

A Study on the Culture of Incense in the Period of T'ang

Chun Hea Sook* · Lee Ae Ryun**

Professor, Dept. of Fashion & Textiles, Dong-A University*

Dept. of Fashion & Textiles, Graduate School, Dong-A University**

I. Instruction

From the ancient times, incense has been used as a means of beauty expression through its flavor, a medicine for disease treatment and one of the objects necessary for religious events or rites.

The period of T'ang was the times when under politically opened environments, China actively made cultural and material exchanges with the outer world. At that time, land trade route was called 'silk road' and marine trade route, 'incense road'. This means that incense was one of the main marine trade goods going towards the Chinese nation.

Incense was mainly imported or tributed to T'ang. It was used for beauty, medical and religious purposes. For women of the royal court, noble class or entertainment, incense was a luxurious goods or gift. In case that the emperor makes a tour or that the plague was prevalent, incense was dispersed to clean up roads. The substance was necessarily used during Buddhaist or Taoist services. The fact that incense was used by people of different classes for different purposes were supported by a number of ancient records.

The culture of incense had many social implications in T'ang in that its was widely distributed in the nation.

Objectives of the study are summarized as follows ;

First, investigate and analyze social factors that facilitated the culture of incense in Tang

Second, examine applications and kinds of incense widely used in the period of T'ang

Third, shed light on social situations of T'ang and values of the nation's people For these objectives, this researcher reviewed historic records about the incense culture of T'ang and thereon looked into the society of the nation.

II. Contents of Study

Factors that prospered the culture of incense in T'ang can be described as follows.

Founded by Li Shi Min(李世民) in 617, the Chinese nation of T'ang, whose capital was Chang An(長安), realized unification and stability politically and militarily and prospered most remarkably in the history of China. The prosperity may be attributed to the ancient empire's political openness, active cultural exchanges and positive acceptance of different cultures.

Though imported from the outer world, incense was not only consumed by people of

special classes, but also widely used by the public in the Chinese nation. This is probably because the material was useful for religious, beauty and medical applications.

Main religions of T'ang were Buddhism and Taoism. Though a foreign religion introduced from India, Buddhism was rapidly distributed over the whole nation through positive political supports of the imperial court, for example, the institutionalization of the religion and the stratification and secularization of temples. Further, even Buddhist services were importantly integrated into national rites.

Burning incense was one of the very important processes of Buddhist service. It was initially developed in India as the origin of the religion, and succeeded by Buddhism of T'ang. The process was popularized as the religion became widely believed among the public. This led to the prosperity of incense culture as a part of daily life.

Grown since the period of South and North Dynasties, Taoism were very prevalent in T'ang through political supports by the imperial court. Li Yuan(李淵), Gao Zu(高祖) of T'ang called Confucius as his ancestor and put Taoism first. Similarly, emperors who succeeded him took policies of giving priority to Taoism. The religion was not only supported by the imperial court and people of the noble class, but also too a deep root in the public.

Ultimate goals of Taoism are eternal life, eternal youth and long life all of which have something to do with the culture of incense. It seemed natural that people of T'ang sought secular needs as they lived a material life of abundance, diversification and difference. Curiosity about different cultures, blind imitations and pursue for worldly desires led the people to have interest in eternal youth and long life and further in taking drugs. Incense imported for medicine was used mainly for such drugs. Meanwhile, incense was also burnt in Taoist rites for exorcism.

The openness of sex culture was another factor of incense culture promotion. T'ang was sexually opened more than any other Chinese countries. Influences of Buddhism and Taoism, economic abundance, political stabilization and free social climates brought changes in Confucianism-based sexual consciousness and further the openness of sex culture. This led to the development of so-called the culture of kibang where entertaining women used incense to seduce men or make up themselves.

These social environments contributed to the extension of incense culture as a social phenomenon over the whole Chinese nation. In T'ang, thus, the culture was not a sort of taste, but a life style social members needed to know.

Features and kinds of incense can be described as follows in accordance with applications, religion, medicine and beauty.

First, incense for religious applications included *Aquilaria agallocha*, frankincense, Jiang Zhen Xiang(降真香){Zi Teng Xiang}, olive incense(ramhyang) and gwanggwakhyang, all of which were imports and often burnt for religious services.

Second, incense for medical purposes included *Aquilaria agallocha*, frankincense, myrrh, *Syringa palibiniana* (clove buds), Qing Mu Xiang (青木香) and camphor(Borneo camphor).

According to literature, these kinds of incense were juiced and applied to treat wounds, or otherwise boiled and taken.

Third, incense for beauty included *Aquilaria agallocha*, camphor, gaphyang, jeonghwahyang, ulkeumhyang and musk. *Aquilaria agallocha* was treated priceless to be presented to the emperor. These kinds of incense were used mainly by women of the noble class and entertainment at couple bedrooms, when taking a bath or drinking tea or at the time of wedding.

III. Conclusion

The culture of incense in the period of T'ang is summarized as follows.

First, the popularization and secularization of Buddhism and Taoism positively affected the prosperity of the incense culture of T'ang. Burning incense was one of the important procedures in services of the two religions, facilitating the public promotion of the culture. Open-mindedness and changes in Confucian consciousness brought the openness of sex culture, expanding incense consumption for beauty around the Chinese nation.

Second, in the period of T'ang, incense was used mainly for religious, medical and beauty purposes. Incense for religion included *Aquilaria agallocha*, frankincense, Jiang Zhen Xiang(降真香){Zi Teng Xiang}, olive incense(ramhyang) and gwanggwakhyang, Incense for medicine included *Aquilaria agallocha*, frankincense, myrrh, *Syringa palibiniana* (clove buds), Qing Mu Xiang (青木香) and camphor(Borneo camphor). For beauty purposes, such kinds of incense as *Aquilaria agallocha*, camphor, Jia Xiang(甲香), Jing Hua Xiang(精花香), Yu Jin Xiang (鬱金香) and musk were used.

Social environments of T'ang contributed to the emergence of incense culture as a social phenomenon. In the society of the Chinese nation, the culture was one of the life styles social members should learn.

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