

***Perfumery in Asia –
Reflections upon the Natural, Cultural and Intangible Heritage***
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“Perfumery” – as the term is used here – refers to *the art and practice of producing, refining and consuming aromatic materials in appreciation of their olfactory quality*. In comparison with common understandings of the English term, various other perfumery product genres are imaginable, transgressing the character of classical European goods of recent times. In Asia, incense, flowers, distillates and aromatic objects especially deserve attention as “perfumes”, if the definition of “perfumery” is widened in this way in favour of a multicultural approach to the vast and diverse world of fragrances and related activities worldwide.

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This paper aims to consider the cultural value of the art and craft of perfumery. The idea might appear inappropriate, as perfumery has seldom received scholarly recognition in this way. No independent scholarly institution has been established for reflecting upon this art and its context. The work of cultural organizations gives similar impressions. For example, there is not one among the UNESCO World Heritage objects – in all numbering more than 1.000 – which is protected with the explicit aim of safeguarding olfaction-related nature and culture.¹

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However, especially Asian traditions merit a review of the role attributed to perfumery. Cultural practices in relation with aromatic materials have a long tradition there. Even if internationally Asian perfumery is nowadays mainly associated with historical images and known as an exponentially growing market of the global industry, it is worth noting that people fundamentally learned about perfumery from Asian cultures in earlier decades and centuries (and still do). The pharmaceutical and purifying qualities of aromatics was already treasured in Asia around 1.500–5.000 years ago, resulting in the continuous specialization and refinement of local perfumery arts there since then.

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For appraising the value of the Asian perfumery heritage, the general considerations by the UNESCO concerning the definition of “heritage”² are inspiring for reflecting upon the ethnographic data.³

Perfumery is characterized as a pan-Asian and long-standing phenomenon.

Manifold archaeological, art historical and literary findings hint at the involvement of people in perfumery activities at many sites in Asia. The diversity and geographical spread of the testimonies support the hypothesis that some kind of perfumery has been known throughout history and Asia.

Perfumery features Asian material arts and innovations.

Perfumery presents an interaction between mankind and nature – the enjoyment and refinement of the wealth of biological resources with their unique aromatic qualities.

The primary outcome has been “perfumes”, i.e artefacts which are fragrant by themselves, or which bear an aromatic quality that can be brought to its olfactory unfolding under special conditions.

Sometimes the olfactory performance depends on additional equipment to allow the fragrant happening to take place – “perfumery accessories”, such as censers. Like the perfumes themselves, also these complementary artefacts depend on, as well as mirror, the art of dealing with nature – the state of local arts and aesthetics.

Necessarily, the production of the (fragrant and complementary) artefacts has depended on tools, and consequentially led to the invention of techniques and instruments. Many of them are now typical of the Asian continent. However, the individual pieces are varied, and the function and design, when examined in detail, reveal geographical, economic, ethnic, and social facets about their local culture.

Perfumery is associated with cultural spaces – and highlights natural resources.

Places of origin and refinement of perfumery raw materials have become pillars of cultural identification. The linkage highlights the wealth of aromatic resources which are native to Asia and for which the continent and individual regions have become famous. In certain areas, the production signifies the livelihood of the population, and the area’s natural conditions determine the daily work rhythms as well as work seasons and festivities throughout the year. Moreover, the fragrant natural wealth is the source of health remedies and thus contributes to the community’s livelihood in additional ways.

The mere appreciation of aromatic materials is also often associated with spaces in Asia far away from production sites. Locations that are meaningful for a population are typical places for using aromatic goods. Especially spaces which have high social value and religious significance traditionally demand the respectful offering of aromatics; the particular perfumes that have been chosen reflect the rituals’ importance for the community. Like other fine arts, perfumery was thus one medium to structure and organize the social existence of complex societies.

Perfumery has been a product of and reason for intra-Asian exchange.

The therapeutic qualities of aromatics, their association with religious and social value,

and simply their fascinating character triggered intra-Asian explorations, trade, migrations and colonization efforts from early on.

Conversely, the various intra-Asian contacts also had an impact on local perfumery practices, since they resulted in the spread of aesthetic ideas and technical knowledge. The cultural flows contributed to the development of a handful of originally local aromatics, to becoming key materials of perfumery arts throughout the continent.

Similarly, the employment of identical techniques at various sites in Asia cannot be fully explained by chemical necessities of the fine art, but reveals processes of cultural exchange and the emergence of transcultural aesthetic ideals.

Perfumery has been the object of sophistication and scholarship in Asia.

The local development of perfumery practices was supported by aesthetical reflections. Historical manuscripts give report of centuries-old considerations and ideals of skilled refinement of aromatics, and how to consume them in meritorious ways. Scientific treatises on handicraft techniques and on medical benefits, etiquette manuals, and poetic accounts all illustrate the attention and value given to fragrances.

Similarly, visual documents inform about aesthetical notions and subtleties of perfumery. For example, visual representations of aromatics serve as symbols of divine qualities and thus inform about the historical “image” of those aromatics for a people. Alternatively, depictions of social gatherings include scenes of perfumery activities and so give testimony of its role in society as well as of the technical knowledge then used.

The scholarly and art-based (re-)presentations simultaneously inform about the historical development(s) of the art(s) of perfumery. It has been the object of changing aesthetic interpretation and reflections, themselves mirroring changing cultural conditions and the transmission of knowledge and ideas.

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In sum, the material factors and spaces associated with Asian perfumery arts, in combination with the manifold practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and necessary skills, distinguish the fine art of perfumery as a common and dynamic part of the intangible cultural heritage of Asia. This heritage simultaneously highlights the natural heritage and is connected with material arts and achievements.

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Following the material basis of the perfumery art, it has always been intrinsically connected with economic aspects. The characteristic intertwinement with business distinguishes the perfumery heritage from others, and makes it more difficult to separate and acknowledge its cultural value.

At the same time, this characteristic intertwinement makes the perfumery art

more susceptible to modern developments. The exponentially growing consumption of scented commodities worldwide also has its effects in Asia. Natural key resources from Asia have become seriously endangered, and synthetic substitutes are also problematic as their impact on human health and ecosystems in Asia and elsewhere is, as yet, widely unknown.

The change in the ecological conditions results in the transformation of perfumery knowledge. The olfactory quality of disappearing resources becomes less known in favor of the sensory character of industrial goods. Similarly, these modern and often ready-made products transform refinement techniques and ways of appreciating perfume.

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Asian perfumery is shifting. This paper seeks to draw light to this heritage and its permeation throughout society and nature. It may call attention to the vulnerability of the art, as well as the significance of sustainable consumption of aromatics for cultures and ecosystems in Asia.

¹ UNESCO, *World Heritage List*. Online: <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>>; <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00559>>.

² UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Online: <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00006>>.

See also: UNESCO, *The Criteria for Selection to be included in the World Heritage List*. Online: <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>>.

³ This article is based on the ethnographic data that was gathered during the international workshop “Perfumery and Ritual in Asia” (University of Heidelberg, November 2010). The conference proceedings have been published as a Special Issue, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 23, Part I, January 2013.

Visual examples of Asian perfumery arts: <<http://www.perfumery-heritage-of-asia.net>>.