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Foreign aromatics, olfactory culture, and scent connoisseurship in late medieval China

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Abstract

By the end of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), olfactory culture in China had evolved significantly as coveted aromatics continued to be imported and in increasing quantities from Southeast Asia. Although there is no surviving treatise dedicated to aromatics from this period, anecdotes in prose literature describing the uses and curation of scents reveal a process in which imported aromatics were being actively incorporated into existing olfactory culture and accrued new social, aesthetic, and ritual significance. This process is discernible in two major respects. First, a discourse of connoisseurship for aromatics arose in contrast to the conspicuous consumption of imported aromatics that flaunted wealth and status. Secondly, aromatics that were once the privilege of the very few began to be circulated among a wider (admittedly still elite) population, as seen in the case of the dragon brain aromatic in late-Tang and Five Dynasties accounts. By delving into these and related prose narratives and by cross-examining these accounts against other types of records, this article examines how imported aromatic goods shaped the Tang elite's perception of how scent was—and could be—used as part of a socially rooted sensory experience.

Keywords: anecdotal literature; aromatics; connoisseurship; dragon brain aromatic; olfactory culture; social perception; Tang Dynasty; transculturation

Introduction

Smells and their nuances can be difficult to capture and represent linguistically, and yet they powerfully evoke the unseen, the distant, and the imaginary. They can signal danger and decay (through putrid odours), but also confer pleasure from the natural world—such as through flowers and aromatic botanicals. Curated scents such as incense, personal perfume, or other ritual aromatics constitute an important subset of the olfactory world, and have been used in many societies to signify the crossing of realms of existence, hierarchies, and membership of in-groups. Despite the 'sensory turn' in the humanities, not all senses lend themselves equally to being historicised and the understanding of olfactory culture presents some unique challenges: scents, by nature ephemeral, cannot be captured indefinitely, archived, or stored, only recreated or reconstituted, and often only by approximation. Textual evidence can be an ally for the olfactory historian but, even so, compared with that of sight and sound, the vocabulary of scent is more limited and requires contextualisation within a broader array of sources. In her article entitled 'Aromas, scents, and spices: olfactory culture before the arrival of Buddhism', Olivia

Milburn points out that ‘research into early Chinese olfactory culture is at present in its infancy’ and that what is still missing is ‘an analysis of Chinese olfactory culture in general—that is, an understanding of how ancient Chinese people understood and classified the world of scent’.¹

In this article, I wish to rise to the challenge that Milburn articulates by focusing on the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) and the Five Dynasties (907–60 CE)—a period after the arrival of Buddhism significantly impacted olfactory culture and during which overseas trade became increasingly important in bringing aromatics from Southeast Asia.² It was also a period from which, unlike the subsequent Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), no dedicated systematic treatise on aromatics survives.³ This textual lacuna behoves us to look for other sources in order to understand how elites from this time perceived and understood scents old and new, indigenous and imported.

In researching premodern Chinese olfactory culture, there are three large areas in which scholarly inquiries have been made. First, archaeological findings of personal fragrances as burial goods—despite being highly perishable and degradable artefacts—expand our understanding of the ingredients of earlier olfactory culture. An example from the pre-Buddhist era is the Mawangdui 馬王堆 tombs dating from 168 BCE during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), in which the aristocratic tomb occupant was buried with many aromatic pouches, including two pouches in each of her hands.⁴ A significant archaeological find dating back to the Tang era came from the crypt of the Famensi 法門寺 Temple located about 140 kilometres west of the Tang capital of Chang’an. Inside the crypt that had been sealed and intact since 874, archaeologists discovered metal censers along with an accompanying stele listing the contents of the aromatics in the crypt that include frankincense, sandalwood, cloves, and agarwood.⁵ Beyond archaeological research, another approach concerns the sources, ingredients, and production of aromatics that constitute olfactory culture, often in the form of object biography, cultural biography, or economic history, and ranges across the disciplines of the history of medicine or the history of science. A number of such recent studies include those on camphor, agarwood, and musk, and form a growing body of scholarship that probes the ingredients and raw materials of olfactory culture, including the routes of their transmission into China.⁶

¹ O. Milburn, ‘Aromas, scents, and spices: olfactory culture in China before the arrival of Buddhism’, *Journal of American Oriental Society* 136 (2016), pp. 441–42.

² For a discussion on Buddhism’s impact on the use of incense in the context of Chinese material culture, see J. Kieschnick, *Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton, 2003), pp. 277–78. For the increase in importation of aromatics, see, for example, A. Schottenhammer, ‘Transfer of Xiangyao from Iran and Arabia to China: a reinvestigation of entries in the *Youyang zazu* (863)’, in *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea*, (ed.) R. Kauz (Wiesbaden, 2010), pp. 117, 126.

³ Recipe books for aromatics were circulating in the Six Dynasties period (220–589), such as *Hexiang fang* 和香方 (*Recipes for Combining Aromatics*) by the historian Fan Ye 范曄 (398–446), which is lost except for a short excerpt. More complete treatises devoted to aromatics survive from the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Analogous treatises of connoisseurship also survive from the Tang era, such as *Cha jing* 茶經 (*The Classic of Tea*) by Lu Yu 陸羽 (733–804).

⁴ On these burial aromatics of Lady Dai, see, for example, Chen Dongjie 陳東杰 and Li Ya 李芽, ‘Cong Mawangdui yihao hanmu chutu xiangliao yu xiangju tanxi handai yongxiang xisu’ 从馬王堆一号漢墓出土香料與香具探析漢代用香習俗 [On Han-Dynasty uses of aromatics from the excavated aromatic materials and vessels of Mawangdui Tomb Number One], *Nandu xuetan* 南都學壇 29 (2009), pp. 6–12; Di Lu and Vivienne Lo, ‘Scent and synaesthesia: the medical use of spice bags in early China’, *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 167 (2015), pp. 38–46.

⁵ Quan Fei 權飛, ‘Famensi tang ta digong chutu tangdai xiangliao chutan’ 法門寺唐塔地宮出土唐代香料初探 [Preliminary investigation into the excavated aromatics in the crypt of the Tang-Dynasty Famen Temple], *Nongye kaogu* 農業考古 [Agricultural Archaeology] 4 (2016), pp. 246–50; see also Fu Jingliang, *Zhongguo xiang wenhua* 中國香文化 [The Culture of Aromatics in China] (Jinan, 2008), pp. 61–63.

⁶ On specific aromatic ingredients, see, for example, R. A. Donkin, *Dragon’s Brain Perfume: An Historical Geography of Camphor* (Leiden, 1999); D. Jung, ‘The cultural biography of agarwood: perfumery in Eastern Asia and the Asian

The third area for research on olfactory culture concerns the socially rooted language and descriptive vocabulary that apply to scents in both ordinary and extraordinary life, along with an evaluative system of connoisseurship for scents and the curation/creation of scents in ways that are comparable to other art forms such as music or painting. These critical interventions span methodologies such as sensory anthropology and critical genealogy—methodologies also shared to some extent by historians of food. As part of this approach, this article focuses on the ways in which prose narratives engage with the olfactory realm as they describe, classify, curate, and appraise scents in an experiential context. Imported aromatics, as a subtype of fashionable ‘exotic’ objects—as Edward Schafer dubbed them in his monograph on this subject—were part of a wider fascination with imports during the Tang era.⁷ However, these imported aromatics were never statically ‘exotic’ as such. They were also actively undergoing a process of adaptation and transculturation through knowledge production and the evolving connoisseurship of the elite; in the process, they were becoming entities with new social, aesthetic, and ritual significances.⁸ Although no treatise dedicated to aromatics or its connoisseurship survived from the Tang period, the uses of scent as part of a socially rooted experience were captured in prose narratives, which serve to fill a crucial gap in our understanding.

Working with a number of such prose narratives from the ninth to tenth centuries, this article builds on studies of the aromatic ingredients (via pharmacopoeias and categorical books) and trade centred on the Indian Ocean to help answer the questions of how some of these imported aromatics gradually accrued aesthetic meaning and social prestige during the Tang era. I argue that anecdotes on aromatics and scent-making point to a process of adaptation and curation that was embedded in the complexity of urban life and social hierarchies, and that this process can be discernible in two ways. First, a discourse of connoisseurship for aromatics arose in contradistinction to the conspicuous consumption of costly, imported aromatics that flaunted wealth and status; this connoisseurship could be glimpsed through a penchant for rankings, groupings, and pairings of scents that were part of the shared and convivial practices of the elite. Second, aromatics that were once restricted to the privileged few began to enjoy circulation outside the upper echelon of society, seen in the case of dragon brain aromatic (*longnao xiang* 龍腦香) as featured in a number of prose records, including an account of a daring swindle involving a late-Tang emperor and a Buddhist monastery near the imperial palace.

