

Cultural flows and interrelations between perfumery arts in Asia: The Spread and Rise of Agarwood.

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Introduction

The perfumery heritage of Asia is renowned for the use of agarwood. This aromatic develops as a natural product in Aquilaria trees after the specific trees have been wounded or infected. An oleoresin develops in the wood due to the pathological (and/or possibly other) reaction, accumulating in aggrandizing deposits, and creating an aromatic quality in the wood. Aquilaria species have their origin in the Indo-Malayan region. Distributed via migration and trade, the aromatic product has become integrated in local perfumery arts all over Asia. Due to the rising commercial demand, the tree species are threatened with extinction today and subject to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) trade regulations. The demand for agarwood is prominent in West and East Asia where it represents the key material in highly elevated perfumery arts.

Objective: The Cultural Biography of Agarwood.

- ▶ Identifying cultural flows and interrelations between the various agarwood fine arts of Asia.
- ▶ Determining characteristics of and reasons for the local and all-Asian socioeconomic processes and aesthetic developments.

Method: Multi-sited Anthropological Fieldwork.

2002-2004, 2007 West Asia
2009 Southeast Asia
2011 East Asia

Ethnographic Research Fields concerning Agarwood Fine Arts.

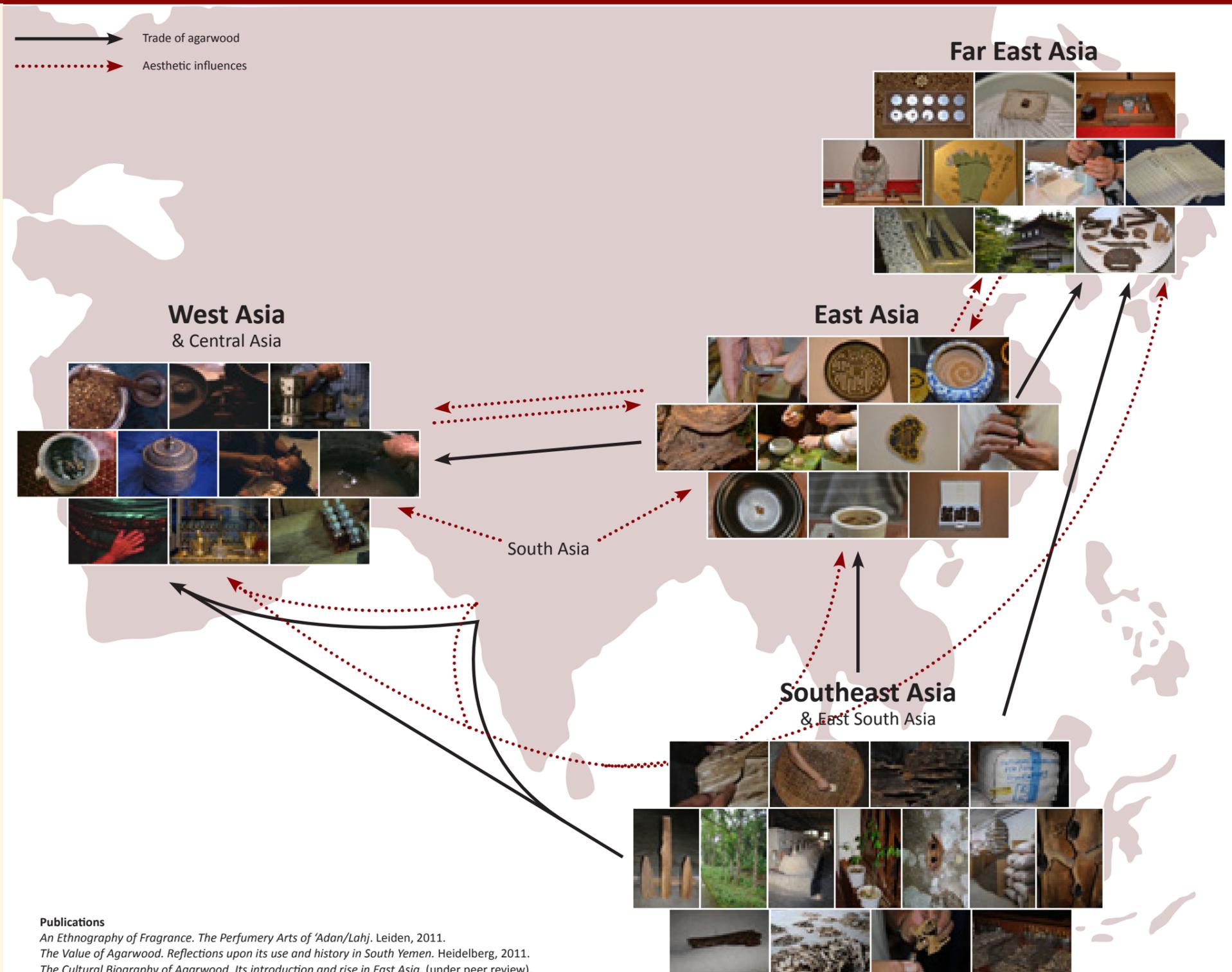
When comparing the leading cultures of agarwood fine arts with each other, affinities conjure up historical contacts and developments that occurred. The initial transmission of the aromatic material together with medical knowledge, social and economic values, and religious concepts, from its origin explains common grounds. Direct contacts between the rising perfumery high cultures as well as manifold minor nexuses throughout Asia have contributed to the spread and rise of agarwood arts in the following centuries which however have unfolded in local contexts. Thus, identical features suggest agarwood-specific characteristics of its perfumery history and fine usage. Local specialties highlight the enormous span of its perfumery potential which makes it unique in comparison with other aromatics. These features are found on three theoretical levels of perfumery – material aspects, the sensory performance, and the cultural context and setup.

