a history of two or three thousand years. The art however, was never specifically separated from medicine, personal grooming or food culture; many aromatic materials were used for all of these purposes. In comparison to western traditions it is notable that Chinese perfumery was local in character. The aromatic raw materials employed were often native to Chinese lands, or imported from nearby. Moreover, Chinese perfumery differs from the western tradition in regard to the way in which a few outstanding aromatics have been employed.

Materials and Products

The most important materials in Chinese perfumery are agarwood, sandalwood, musk, ambergris, and camphorwood. Other aromatics have been used in addition to these, for example spices and herbs, in appreciation of their various fragrance notes and sometimes also for their medical benefits. For instance, the aromatic woods are known for their beneficial influence on the flow of energy,² metabolic cycles, and the nervous system. Synthetic materials were unknown in traditional practice and are not favoured now. It seems that exclusively the production process has undergone major changes in recent decades, due to technological innovations, but the aromatic products as such are still of the same kind as before.

The aromatic raw materials may either be used in the form in which they are found in nature, or else they can be processed to produce refined goods for consumption. For example, pieces of agarwood and sandalwood may be used without further refinement for incensation. Alternatively, the wood is integrated in the production of incense blends. For this purpose, the wood is finely chopped, and the resulting aromatic powder mixed with camphorwood, ambergris and musk. An adhesive additive helps to produce an aromatic paste that can be formed into linear, pyramidal, and sphere-like shapes, thus making products such as incense cones, sticks, cookies, balls, and spirals possible.

Recent History

The traditional Chinese perfume culture suffered a significant blow during the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Before 1966 Taoist convents and Buddhist temples used incense during

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²Qi [氣 / 气].

religious ceremonies but after the Cultural Revolution, perfume culture in mainland China became virtually extinct for decades.

Since the opening of mainland China, beginning in 1978 and the resulting reforms in the following decades, contact with the rest of the world has increased. In this context Chinese perfumery has also slowly revitalised. Since the 1990s in particular, perfumery has become noteworthy again. The Japanese tradition of *kōdō*³ has been noticed and followed among the Chinese elite, in memory of their own traditions of ceremonial incense appreciation.

In addition, books from Taiwan about East Asian perfumery increasingly reached the mainland. The island's perfume culture differed significantly with that of mainland China, as a result of its unique history. During the era of Japanese colonial rule from 1895 to 1945, the Japanese *kōdō* tradition had a considerable influence on Taiwanese culture. After Japan's surrender and its retreat from Taiwan, local island traditions were revived. Books were published that informed readers about the local heritage and special character of perfumery. Since these written Chinese publications could be easily understood in mainland China, they aroused interest among the mainland population in the long-neglected local perfumery arts. The bibliographic information from abroad also made older Chinese people become aware of mutual influences and differences between their own historical practices and other East Asian perfumery traditions.

Since then, a number of mainland Chinese books have been published on perfumery issues. It is accompanied by an increase in the use of aromatics in mainland China. Obviously, perfumery has gained esteem among intellectuals, and is highly regarded as an additional contributing factor in the acquisition of an elevated lifestyle.

Current perfumery

The revival of perfumery in China is observable in the popularisation of incense appreciation sessions, and the use of such aromatics in general. Many perfumery studios have opened in big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Fuzhou and Guangzhou. However, instead of *xiang wen hua*⁴, which in accordance with the Chinese tradition also includes medical issues, their clients often speak of *xiang dao*⁵ in order to refer to their pursuit. The recent history of local perfumery, specifically the influence from abroad, is discernible. It is apparent that knowledge of, and identification with, the perfume culture which preceded the Cultural Revolution has yet to flourish. A lack of popular and in-depth knowledge among the younger generations is the reason for the abundance of imitation and poor-quality products on local markets.

Taiwanese perfumery enjoys a special position. The use of aromatic materials for religious purposes is comparable to that on mainland China, and was historically influenced by the latter. In contrast, the appreciation of perfume materials for leisure has been significantly influenced by Japanese culture in recent decades; particularly the prominent role of agarwood. Taiwan has led research on the refinement of agarwood and the professional production of fine goods.

³ *Kōdō* (Japanese term, 'The Way of Incense') refers to ritual practices of appreciating incense.

⁴ [香文化], 'incense culture'.

⁵ [香道], 'The Way of Incense', mirroring the Japanese expression of [香道], *kōdō*, 'The Way of Incense'.



Fig. 1. A traditional Chinese salon for appreciating incense together. (© Chen Yunjun)

Perfumery and Zen

Chinese perfumery's relationship with the art of Zen is fundamental. Not only do fragrances stimulate the flow of energy and support a meditative mood, but the connection also concerns the nature of perception. Strikingly fragrances elude description in words just as, according to devotees, does the Zen experience. Due to their similar character, the experience of fragrances may thus support the process of learning about Zen and experiencing steps to enlightenment. People may experience them immediately or in wavelike increments, without relying on a material and clear basis. For instance, when agarwood is used in incense, one does not see fire or smoke; only its fragrance rising⁶ – similarly to thoughts in Zen. The monk Xiang Yan elaborated on the Buddhist concept: One does not know where fragrances come from or where they are going, analogous to the process of acquiring deeper insights. In a similar way, the following narrative illustrates this connection:

“One day Juan Tingjian went to a temple and asked how he could learn Zen. The master taught him a text, however Huang had trouble understanding it and his doubts increased. On this very day, plum trees were in bloom and the smell of the fruit was hanging in the air. The master asked Huang whether he had perceived this scent. Huang nodded and at this

⁶The incense material is traditionally not put directly on the burning charcoal, but with the help of a small plate, it is instead placed into the rising warm air. The development of smoke is thus avoided, and merely the essential oil vaporises.

very moment he experienced an instant of enlightenment: there is no clear and fast way to achieve Zen. Instead, small intuitive steps are possible and lead to deeper understanding”.

The master explained Zen using the example of the scent of the plum tree. Later Huang would describe his enlightenment in a poem entitled: “Bi guan (Observing the nose)”, thus elaborating on the metaphor. wocyj666@163.com

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