From conspicuous consumption to discourses of connoisseurship

A wider use of imported aromatics, mostly in the form of wood and resin, is perhaps the most noticeable change in the Chinese sensorium since the arrival of Buddhism. As a point of comparison, the aromatics buried in the Han-Dynasty Mawangdui tomb (circa 150 BCE), which belong to the pre-Buddhist olfactory world, were all indigenous in origin.⁹ In the Tang era, aromatics were part of a broader vogue for exotic imports that also included foreign clothes, food, and music, as Edward Schafer details in his book, *The*

neighbourhood’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23 (2013), pp. 103–25; A. H. King, *Scent from the Garden of Paradise: Musk and the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden, 2017); Angela Ki Che Leung and Ming Chen, ‘The itinerary of Hing/Awei/Asafetida across Eurasia, 400–1800’, in *Entangled Itineraries: Materials, Practices, and Knowledges across Eurasia*, (ed.) P. H. Smith (Pittsburgh, 2019), pp. 141–64.

⁷ E. H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics* (Berkeley, 1963), pp. 28–32.

⁸ On the issue of transculturation, I am particularly indebted to and inspired by the forthcoming article, Yan Liu, ‘Scented protection: a transcultural history of saffron in premodern China’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (2024) (forthcoming).

⁹ Lu and Lo, ‘Scent and synaesthesia’, pp. 38–46.

Golden Peaches of Samarkand.¹⁰ Foreign aromatics arrived in China on ships. In 743, when the Buddhist Monk Jianzhen 鑑真 (688–763) was preparing for his voyage to Japan in the port city of Guangzhou 廣州, he saw ‘innumerable’ foreign ships anchored in the Pearl River 珠江, laden with ‘mountainous piles’ of aromatic drugs (香藥), pearls, and other rare and precious goods, and the vessels were said to be from India (婆羅門), Persia (波斯), Malaya (崑崙山), and Arabia (大食), each 60 to 70 feet deep.¹¹ Jianzhen’s eye-witness inventory speaks to the voluminous transport of precious commodities on maritime trade routes. He may have paid close attention to these ships because he himself purchased close to 1,000 *jin* of aromatics that year to be transported via ship to Japan. The aromatics he purchased included musk (麝香), agarwood (沉香), armour aromatic (甲香),¹² dragon brain aromatic (龍腦香), benzoin (安息香), land-infusing aromatic (熏陸香), and others.¹³ Aromatics are compact, dense, and often resinous and therefore less perishable, thereby lending themselves towards long-distance transport on vessels moving across the Indian Ocean. This is also evidenced by another encounter in Jianzhen’s experience: a pirate based in Hainan Island, Feng Ruofang 馮若芳 (n.d.), who was said to have pillaged the cargoes and crew of ‘two or three Persian ships each year’, entertained his guests by extravagantly ‘burning frankincense as if they are candles’, 100 catties at a time.¹⁴ This testifies to the pirate’s wealth in general, but also to his unmitigated access to frankincense on board these passing ships in the South Sea.

Recent studies related to Jianzhen’s eye-witness account in the coastal port and on Hainan Island have shown that a maritime trade route from the Persian Gulf to China via the Indian Ocean experienced a ‘permanent upswing’ in the late Tang to early Song Dynasties; of all the commodities that entered China via the sea, aromatic drugs (*xiangyao* 香藥) were the most significant in value and quantity.¹⁵ A study by Wen Cuifang concludes that, in the medieval period, it was aromatics rather than metal currency that constituted a major import commodity that helped balance the export of Chinese silk.¹⁶

At its farthest reach, a maritime trade route connected the (inland) capitals of the Chinese empire, Chang’an, and the caliphate seat of Bagdad, as well as many port cities along the South Sea in Sumatra, India, and Ceylon. In official histories such as the ‘geography’ (*dili* 地理) category of the *New Tang History*, the grand councillor Jia Dan 賈耽 (729–805) recorded ‘The route to foreign countries across the sea from Guangzhou’ (廣州通海夷道), which begins with the port city on China’s south coast.¹⁷ This recorded route is

¹⁰ Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, *passim*.

¹¹ Zhenren Yuankai 真人元開, Ōmi Mifune, and Wang Xiangrong 汪向榮 (eds.), *Tang da he shang dong zheng zhuan* 唐大和上東征傳 (Beijing, 1979), p. 74. An English translation of this passage can be found in A. George, ‘Direct sea trade between early Islamic Iraq and Tang China: from the exchange of goods to the transmission of ideas’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25 (2015), pp. 594–95.

¹² This is an aromatic derived from the shell of a gastropod in the South Sea. See its entry in Li Fang 李昉 (ed.), *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽 [*Imperial Anthology from the Taiping Era*] (Beijing, 1985), juan 982, p. 99.

¹³ Zhenren Yuankai et al., *Tang da he shang dong zheng zhuan*, p. 47. The aromatic *xunlu xiang* 熏陸香 is sometimes associated with frankincense (*ruxiang* 乳香 in Chinese), but there is conflicting evidence regarding this identification. For this reason, I render it as ‘land-infusing aromatic’.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁵ *Xiang* 香 and *yao* 藥 were often mentioned and grouped together in this context because aromatics and medicine/pharmacopoeia were functionally intertwined. On the upswing in importation, see Schottenhammer, ‘Transfer of *Xiangyao*’, pp. 117, 126.

¹⁶ Wen Cuifang 溫翠芳, ‘Tangdai de wailai xiangyao yanjiu’ 唐代的外來香藥研究 [A Study of Foreign Aromatics Drugs in the Tang Dynasty] (unpublished PhD dissertation, Shaanxi Normal University, 2006), p. 3.

¹⁷ The route went through Southeast and South Asia, and passed by major stopping points including Hainan Island, Vietnam, Straits of Malacca, Sumatra, Sri Lanka, the Malabar Coast, and Abadan in the Persian Gulf, before reaching Bagdad. English translation from Gungwu Wang, ‘The Nanhai trade: a study of the early history of Chinese trade in the South China Sea’, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31 (1958), pp. 104–

consistent with those described in Arabic sources such as *The Book of Routes and Realms* by Ibn Khurdādhbih (circa 825–911) and the anonymous *Accounts of China and India* compiled in 851.¹⁸ These sea routes have been corroborated by recent archaeological finds as well. Excavated Chinese pottery dating to the eighth to tenth centuries dot the coastline of the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the ports of Indonesia, attesting to locations that received exports of Chinese ceramics.¹⁹ Two recently excavated shipwrecks near Indonesia also testify to this maritime traffic in the ninth and tenth centuries. The *Belitung* (circa 850), a ship that carried over 60,000 pieces of Tang ceramics on its outbound leg, sank near Sumatra.²⁰ The Chinese ceramic cargoes of the *Intan* (circa 940) are, similarly, believed to have been intended for exchange with commodities from Southeast Asia, including aromatics in the form of resins and wood.²¹ For example, agarwood or ‘sinking fragrance’ (*chenxiang* 沉香) was imported into China as both an ingredient for blended incense as well as a material that could be carved into religious objects of devotion.²²

According to Yan Liu’s count, the state-commissioned pharmacopoeia compiled in 659, *Newly Revised Materia Medica* (*Xinxiu bencao* 新修本草), describes 11 kinds of aromatics of foreign origin, such as agarwood, frankincense, patchouli, storax, dragon brain, benzoin, sandalwood, and armour aromatic.²³ Foreign aromatics also figured prominently in personal perfumes, which were burned in censers and fumigated onto clothing. In Tang poems from the ninth century, aristocratic youths are described as wearing clothing fumigated with fragrance from far-flung places. The poet Zhang Xiaobiao 章孝標 (791–873) describes a day in the life of such a young man, and he begins with the couplet: ‘At dawn, he leaves the barracks for a quick hunt/ Foreign fragrances permeate his sleeves’ (平明小獵出中軍, 異國名香滿袖熏).²⁴ We find a similar depiction in a ‘Ballad of a young man of Chang’an’ (長安少年行) by Li Kuo 李廓 (d. 851), which begins with the couplet: ‘Wearing a Yangzhou-styled hat aslant/ heavily infused with fragrances from foreign lands’ (剗戴揚州帽, 重熏異國香).²⁵

Imported aromatics also played an increasing role in the production of incense during the Tang era, constituent to an important type of religious commodity. A recipe for blended incense associated with Huadu 化度 Temple in the north-west portion of

5. For a discussion and schematic of Jia Dan’s route, see Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Pre-modern Asia* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 29.

¹⁸ George, ‘Direct sea trade’, p. 584, n. 7. See also Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds*, pp. 61–65. Park suggests that this consistency implies that ‘all three authors used the sum of knowledge in circulation at that time’, *ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30, Fig. 1.1.

²⁰ See descriptions of this shipwreck and the ship cargo in R. Krahl et al. (eds.), *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds* (Washington, DC, 2010), pp. 19–27.