- ▶ **Arts of Material Refinement: Common and special products.**
 - Incense (plain wood).
 - Mixed products (e.g. perfume powder, incense balls, sticks).
 - Carved objects and icons (e.g. natural wood sculptures, rosaries, figures).
 - Oil.
- ▶ **Arts of Performing Fine Fragrances: Similar foci – various accomplishments.**
 - Tools for enabling the fine art of perfumery (e.g. censers, boxes, cutleries).
 - Techniques for improving the material performance (e.g. choice of heat).
 - Techniques of sharpening the olfactory perception (e.g. channeling fragrant air, combination of materials).
- ▶ **Arts of Sophisticated Appreciation: Comparable contexts – specific setups.**
 - Aesthetical concepts of distinguishing different types of agarwood (references to assumed origin, color, weight).
 - Experience of spirituality, well-being, wisdom.
 - Reflection in holy literature (e.g. Buddhist tripitaka, Islamic hadith).
 - Identification with nobility and elevated life.
 - Etiquettes concerning agarwood appreciation (e.g. ritual preparation, moments of use).
 - Pursuit of “syn-aesthetic” poesy (e.g. poetry and perfumery).
 - Social and ceremonial value (e.g. gathering for offering and appreciating agarwood).

Conclusion: The Story of Agarwood

Taking a crosscut view on the ethnographic phenomena and resulting histories, three intertwined characteristics are discernible which let agarwood become the reason for and the key material of the sophisticated and standout perfumery arts in West and East Asia. In their combination they represent the general history of Asia concerning the pursuit of refined lifestyles with all its detailed meanings in individual and everyday life.

- ▶ Its sensory nature – a rich potential of highly variegated fragrance notes.
- ▶ Its mystic aura – the recondite natural development and exotic origins.
- ▶ Its commercial exclusivity – the limited natural production and availability.



Publications

An Ethnography of Fragrance. The Perfumery Arts of 'Adan/Lahj. Leiden, 2011.
The Value of Agarwood. Reflections upon its use and history in South Yemen. Heidelberg, 2011.
The Cultural Biography of Agarwood. Its introduction and rise in East Asia. (under peer review).
(Ed.) *Perfumery and Ritual. The use of incense, flowers, distillates and aromatic objects in Asia.* (under peer review).

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