²¹ Recovered from the *Intan* shipwreck were also 24 small pieces of benzoin, another non-native aromatic. K. R. Hall, ‘Indonesia’s evolving international relationships in the ninth to early eleventh centuries: evidence from contemporary shipwrecks and epigraphy’, *Indonesia* 90 (2010), p. 22. For comparison, a large number of aromatic woods was found in a Song-Dynasty sunken ship excavated from Quanzhou 泉州, Fujian. See description and inventory of such aromatics in Quanzhou wan songdai haichuan fajue baogao bianxie zu 泉州灣宋代海船發掘報告編寫組, ‘Quanzhou wan songdai haichuan fajue jianbao’ 泉州灣宋代海船發掘簡報, *Wenwu* 文物 10 (1975), p. 4.

²² The entry ‘Qingmen chushi’ 清門處士 describes an agarwood figurine several feet tall that arrived in China by boat from overseas and was given to the king of Wu Yue 吳越 as a gift. *Qing yi lu* 清異錄, (ed.) Zhu Yi’an 朱易安, *Quan Song biji* 全宋筆記 [*The Complete Song-Dynasty biji Collections*] (Zhengzhou, 2003), p. 111 (hereafter abbreviated as QYL).

²³ See Liu, ‘Scented protection’.

²⁴ *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Beijing, 1960), *juan* 506, p. 5756.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, *juan* 24, p. 327.

Chang'an survives from the Song-Dynasty treatise on aromatics, *Xiang pu* 香譜; it calls for one part dragon brain and one part musk (麝香), along with more copious amounts of agarwood (沈香), white sandalwood (白檀香), storax (蘇合香), and armour aromatic (甲香).²⁶ Of the ingredients listed in the recipe, most are of foreign origin. In an entry about aromatics in a tenth-century prose collection *Qing yi lu* 清異錄 (*Records of the Pure and Marvellous*), we see an explicit statement of a preference for imports. The entry is entitled 'Beggar child's fragrance' (乞兒香):

As for the regions of Linyi [present-day central Vietnam], Zhancheng [Champa], Dupo [present-day Sumatra Island] and Jiaozhi [present-day Vietnam], they are paragons of mixing marvelous aromatics in recipes. These have extraordinary scent accords, such that the 'Three Mixtures' and 'Four Remarkables'²⁷ of China are deemed 'beggar child's fragrance'.

林邑、占城、闍婆、交趾，以雜出異香劑和而範之，氣韻不凡，謂中國三勻四絕為「乞兒香」。²⁸

Having now arrived in China from places such as Sumatra, Borneo, or parts of present-day Vietnam, these aromatics were beginning to be catalogued, evaluated, gifted, displayed, compared, and competed against in the hands of the elite. Because imported aromatics were costly, anecdotes that describe their consumption in large quantities in effect showcase a wilful act of conspicuous consumption. For example, in Tang anecdotes, Emperor Yangdi of the Sui 隋煬帝 (569–618) is said to have burned 'fiery mountains' of agarwood as his nightly entertainment. Similar behaviour is often recounted as typical of doomed last emperors, and was used as pointed admonition to Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–49) by his officials.²⁹ Two centuries later, when a Persian merchant named Li Susha 李蘇沙 presented Emperor Jingzong 敬宗 (809–27, r. 824–27) with materials for a pavilion made of agarwood, an official again remonstrated against such opulence, pointedly comparing it to building terraces made of jasper (不異瑤臺瓊室)³⁰—a reference with a specific and time-worn association with dynastic decline.

Not all acts of wanton extravagance were from benighted rulers however; some were also from the uber-riche in the capital of Chang'an, such as a Tang merchant Wang Yuanbao 王元寶. The following record similarly illustrates the extreme of this consumptive craze for aromatics:

Yuanbao was an eager host and occupied himself with ostentatious luxuries. His vessels and decorations were appropriated from the aristocrats and royal houses, and the elite from all over flocked to him to admire them. He often set up two dwarf servants in front of his canopy bed, each holding a Seven-treasure Boshan censer. They burned incense continuously from dusk to dawn—such was his swaggering extravagance.

²⁶ Hong Chu 洪芻, *Xiang pu* 香譜 [*The Register of Aromatics*] (Shanghai, 1937), p. 28. This recipe is also cited in Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, p. 159.

²⁷ I have not been able to find a definition for the 'Four Remarkables'. The 'three mixtures' (三勻) is mentioned in an entry in the *Qing yi lu* as a fine-grade drug sold to the Tang elite by a merchant in Chang'an. QYL, p. 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁹ Li Fang 李昉 (ed.), *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 [*Extensive Records from the Taiping Era*] (Beijing, 2003), *juan* 236, pp. 1814–15.

³⁰ Liu Xu 劉昫 (887–946) (ed.), *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 [*Old History of the Tang*] (Beijing, 1975), *juan* 17, p. 512.

元寶好賓客，務於華侈，器玩服用僭於王公，而四方之士盡歸而仰焉。常於寢帳牀前置矮童二人，捧七寶博山爐，自暝燒香徹曉，其驕貴如此。³¹

Similarly, Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 (d. 756), who ascended to power through his family ties to the royal consort Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 during the reign of Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–56), was considered a parvenu of a different sort. In an entry entitled ‘The four-fragrance pavilion’ from the same collection, the *Kaiyuan Tianbao yishi*, his extravagance with expensive aromatics is described as overreaching propriety:

[Yang] Guozhong also used agarwood to build a pavilion and used sandalwood as banisters, with musk and frankincense ground into the wall plaster to cover the walls. Whenever in the spring the tree peony fully bloomed, he would gather guests atop the pavilion to view the flowers. Even the agarwood gazebos inside the imperial palaces were not nearly as grand and fine as this.

國忠又用沈香爲閣，檀香爲欄，以麝香、乳香篩土和爲泥飾壁。每於春時木芍藥盛開之際，聚賓友於此閣上賞花焉。禁中沈香之亭遠不侔此壯麗也。³²

While the entries cited above show the historians’ contempt toward the merchants and power usurpers, what is less discussed is the way in which they also reveal an anxiety toward an unbridled consumption of expensive aromatics. As records of the ‘misuse’ of aromatics, they point to a tension or slippage in socially perceived value and their deployment: Emperor Yangdi of the Sui augured dynastic collapse with his use of agarwood, while Yang Guozhong and Wang Yuanbao, parvenu and merchant, consumed aromatics in amounts that were clearly deemed ‘wrong’. Yet their behaviour was not defined by sumptuary codes and fell into a no man’s land of social regulation. As Arun Appadurai points out in his article on commodities: ‘Sumptuary laws constitute an intermediate consumption-regulating device, suited to societies devoted to stable status displays in exploding commodity contexts, such as India, China, and Europe in the premodern period’.³³ Yet another crucial observation that we should make is that sumptuary laws are inherently designed for the *optics* of consumption, such as clothing, carriage, and the sizes of dwellings. What we see in these Tang-era anecdotes is that consumption of olfactory luxury goods was noticed as extravagance and transgression, yet it curiously escapes the social regulations per se. Even though agarwood-scented banisters displayed immense wealth and status, aromatics as such were in fact not regulated by Tang sumptuary laws that regulated other material goods that signalled social status. Thus, we see in these anecdotes the unstable cultural valuation of a relatively new luxury commodity for which there were no established protocols for proper measures of consumption, such that these ‘wrong’ ways of consuming aromatics fall into the interstices of social regulation. Yang Guozhong, the merchant Wang Yuanbao, and the pirate Feng Ruofen, who burned mounds of frankincense, are each represented as failing to practise the ‘right’ way to consume these expensive foreign aromatics.

As the art historian Craig Clunas observes of sumptuary regulations: ‘they begin with categories of person which are assumed to be immutable and then assign to those categories specific types of object’. This contrasts with the aspirational drives of

³¹ Wang Renyu 王仁裕, *Kaiyuan Tianbao yishi* 開元天寶遺事 (Beijing, 2006), p. 37.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³³ A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 25, cited and discussed in C. Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu, 2004), p. 147.

connoisseurship-related texts, which, he notes, ‘begin invariably with types of thing, specifically described, and then relate to them essentially social categories like “vulgar” or “elegant”’.³⁴ This is precisely what Tang elites had begun to do with aromatics, and imported aromatics in particular, as evidenced in anecdotal writing that reveals the ways in which they self-consciously cultivated an appreciation for aromatics to distinguish themselves from the negative examples of consumption cited above. One valuable source for this burgeoning discourse of connoisseurship can be found in the genre of *biji* 筆記 (notebook jottings), and in particular the aforementioned *Qing yi lu* 清異錄 attributed to Tao Gu 陶穀 (903–73), who was active during the Five Dynasties. The collection consists of 661 entries of short anecdotes about people and events throughout the Tang and Five Dynasties³⁵ organised into 39 categories (門); they are ordered hierarchically and in a fashion that is consistent with *leishu* (categorical books or ‘encyclopaedia’) from this time. As is conventional for the *leishu* genre, the categories begin with astronomy (天文) and geography (地理) and move on to terrestrial plants, including grasses and trees (草木), varieties of fruit (百果), and vegetables (蔬菜), followed by interior decorations (陳設), wine and ale (酒漿), tea (茗菴), fine food (饌羞), and others, before ending with the liminal categories of ghosts (鬼), spirits (神), and demons (妖).³⁶

Entries in *Qing yi lu* pertaining to aromatic practices are rich and numerous, and have not been adequately studied.³⁷ They are primarily found under the category of ‘fumigating and burning’ (燻療), with 24 entries detailing aromatics, incense, and aromatic woods. Just as importantly, entries relating to (mostly domestic) aromatics are also scattered among other categories such as ‘plants’, ‘flowers’, and ‘fruits’, which discuss the botanical ingredients and their olfactory features. For example, in the fruit category is an entry about the fragrance of melons, vividly entitled ‘Choosing with the nose’ (鼻選).³⁸

There are several entries in *Qing yi lu* that describe olfactory practices through a connoisseurial lens, manifested as an implicit or explicit emphasis on rankings and lineages of scents. For example, under the category of ‘plants’ (草木), the *lan* 蘭 flower is crowned as a ‘master fragrance’ (香祖) by the intensity and durability of its aroma:

Although the *lan* flower only puts out one blossom, inside the home the aroma’s richness is overwhelming, and does not dissipate even after ten days. For this reason the people of Jiangnan consider it the ‘master fragrance’.

蘭雖吐一花，室中亦馥郁襲人，彌旬不歇，故江南人以蘭為「香祖」。³⁹

This awareness of a lineage, hierarchy, or ranking for the quality of scents is evident in other entries as well. An important part of connoisseurship is the process of ranking and evaluation, in the form of competitions. *Qing yi lu* describes an aromatics competition called ‘The Fragrance Tournament’ (鬪香):

³⁴ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, p. 150.

³⁵ Deng Ruiquan 鄧瑞全 and Li Kaisheng 李開升, ‘*Qing yi lu* banben yuanliu kao’ 《清異錄》版本源流考 [The textual history and transmission of the *Qing yi lu*], *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究學刊 [Journal of Ancient Books Collation and Studies] 4 (2008), p. 48.

³⁶ QYL, pp. 1–114.

³⁷ There have been related studies of the *Qing yi lu* on its entries on food and gastronomy. See, for example, Li Yimin 李益民 et al. (eds.), *Qing yi lu yinshi bufen* 清異錄飲食部分 [Selections from the *Qing yi lu* about food], *Zhongguo pengren guji congkan* 中國烹飪古籍叢刊 [Collection of Ancient Chinese Culinary Texts] (Beijing, 1985), *passim*.

³⁸ QYL, p. 44.

³⁹ From the category ‘Grasses and trees’ (草木門), QYL, p. 33.

During Emperor Zhongzong's reign, [the households of] Zong, Ji, Wei, and Wu held elegant gatherings from time to time, in which each presented choice aromatics to compete for the best. It was called the 'aromatics challenge'. It was Wei Wen, who put forth [an aromatic] bestowed on him by the empress, who constantly won first place.⁴⁰

中宗朝，宗、紀、韋、武間為雅會，各攜名香，比試優劣，名曰「鬪香」。惟韋溫挾椒塗所賜，常獲魁。⁴¹

This competition seems to have been a recurring event among the households that were all imperial affines and therefore at the top echelon of Tang society. We do not know the identity of the aromatic that emerged as the champion in that *Qing yi lu* entry, but the passage suggests that it came from a privileged source, most likely through an imperial tribute. Interestingly, the term for empress—*jiaotu* 椒塗—is itself related to an aromatic, the Sichuan pepper (椒), which is native to China. Starting in the Han Dynasty, 'the pepper chamber' (*jiaofang* 椒房) began to be used to refer to the living quarters of the empress and royal consorts, as the Sichuan pepper was incorporated into the plaster on the walls due to its warming properties and suggestion of fertility.⁴²

Comparing rare aromatics and establishing a ranked list constitutes but one form of connoisseurship pertaining to aromatics; another is that of comprehensive display. An entry in *Qing yi lu* documents an 'aromatics banquet' (香燕) in which various specimens are showcased for appreciation, this time in the court of Emperor Yuanzong 元宗 (r. 943–60) of the Southern Tang (937–75):

In the seventh year (949) of the Baoda Era (943–957) of Li Jing's (916–961) reign, court ministers and royal relatives were summoned into the palace for an 'aromatics banquet'. It [featured] everything produced by the Central States and foreign kingdoms, including compound scents, those in the form of blended decoctions, as well as sachets to be worn on the person. There was a total of 92 varieties, the likes of which the Jiangnan area has never seen.

李璟保大七年，召大臣宗室赴內香燕。凡中國外夷所出，以至和合煎飲、佩帶粉囊，共九十二種，江南素所無也。⁴³

This olfactory pageantry emphasises the variety and foreign origin of the aromatics as well as their versatility (as drugs, as perfume, etc.). During a time at which regional courts were vying for imperial ambitions, the display in turn creates a kind of spectacle to advertise its power beyond its own geographical limits.

⁴⁰ *Jiaotu* 椒塗 in this passage refers to the empress, who is conventionally described as dwelling in the 'pepper chambers'. An example of this usage can be found in the *Old Tang History* biography concerning Empress Wu Zetian 武則天, in which her wrongdoings are described as 'to suffocate and kill the babe in the swaddling clothes, and to make into mincemeat those in the pepper chamber'. (振喉絕襁褓之兒，菹醢碎椒塗之骨) Liu Xu (ed.), *Jiu Tang shu*, *juan* 6, p. 133. Schafer misinterprets *jiaotu* 椒塗 in this passage as 'a kind of fagara paste'. Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, p. 157.

⁴¹ QYL, p. 109. For a biography of Wei Wen, see Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (ed.), *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 [New History of the Tang] (Beijing, 1975), *juan* 206, p. 5843.

⁴² Milburn translates the following passages from the Ceremonial Regulations for Han Dynasty Officials (*Hanguan yi*) by the Eastern Han-Dynasty historian Ying Shao (140–206 CE): 'The empress is called by the epithet "Pepper Chamber" in order to take advantage of its implication of numerous fruit. Book of Songs [*Shijing*] says: "The fruit of the pepper plant grow lushly and fill a sheng-measure." The building [is constructed with] pepper-infused plaster, in order to imbue [the empress's residence] with warmth and expel evil influences'. O. Milburn, *The Empress in the Pepper Chamber* (Seattle, 2021), pp. 3–4.

⁴³ QYL, p. 109.

During the late medieval era, aromatics were also being appreciated in the private homes of the gentry class. It is here that we come across activities that emphasise selection, discernment, and private valuation, all of which constitute what Craig Clunas calls the ‘invention of taste’.⁴⁴ An entry entitled the ‘Fivefold suitability’ (五宜) describes another form of connoisseurial activity: the art of finding the right aromatic to blend with fragrances from flowers. It features Han Xizai 韓熙載 (902–70), an official who served in Emperor Yuanzong’s court (mentioned above), whose pleasure-seeking antics were well known in his time.⁴⁵ This entry, however, connects Han to an aesthetic venture in the lesser-known realm of olfactory discernment:

Burning aromatics in front of flowers harmonizes their respective vapors and scents; it is marvelous beyond words. *Muxi* (*osmanthus*) is most suited with dragon brain, *tumi* with agarwood, *lan* with the ‘four remarkables’, *hanxiao* with musk, and *zhanbo* with sandalwood. Han Xizai maintains a discourse on the ‘Fivefold suitability’.⁴⁶

對花焚香，有風味相和，其妙不可言者。木犀宜龍腦，麝麝宜沉水，蘭宜四絕，含笑宜麝，蒼菊宜檀，韓熙載有五宜說。⁴⁷

Although this particular anecdote is tantalisingly short, it presents the kind of connoisseurial engagement with blending scents and situating them in a socially mediated experience, in contrast to the aforementioned cases of undisciplined and extravagant consumption of aromatics in which a corrupt emperor or a parvenu merchant simply burns agarwood. The evaluative terms, such as *he* 和, *miao* 妙, and *yi* 宜, along with the mention of Han’s discourse, suggest that there may have existed more writing on connoisseurial matters from this era that, like the early medieval *Hexiang fang* (*Recipes for Combining Aromatics*) by Fan Ye, have since been lost.

The first kind of connoisseurial engagement suggested by this entry is that of the aromatic pairing of scents. Although it does not explain the reasoning behind each aromatic pairing, its overall logic is to combine aromatics of resinous, woody, and animalic sources with the seasonal scents of in-situ botanical fragrances found in the cultivated garden. The mention of Han Xizai’s discourse of the ‘Fivefold suitability’ suggests yet another common penchant in connoisseurship, namely that of the numerological component of rankings, lists, and categorisations. The numerological category of five evokes the role of the five elements (五行)—‘one of the most important generators of the possibility of cosmic knowledge’ in the context of patterns that might serve as models to make sense of objects through groupings.⁴⁸ It is worth noting that, of the five aromatics

⁴⁴ In this context, Clunas is referring to a robust late-Ming phenomenon that left ample textual traces, but taste as defined as such also predated the Ming. Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, p. 171.

⁴⁵ Han became the subject of a Southern Song painting depicting his decadent night revels, and continues to fascinate the collective imagination in modern times. This famous painting, from its inception to modern-day reception, is discussed in detail in De-nin Deanna Lee, *The Night Banquet: A Chinese Scroll Through Time* (Seattle, 2010). As for the historical figure of Han Xizai, Johannes Kurz suggests in an essay on Han’s biography that decadent evening gatherings were not unusual for Southern Tang literati culture, and that Han’s overt hedonistic behaviour may have been a stratagem for avoiding office. J. L. Kurz, ‘Han Xizai (902–970): An eccentric life in exciting times’, in *Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms*, (ed.) P. A. Lorge (Hong Kong, 2011), pp. 79–99.

⁴⁶ Due to the many problems in identifying plants in historical sources, I have chosen to leave all but osmanthus untranslated. For reference, also see Schafer’s translation: ‘The height of elegance was achieved by Han Hsi-tsai, a tenth-century sybarite, who allowed incenses to blend with the fragrance of his garden flowers, each according to his notion of its suitability—as camphor with osmanthus, aloeswood with bramble, “four exceptions” with orchid, musk with magnolia, and sandal with michelia.’ Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, p. 157.

⁴⁷ QYL, p. 40.

⁴⁸ C. Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368–1644* (Honolulu, 2007), p. 121.

mentioned in this account, four of them—camphor, sandalwood, agarwood, and musk—are imports or largely imports from foreign states or from the outer reaches of the empire. This inventory thus speaks to the nature of aromatics that were popular in the tenth century and have become increasingly appreciated to enhance a garden environment shared by the elite, perhaps in a way analogous to Han Xizai's famous night revels.

What a swindle story tells us: 'leaked' scents and the diffusion of dragon brain

In understanding the process by which foreign aromatics gained traction in Chinese scent culture and became assimilated into daily use, one discernible pattern is that some imported aromatics began their role in Chinese olfactory culture first as rarities gifted to rulers, who first disseminated them to those in an inner circle, thus beginning a process of transculturation. In this regard, rare aromatics share similarities with the rise in popularity of tea, which was also frequently given as a high-level gift in the Tang era.⁴⁹

Even from the early medieval era, there were examples of this pattern in literary traces, in which we see a foreign and unfamiliar scent 'trickle down' as a gift bestowed from the highest echelon of power. When Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226, r. 220–26) transplanted into his garden an aromatic plant of Roman origin called *midixiang* 迷迭香, he invited a group of literati to compose rhapsodies on it. The rhapsodies composed on this occasion are the only extant early descriptions of this foreign aromatic plant and, in effect, capture an occasion on which a new and foreign oddity was incorporated into the collective imagination through a conventional literary form.⁵⁰ Another literary record can be found in the collection of anecdotes compiled during the Wei-Jin period, *Shishuo yinyu* 世說新語 (A New Account of Tales of the World). This scent-oriented narrative unfolds around an unidentified 'rare and unusual fragrance' (奇香) originating from the 'western regions' and said to last for over a month when worn on a person. The courtier Jia Chong 賈充 (217–82) receives this fragrance as a gift from the emperor and, to his surprise, smells this scent one day on one of his officials named Han Shou 韓壽, leading to his realisation that his daughter has initiated a liaison with this young man.⁵¹ Thus, due to both its rarity and durability, the fragrance serves as a tracer for the otherwise invisible connections of desire and intimacy.

Building on these early medieval precedents, this section of the article draws on anecdotes from the late-Tang and Five Dynasties era to focus on the descriptions of dragon brain aromatic that highlight its strong and lasting scent, and, just as importantly, its olfactory reception. I hope to show that, from the ninth and tenth centuries, dragon brain was an imported aromatic that seemed to strongly exemplify the abovementioned 'trickle-down' effect, straddling a dual identity as royal status symbol and commodity, thereby offering us glimpses into the pathways for the transculturation of imported scents.

First, as a brief background to the nature of dragon brain aromatic, the Chinese term *longnao xiang* in this context mostly refers to Borneo camphor, formed in the wood of the evergreen tree *Dryobalanops aromatica*, whose natural range during the Tang era was in the Malay region. The English term 'camphor' can refer to the aromatic products of two other

⁴⁹ On tea as a gift and as a religious and cultural commodity in medieval China, see J. A. Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History* (Honolulu, 2015), pp. 13–17.

⁵⁰ Fu Jingliang, *Zhongguo xiang wenhua*, p. 45. For an in-depth discussion of these poems as panegyrics and the problems with ascertaining the exact nature of the referent aromatic herb, see O. Milburn, 'Rhapsodies on Midixiang: Jian'an period reflections on an exotic plant from Rome', *Early Medieval China* 22 (2016), pp. 26–44.

⁵¹ Liu Yiqing 劉義慶, *Shishuo yinyu jiaojian (xiuding ben)* 世說新語校箋 (修訂本) (Beijing, 2006), p. 827. The anecdote is also recorded in Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (ed.), *Jin Shu* 晉書 [History of the Jin] (Beijing, 1974), *juan* 40, pp. 1172–73. See Fu Jingliang, *Zhongguo xiang wenhua*, p. 76.

tree varieties: *Cinnamomum camphora* from southern Japan, Taiwan, and Ryukyu islands, as well as *Blumea balsamifera*, which is a common variety found in Southeast Asia and southern China. All three varieties yield aromatic material that is distinct in its properties.⁵² In contrast to aromatics such as agarwood, which was used in its resinous woody form, *Dryobalanops aromatica* yields a camphoraceous oleo-resin (oil) in addition to solid camphor (borneol).⁵³ Before the term *longnao xiang* denoted Borneo camphor as seen in Tang sources, the term *longnao* appeared in a more literal sense in at least one early medieval text as an appended commentary to the entry “*long gu*” 龍骨 (dragon bone) in *Bencao jing jizhu* 本草經集注 by Tao Hongjin 陶弘景 (456–536), under the category of ‘the three grades of crawlers and animals’ (蟲獸三品). As indicated by both its categorical heading and its description, in this work, it refers literally to constituents of a dragon rather than metaphorically to the botanical by-product of a tree.⁵⁴ How the term ‘dragon brain’ became detached from the creaturely dragon and became associated with Borneo camphor awaits further investigation.⁵⁵

Textual records from the seventh to tenth centuries mention dragon brain in official accounts of tribute gifts, in medical treatises, and in anecdotal literature. In the first type of sources, emphasis is placed on its rarity and exotic origins. For example, in the official history of the Sui Dynasty (581–618), dragon brain is mentioned as a tribute item from the state of Chitu 赤土; another reference in the *New Tang History* mentions the tribute of dragon brain from the state of Wucha 烏茶 in the Indo-Malay region.⁵⁶ Perhaps also due to its name, which has a powerful association with the throne, dragon brain is often featured in royal rituals: in the annals of Emperor Xuanzong 宣宗 (810–59), it was mentioned that there had been a long-standing custom in the palace of strewing

⁵² The English name ‘camphor’ is therefore imprecise when referring both to the species that produces the substance as well as the chemical substance itself. The product of *D. aromatica* is in fact camphol or dextro-borneol (C₁₀H₁₈O₂), rather than common camphor or dextro-camphor (C₁₀H₁₆O₂). Donkin, *Dragon’s Brain Perfume*, p. 37. However, as Ptak points out, the terminology of dragon brain used from the Tang era to the Ming has never been completely exact and the expression ‘*longnao*’ can ‘refer to camphor generally and/ or to a very specific form of this substance’. R. Ptak, ‘Camphor in East and Southeast Asian trade, c. 1500: a synthesis of Portuguese and Asian sources’, in *Vasco Da Gama and the Linking of Europe and Asia*, (eds.) A. R. Disney and E. Booth (New Delhi, 2000), p. 145.

⁵³ Donkin, *Dragon’s Brain Perfume*, p. 40.

⁵⁴ The entry is within that of ‘dragon bones’ (*long gu* 龍骨) and reads: ‘There is also dragon brain (or brain of dragon), which is fatty and soft, and also cures *li* disease (dysentery)’ (又有龍腦，肥軟，亦斷痢). Tao Hongjin 陶弘景, *Bencao Jing Jizhu* 本草經集注 [Annotated Canon of Materia Medica], (eds.) Shang Zhijun 尚志鈞 and Shang Yuansheng 尚元勝 (Beijing, 1994), pp. 387–88.

⁵⁵ Although this question lies outside the scope of the present study, it is worth noting that a comparable terminological trajectory could be observed—later—in the case of ambergris, *longyan* 龍涎 (dragon spittle) in Chinese; this naming practice makes more sense when we remember that, in Chinese literary language, whales and dragons were often intermingled as exotic sea beasts; there is no easy connection for the term ‘dragon brain’, however, as nothing about camphor trees or its environs is dragon-like or water-borne. We also see overlapping uses with Sanskrit transliteration in medieval sources. For example, in the seventh-century travelogue of the Buddhist monk-pilgrim Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–64), he describes the Jiebuluo 羯布羅 (transliteration of *karpura*) tree as containing within its trunk an aromatic ‘shaped like mica, with coloring like ice and snow’ that he identifies as *longnao xiang* or dragon brain aromatic. His description of the substance inside the dried tree trunk is as being ‘shaped like mica and colored like ice and snow’ is consistent with the physical characteristics of camphor. (羯布羅香樹，松身異葉，花葉斯別。初採既濕，尚未有香，木乾之後，循理而析，其中有香，狀若雲母，色如冰雪，此所謂龍腦香也) Xuanzang 玄奘 and Bianji 辯機, *Da Tang xiyuji jiaozhu* 大唐西域記校注 [Annotated Edition of Record of the Western Regions of the Tang], (ed.) Ji Xianlin 季羨林 (Beijing, 1995), p. 859.

⁵⁶ Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), *Sui shu* 隋書 [History of the Sui] (Beijing, 1973), *juan* 82, p. 1835. Liu Xu, *Xin Tang shu*, *juan* 221, pp. 6239–40. There are comparable mentions of tributary gifts of dragon brain in other compilations such as *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (*juan* 970–71) and *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (*juan* 999). Wen Cuifang, ‘Tangdai de wailai xiangyao yanjiu’, p. 66.

dragon brain and saffron underfoot for the emperor.⁵⁷ These references, though by no means precise in their denotation of dragon brain, largely point to a converging set of characteristics of dragon brain as far-flung and precious—something gifted and reserved for royal consumption.

Medical treatises from this period also contain descriptions of dragon brain. The early Tang state-commissioned pharmacopoeia *Xinxiu bencao* 新修本草 (*Newly Revised Materia Medica*) describes its origin as being from the state of Polü (婆律國), associated with north-west Sumatra, and its sapor (味) and major medical uses.⁵⁸ The text also mentions the preferred method of storage to prevent it from wasting away.⁵⁹ The latter suggests that the aromatic described may have been a combination of the borneol from the *Dryobalanops aromatica* tree (which does not evaporate or volatilise) and that from other camphor trees (which does volatilise when exposed to air). The pharmacological treatise *Waitai miyao* 外臺秘要 (*Arcane Essentials from the Imperial Library*) from 752 contains six medical formulas using dragon brain.⁶⁰ In these recipes, however, dragon brain is not distinguished by its scent or its olfactory effects and is treated as any other medical ingredient.

The third category of texts containing references to dragon brain is from anecdotal literature, and is perhaps the most capacious. Some of the shorter anecdotes overlap with references to dragon brain in the abovementioned types of sources; however, it is in anecdotal literature that we find the most emphasis on dragon brain as a scent and olfactory experience. For the purpose of this article with a focus on olfactory perception, I will look closely at four substantive and resonant anecdotes drawn from two anecdotal collections written in the ninth century and two from the tenth, all of which emphasise the nature of dragon brain as a socially rooted scent, sometimes in surprising ways.

First, anecdotes about dragon brain show that it was used in its crystalline form, as an oil, or as the wood of the tree; it functioned as a pharmacological ingredient, as personal perfume, and as ingredients in food and drink. Because of its putative cooling effect, there was an imperial practice in the court of Jingzong 敬宗 for making ice-chilled ‘refreshing breeze rice’ (清風飯) during the dog days of summer; it used powdered dragon brain as an additive.⁶¹ Its oleo-resin form seems to have been used in scented wine, as well. The ‘wine and ale’ section (酒漿門) of the *Qing yi lu* notes that, during the winter, the grand councillor Pei Du 裴度 (764–839) served his guest a drink called ‘fish wine’, which was made by first congealing dragon brain and carving it into the shape of small fishes, before immersing them into a flagon of hot wine.⁶² From the late-Tang era, the longest and most systematic description of the source tree of dragon brain is from the ninth-century collection *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎 [*Mixed Morsels from Youyang*], which details its taxonomy, origin, botanical properties, and methods of harvest:

⁵⁷ The two aromatics named are *longnao* and *yujin* 鬱金. Liu Xu (ed.), *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 18, p. 644.

⁵⁸ See Gungwu Wang, ‘The Nanhai trade’, p. 105. Like dragon brain, saffron was also a rare and costly foreign aromatic that was frequently part of a tribute mission’s gift to the throne. See Wen Cuifang, ‘Tangdai de wailai xiangyao yanjiu’, pp. 29–32.

⁵⁹ Su Jing 蘇敬, *Tang xinxiu bencao* 唐新修本草 [*Newly Revised Materia Medica*], (ed.) Shang Zhijun 尚志鈞 (Hefei, 1981), p. 338.

⁶⁰ Wang Tao 王焘, *Waitai Miyao* 外臺秘要 [*Arcane Essentials from the Imperial Library*] (Beijing, 1955). The recipes can be found in juan 13, 21, 31, and 35.

⁶¹ In the first year of the Baoli Reign (825), the inner palace had an imperially decreed recipe for ‘refreshing breeze rice’ (清風飯). Its ingredients were crystalline rice (水晶飯), dragon eye powder (龍睛粉), flakes of dragon brain, and cow’s milk, mixed into a gold bucket and lowered into an ice pool. It was served after it has been thoroughly chilled. QYL, p. 104. See also Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, p. 168.

⁶² QYL, p. 94. The practice of scented wine with aromatics is, of course, not new to the Tang.

The tree of dragon brain aromatic comes from the kingdom of Poli [Barus], whose people call it gubupolü. It also comes from Bosi. The tree is about eight or nine *zhang* tall, its girth equal to six or seven people's arm span. Its leaves are round and white on the back side; it does not bloom or bear fruit. The trees can be thick or thin. The thick kind produces 'Polü oil aromatic'. Others say the thin trees produce dragon brain aromatic, while the thick trees produce Polü oil. [The oil is] found in the heartwood. When the tree is cut down and split open, the oil flows out from the tree. People cut down these trees and store them in a pit. It can be incorporated into medicine with separate methods.

龍腦香樹。出婆利國。婆利呼為固不婆律。亦出波斯國。樹高八九丈。大可六七圍。葉圓而背白。無花實。其樹有肥有瘦。瘦者有婆律膏香。一曰瘦者出龍腦香。肥者出婆律膏也。在木心中。斷其樹劈取之。膏於樹端流出。斫樹作坎而承之。入藥用。別有法。⁶³

Whatever lingering ambiguities there may have been regarding the terminology for dragon brain, accounts of its olfactory effects focus on its extraordinary scent. In this entry, Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–56) receives a tribute gift of dragon brain from Jiaozhi 交趾 in Indochina, then bestows it onto Precious Consort Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–56) as a rare personal perfume:

Towards the end of the Tianbao Era [742–55], Jiaozhi presented as tribute dragon brain aromatic as a tribute. It was shaped like a cicada or silkworm. The Persians say that it can only come from the nodes of old dragon brain trees. In the inner palace it is called the 'auspicious dragon brain'. The emperor bestowed ten pieces of this upon Yang Guifei and no one else. Its fragrance permeated a radius of more than ten paces.⁶⁴

天寶末。交趾貢龍腦。如蟬蠶形。波斯言。老龍腦樹節方有。禁中呼為瑞龍腦。上唯賜貴妃十枚。香氣徹十余步。⁶⁵

The newly acquired epithet of 'auspicious' in particular is presented as a Sinitic quality that was not inherent in the aromatic itself, but was acquired after its arrival in China. Either because of its scarcity or due to the reference to a royal emblem in its name, dragon brain aromatic evoked an association with the imperial inner circle.

In the second half of this anecdote, the scent of dragon brain begins to take on a larger-than-life importance. It recounts that, one day, as Yang Guifei was watching the emperor play a game of chess, her kerchief was blown away and landed on the headgear of a courtier nearby. The courtier went home and kept his headgear wrapped in a brocade pouch. The subsequent scene takes place after the An Lushan Rebellion and the author did not need to mention to readers that Xuanzong was forced to put his favourite concubine to death during his exile. The anecdote only tells us what happens years later, after order was restored:

When it came time for the former emperor to return to the palace gates [from exile], he could not stop thinking about Yang Guifei. Thereupon [the courtier] He Huaizhi

⁶³ Duan Chengshi 段成式, *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎 [Mixed Morsels from Youyang] (Beijing, 1985), *juan* 18, p. 150.

⁶⁴ My translation differs somewhat from that of C. Reed, *A Tang Miscellany: An Introduction to Youyang zazu* (New York, 2003), p. 81.

⁶⁵ Duan, *Youyang zazu*, *juan* 1, p. 2.

brought out and presented the headgear which he had stored away, then discussed matters from other days. The former emperor unwrapped the sachet, wept and said, ‘This is the “auspicious dragon brain aromatic!”’

及上皇復宮闕。追思貴妃不已。懷智乃進所貯襪頭。具奏它日事。上皇發囊泣曰。此瑞龍腦香也。⁶⁶

In this instance, a rare scent was presciently ‘archived’ and stored away; it later allowed the grieving Xuanzong to access the memory of Yang Guifei, whose death and absence are contrasted with the enduring scent of the dragon brain, which shows a preternatural ability to transect time and evoke memories and emotions, in the manner of the Proustian madeleine a millennium later.

In the case of her kerchief, Yang Guifei’s signature scent stayed within the confines of the palace and with the person who originally bestowed the gift but, in other cases, the scent of dragon brain was not easily contained; it breeched physical and social barriers and hierarchies by wafting beyond these confines. The incident in question is recorded in the collection *Duyang zabian* 杜陽雜編 (*Miscellaneous Compilations from Duyang*) by Su E 蘇鶚 (fl. 885–88) and begins with a description of the extravagant habits of Princess Tongchang 同昌 (849–69) as she travelled around the city ensconced in luxurious objects and subsequently leads to a discussion about whether the whiff of aroma someone caught in a wine shop was the legendary dragon brain:

The [Tongchang] Princess rode in the Palanquin of Seven Treasures, and from its four corners each were hung five-colored brocade sachets filled with aromatics. Inside the sachets were Apotropaic Aromatics, Auspicious Qilin Aromatics, and Golden Phoenix Aromatics. They were all tributes from foreign states, and were mixed with shavings of dragon brain [aromatic] and gold. Dragon-Phoenix flower shapes were carved from crystal, agate, and dust-dispelling rhinoceros horns, netted with pearls and tortoise shells. Moreover, tassels of gold with carved light jade hung from them. Whenever she went out, the roads and alleyways were filled with fragrance and bright refracted lights, dazzling onlookers. At that time, several eunuchs were buying wine at the bannered tavern in Guanghua Ward when they turned to one another and asked, ‘What is this unusual fragrance wafting over to our seat?’ Someone among them said, ‘Could it be dragon brain?’ Another said, ‘No; when I was young I was serving the royal consorts’ palaces and often smelled [that]. I wonder how this scent came to be here?’ They turned to ask the server, who replied that the Princess’s palanquin-bearer had pawned [her] brocade jacket for wine here. The eunuchs asked to look at [the jacket] together, sighing with further amazement.

公主乘七寶步輦。四角綴五色錦香囊。囊中貯辟邪香瑞麟香金鳳香。此皆異國獻者。仍雜以龍腦金屑。鏤水晶瑪瑙辟塵犀為龍鳳花木狀。其上悉絡真珠瑠。更以金絲為流蘇。雕輕玉為浮動。每一出遊。則芳香街巷。晶光耀日。觀者眩其目。時有中貴人。買酒於廣化旗亭。忽相謂曰。坐來香氣。何太異也。同席曰。豈非龍腦乎。曰。非也。予幼給事於嬪妃宮。故常聞此。未知今日由何而致。因顧問當壚者。云。公主步輦夫。以錦衣質酒于此。中貴人共請視之。益嘆異焉。⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, juan 1, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Li Fang, *Taiping guangji*, juan 237, p. 1826.

The Guanghua 廣化 Ward, where this anecdote is set, was a residential ward near the Xingqing 興慶 Palace in the north-eastern quadrant of Chang'an.⁶⁸ This, then, was urban space that was outside the palace gates and yet proximate to it—a spatial detail that is relevant to the issue of how scent can be ‘leaked’ unintentionally. The narrative depicts the volatility and power of the dragon brain scent lodged in a brocade jacket, which allows those outside of the princess’s inner circle to access her opulence as well as royal status, bringing traces of the inner court to urban, public spaces such as the wine shop. Compared with the ostentatious display of opulence mentioned at the beginning of the anecdote, the brocade jacket functions as something that intrigues rather than boasts and, precisely due to the tenuousness of the scent, occasions a greater hold on the imagination.

Another way to read this anecdote is to see it as narrative evidence that a scent, however exclusive and luxurious, cannot be fully restricted because its olfactory pathway cannot be controlled or even predicted. We see another incident of ‘scent leakage’ in an anecdote from the collection *Qing yi lu* entitled ‘Snow fragrance fan’ (雪香扇), which describes an incident from the court of the Later Shu 後蜀 (934–65) in the Five Dynasties. Here, a prized aromatic again transgresses palace walls and ‘leaks’ from the inner palace:

On summer nights, Meng Chang (919–965, r. 934–965) mixed dragon brain in water and painted [the liquid] on a white fan, then used the fan to whip up a breeze. One night as he was viewing the moon with Lady Flower Heart atop a pavilion, the fan was dropped by accident, and someone [below] picked it up. Others outside [the palace] began to imitate this [practice] and called it the ‘Snow Fragrance Fan’.

孟昶夏月水調龍腦末塗白扇上，用以揮風。一夜，與花藥夫人登樓望月，悞墮其扇，為人所拾。外有效者，名「雪香扇」。⁶⁹

Here, the vector for scent propagation is a fan instead of a jacket or headgear; the tension here is between dragon brain being a closely guarded ‘royal’ signature scent on the one hand and its being emulated or popularised in the outside world by the privileged connoisseur. The anecdote suggests that a small mishap is all that it took to unleash the closely guarded aromatic into wider circulation. Once again, it is significant that the practice is scent-related rather than one that comes under the purview of sumptuary regulations, designed on the basis of sight-oriented consumption. Yet, here it is nonetheless still applicable that the ‘leaking’ of the royal scent shows an inherent contradiction, as pointed out by BuYun Chen, of sumptuary measures: ‘Through the prescription and proscription of specific objects, the laws plainly reify the objects as symbols of rank and status—thereby opening them up to usurpation and imitation’.⁷⁰

We do not know exactly how much dragon brain was circulating outside of imperial use, but the fact that a small number of medical recipes refer to it (even without mentioning its scent) makes it likely that it was also available at least to some; Wen Cuifang estimates that the price for dragon brain during the Tang was 50,000 *wen* of copper coin for two *liang* of the aromatic.⁷¹ The following narrative is particularly evocative for this

⁶⁸ Guanghua Ward was originally named Anxing 安興 Ward. See map in Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang'an: A Study in the Urban History of Medieval China* (Ann Arbor, 2000), map 2.1.

⁶⁹ QYL, p. 110.

⁷⁰ BuYun Chen, ‘Wearing the hat of loyalty: imperial power and dress reform in Ming Dynasty China’, in *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, C. 1200–1800*, (eds.) Giorgio Riello and Ulinka Rublack (2019), p. 430.

⁷¹ Her calculations are based on the anonymous Arabic source, *Accounts of China and India* compiled in 851. See Wen Cuifang, ‘Tangdai de Wailai xiangyao yanjiu’, p. 240.

reason, because it demonstrates that, at least in the popular imagination, dragon brain was known and identifiable outside the palace and that, whether as lore or as practicable knowledge, its connoisseurs were not limited to imperial consorts and eunuchs. As with many informal and anecdotal narratives from this time, it shows what was *plausible* to the audience of the narrative at the beginning of the tenth century, and therefore does not need to be factually accurate in order to illustrate pertinent perceptions from this time. The narrative describes a band of conmen who swindled a Buddhist monastery during the reign of Emperor Yizong 懿宗 (r. 859–73) by, remarkably, impersonating the plain-clothed emperor (textual emphasis mine):

Emperor Yizong of the Tang governed the subcelestial realm with cultured principles and the world was peaceful and orderly. The emperor often changed his clothing and roamed among temples and abbeys incognito. Some devious fellows among the populace got wind that officials submitting tribute from the southeast region had stored a thousand bolts of damask silk from the Wu region in the cloister of the Da Anguo Temple. *Thereupon, they gathered secretly, picked someone among them who resembled the emperor, dressed him as the emperor might for his disguised travels, and generously infused his clothes with dragon brain and other fragrances.* This person took along two or three servants and entered the cloister where the damask silk was stored. At that moment, one or two beggars approached him; the ‘emperor’ gave them [some alms] and they went away. Soon, all kinds of beggars arrived in droves and there was not enough [alms] to go around. The emperor-impersonator turned to a monk in the cloister and asked, ‘Is there anything I could borrow from your cloister?’ Before the monk could answer, the [impersonator’s] servant threw the monk a meaningful look. Startled into his senses, the monk replied, ‘Our storage cabinets contain a thousand bolts of silk, which can be at your disposal’. They opened the cabinets and gave all [to the impersonator]. The [impersonator’s] servant told the monk: ‘Tomorrow morning, look for us at the palace gate; we will conduct you inside, and you will be rewarded aplenty’. The impersonator then left with his retinue. The monk, from this point on, went daily to the palace gate, but never saw anyone [as promised]. Only then did he realize that the flock of beggars had all been accomplices in the gang of fraudsters.⁷²

唐懿宗用文理天下。海內晏清。多變服私游寺觀。民間有奸猾者。聞大安國寺。有江淮進奏官寄吳綾千匹在院。於是暗集其群。就內選一人肖上之狀者。衣上私行之服。多以龍腦諸香薰裏。引二三小僕。潛入寄綾之院。其時有丐者一二人至。假服者遺之而去。逡巡。諸色丐求之人。接跡而至。給之不暇。假服者謂院僧曰。院中有何物。可借之。僧未諾問。小僕擲眼向僧。僧驚駭曰。櫃內有人寄綾千匹。唯命是聽。於是啓櫃。罄而給之。小僕謂僧曰。來日早。於朝門相覓。可奉引入內。所酌不輕。假服者遂跨衛而去。僧自是經日訪於內門。杳無所見。方知群丐並是奸人之黨焉。⁷³

⁷² This entry is from a Five Dynasties prose collection, *Yutang xianhua* 玉堂閑話 [Casual Conversation in the Jade Hall] by Wang Renyu 王仁裕 (880–956). English translation adapted from Linda Rui Feng, *City of Marvel and Transformation: Chang’an and Narratives of Experience in Tang Dynasty China* (Honolulu, 2015), p. 71.

⁷³ The narrative is entitled ‘Da’an si’ 大安寺. Li Fang, *Taiping guangji*, juan 238, p. 1835. For a detailed study of the collection *Yutang xianhua* and its author Wang Renyu, see G. Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China: From the Memoirs of Wang Renyu* (Oxford, 2013). Zhu Yuqi briefly discusses this tale as a case of a rather outrageous con scheme taking place in the urban temples of Chang’an. Yang Weigang 楊為剛, ‘Tangdai dushi xiaoshuo xushi de shijian yu kongjian—yi jiegu zhidu wei zhongxin’ 唐代都市小說敘事的時間與空間—以街鼓制度為中心, *Tang yanjiu* 唐研究 [Journal of Tang Studies] 15 (2009), p. 115.

What does this swindle narrative tell us about dragon brain? First of all, scent plays a central role in this swindle as a claim to authenticity. The swindlers' aim is to counterfeit an emperor counterfeiting a non-emperor, in which the dragon brain scent is the olfactory clue that would give the emperor away. Furthermore, the swindlers show an entrenched understanding of the psychology of the monks in a temple close to the imperial palace: the monks know that the emperor may be visiting in plain clothes to give alms but are complicit in not giving the emperor away. The ingenious swindlers show that they understand this complicity better than the monks know it themselves and, in this 'recursive theory of mind', dragon brain is an unmistakable olfactory marker of the subsurficial and invisible hierarchy of the world.⁷⁴

With its olfactory premise, the account can only be plausible if dragon brain occupied a paradoxical place in the cultural imagination in this late-Tang moment: it must have been simultaneously restricted and yet part of the popular consumptive imagination—that is, something that signalled an imperial presence and yet was familiar enough for those outside of the palace to recognise it, and, just as importantly, was plausibly available to the counterfeiters.

In this context, it is interesting to note that, despite observations of its powerful scent compared with other aromatic ingredients, dragon brain was rarely mentioned in Tang recipes for fumigating clothing (薰衣香方). In the recipe collection *Bei ji qianjin yaofang* 備急千金要方 (652), five such recipes are included, each of them calling for various quantities of agarwood, musk, sandalwood, storax, and armour aromatic, but none of them included dragon brain. Similarly, among the five fumigant recipes preserved in the pharmacological treatise *Waitai miyao* 外臺秘要 (*Arcane Essentials from the Imperial Library*) from 752, including one bestowed by Emperor Taizong during the Zhenguan 貞觀 era, none of them contained dragon brain.⁷⁵ This pattern is consistent with what this swindle story implies: that dragon brain was not a scent for popular use as a fumigant perfume.

However, this is also a story of a savvy connoisseurship of scent reaching beyond enforced social hierarchy, balancing uneasily between the aromatic as a commodity and as an authenticating signifier. In his article 'The cultural biography of things', the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff proposes two diametrically opposed poles when considering an object. At one pole, an object can be a 'perfect commodity' when it is 'exchangeable with anything and everything else'; its opposite, the 'perfectly decommodified object', is one that is singular and unexchangeable. Kopytoff notes that there are two forces that oppose the drive toward commodification: 1) what he calls 'culture' or the drive for discrimination and 2) one in which the power-holding state places prohibitions to preclude certain objects from being commoditised because, as he puts it, 'power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects'.⁷⁶ Here, I propose that this tenth-century swindle narrative serves as an incidental cultural biography of dragon brain: it captures the precarious moment at which dragon brain transitioned from a singularised object reserved for the uppermost echelon of society to one that was de-singularised and had the potential to be commoditised as an object to be acquired by the savvy. As Sophie Volpp points out in the case of the circulation of python robes during the Ming era, the prestige of such robes 'depended on the fiction that it was

⁷⁴ For a discussion of the recursive theory of mind in swindle stories from the Ming Dynasty by Zhang Yingyu 張應俞, see the translator's introduction in C. G. Rea and B. Rusk (eds.), *The Book of Swindles: Selections from a Late Ming Collection* (New York, 2017), p. xv.

⁷⁵ For the recipes, see Wu Juanjuan 吳娟娟, 'Xiangliao yu tangdai shehui shenghuo' 香料与唐代社会生活 [Aromatics in Daily Life during the Tang Dynasty] (unpublished MA thesis, Anhui University, 2010), pp. 24–25.

⁷⁶ I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in *The Social Life of Things*, (ed.) A. Appadurai (New York, 1986), pp. 73, 90.

manufactured exclusively under imperial auspices'.⁷⁷ The same can be said of the prestige of dragon brain as a fumigant fragrance at this moment in its olfactory history. This narrative therefore echoes the pattern found in aforementioned accounts (relating to Princess Tongchang and to Meng Chang) in which dragon brain, as a rare and closely guarded scent, is 'leaked'—even fictively—into the urban space at large in the capital city. This leak speaks to not only its being an object with potential for exchange, but also its ontological status as a scent, which has a unique mobility, as Jonathan Reinartz puts it, to cross boundaries that are otherwise difficult to breach.⁷⁸ While dragon brain may have begun its early life in China as an imperial tribute item or elite gift, by the time of the anecdote (in the late-Tang era and during the Five Dynasties), it could no longer be contained.

Conclusion

This article investigates the case of foreign aromatics and the process by which they became incorporated into Chinese olfactory culture during the late medieval era, as maritime trade across the Indian Ocean gave elites access to more imported goods. Although aromatics were just one of the many types of foreign imports flowing into China from this time, they constituted a type that deserves its own study, because aromatics could be consumed and flaunted in ways that were radically different from objects such as clothing, carriage, and buildings. The lack of surviving treatises devoted to aromatics from the Tang era notwithstanding, textual evidence from ninth- and tenth-century anecdotal literature such as *Qing yi lu* demonstrates the ways in which writers perceived, classified, and characterised scent as part of socially rooted experiences. In short, these texts show us the process of transculturation for imported aromatics, as a collective discourse around them gains traction in literary traces. From the evidence examined in this article, we find a cohering discourse of connoisseurship that reflected aromatics as both restricted items as well as commodities that allowed the elite to define their evolving taste vis-à-vis olfactory culture. The anecdotes examined in the first half of this article acknowledge the far-flung sources of aromatics and their rarity and cost, but also show that, rather than burning imported aromatics as conspicuous consumption, the elite found opportunities to compete, rank, evaluate, and otherwise revel in the varieties and permutations of scents, both foreign and domestic. In the second half of this article, narratives drawn from anecdotal collections of the ninth and tenth centuries show that, although scents such as dragon brain began as exclusive royal gifts associated with emperors and their innermost circle, by the late medieval era, they were not completely off-limits to the perceptive and curious noses outside palace walls. Culminating in the narrative describing a successful swindle, each of the four anecdotes examined shows that, with the right olfactory savvy and access to aromatic commodities and its operant hierarchies, even dragon brain aromatic could be imitated and made available to those who understood its value and knew how to make the most of its allure.

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⁷⁷ Cited in BuYun Chen, 'Wearing the hat of loyalty', p. 422, n. 13.

⁷⁸ J. Reinartz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Chicago, 2014), p. 19.

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