

BURNING INCENSE, BREWING TEA

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We can start our journey through incense and tea with a bit of history, exploring the relationship between incense and tea in general, before we move on to discussions of Aloeswood itself. From Buddhist history to scented teas, Liu Jingmin covers the spectrum of incense and tea, ending with some great advice for how we can all incorporate fine incense into our tea gatherings.

A gathering of good friends with fine art and pleasant conversation, freshly brewed tea and fragrant incense is one of life's greatest pleasures—so said Ming dynasty artist and poet Wen Zhengming (1470–1559 C.E.). Exquisite paintings and scrolls of calligraphy may have played the leading role in literary parties of that time, but tea and incense are the perfect supporting characters, subtly bringing the whole play together and heightening emotional connection to the art.

A little later on in history, Chinese opera composer Gao Lian (1573–1620 C.E.), in his *Eight Notes on an Honorable Life*, expounded the importance of installing a tea room near one's study, especially for a reclusive scholar. This way, as you pass the seasons in the solitude of study—contemplating, meditating, reading, arranging flowers, burning incense, appreciating paintings, and making offerings to the Buddha—you'll always have a fresh cup of tea by your side. Both tea and incense can be found throughout Chinese history; they are a central element in a life of peace, contentment, and self-cultivation of mind and spirit.

We can also see evidence of the use of tea and incense in the Ming Dynasty *Wu Collection*, compiled by Wang Xideng and proofread by Zhang Qi from Wulin, housed in the collection of the Taipei National Library. The book contains a drawing entitled "Maiden Looking at an Exotic Bird Whilst Painting Her Eyebrows," in which the artist depicts a desk set out with a teapot, tea cups and an incense burner.

The Union of Tea and Incense and Their Role in Zen

Incense and tea have a surprising amount in common. They both originated in the south of China and subsequently became a staple of everyday life throughout the nation. Permeating the senses through the eyes, nose and taste buds, they've deeply touched the hearts of people and have eventually become objects of beauty and importance to spiritual practice.

At the heart of the connection between incense and tea lies Buddhist philosophy. At the time of the Han, Wei and Six Dynasties periods, tea had already become widespread

due to the expansion of Buddhism. Tea was an essential part of Buddhist practice—it could be used to awaken and refresh oneself for meditation, and was also used in ceremonies as well. Incense's earliest traditional uses were also centered around cleansing and purifying, in both a physical and a spiritual sense: it was used for eliminating bad odors, for perfuming one's person and clothing, during bathing, while dining, for making offerings, for warding off evil and even to treat illnesses.

Thus, tea and incense first met in Buddhist ceremonies. When the well-known Tang Dynasty Zen master Huai Hai (749–814 C.E.) wrote his book of rules for monastic discipline, the *Pure Rules of Baizhang*, both incense and tea were featured in many of the rituals he described, including burning incense while brewing, serving and offering tea.

From the *Pure Rules of Baizhang*, it's clear that both tea and incense were integral to the daily lives of monks, from the simplest act of offering tea and incense to the Buddha to celebrating holy festivals such as *Vesak* (the Buddha's Birthday), the Buddha's Enlightenment and many



others. From greeting guests or saying farewell, requesting or receiving donations to daily prayer, for a Zen monk even the simplest ceremonies were infused with incense and tea. Through the passing down of these rituals, tea and incense have been woven into the complex, rigorous set of customs that structure the life of a Zen monk.

According to the *Pure Rules of Baizhang*, each member of the monastery was responsible for performing a certain role in the diverse rituals associated with tea and incense, such as heating water (*cha tong*) and brewing the tea, offering tea to visitors or even sweeping the floors and setting out the incense. It may seem as if the higher-status attendants were responsible for burning the incense, preparing books, and administering to guests, but in most Zen monasteries, simpler jobs were often given to the monks with a stronger practice. Whenever the head monk called gatherings to share teachings, conduct a ceremony, or chant *mantras*, there were attendants in charge of lighting the incense, performing incense-burning ceremonies, and transcribing speeches. Jobs that required more work meant that the monk or nun

had less time to meditate and needed to be able to utilize the task at hand as an aspect of self-cultivation; this, of course, included tea and incense.

Artifacts discovered in the underground vaults below Tang Dynasty Buddhist temples, including incense burners, incense bags, long-handled incense burners and spoons, as well as all kinds of tea cups, braziers and tea-grinding implements, have also served to underline the significance of both tea and incense in Zen practice.

Burning Incense, Brewing Tea: Two of the "Four Pastimes"

While tea and incense took on a spiritual significance through Buddhist ritual, the wider public was also discovering new uses for them, though the mainstream was introduced to them and therefore influenced by Buddhist practices.

Prior to the Qin Dynasty, the earliest types of incense were simply fragrant herbs and plants. In the Han Dynasty, new types of incense emerged, including exotic fragrances from abroad. During the Wei, Jin and North-South dynasties, Buddhism

lent incense a deeper significance. Luxury-loving Tang Dynasty aristocrats built their palaces and gardens with fragrant wood and used various fragrances in their daily lives: alongside the art of appreciating flowers appeared that of "appreciating fragrance." Thanks to these influences, incense gradually became more widespread, and by the Song Dynasty, incense and tea were already a common feature of daily life, as well as symbols of an elegant lifestyle. A collection of writings about the customs of Lin'an city from the Southern Song Dynasty, *Mengliang Records*, refers to the "Four Pastimes (四般閒事)": burning incense, brewing tea, hanging paintings and arranging flowers. The author advises that these should not be entrusted to anyone else—to be truly cultured, one should cultivate these artistic practices in one's own daily life.

These "Four Pastimes," also called the "Four Arts of Life," originated from the need to decorate one's living space, to hold banquets and entertain guests. The Song Dynasty saw the establishment of the "Four Departments and Six Posts (四司六局)," which was a system for assigning



responsibilities to attendants during a banquet. The “Four Departments” were responsible for the four main aspects of the banquet, namely setting up the tables and furnishings, attending to guests, preparing food and drink, and coordinating the table service. Each of the “Six Posts” covered a specific aspect of the banquet: fruit, sweets, vegetable side dishes, candles, fragrance and décor. As you can see, this arrangement accounted for every last detail, from preparing the decorations for the banquet venue—hanging paintings, arranging flowers, preparing tea and arranging seating and screens—to the dishes, fruit, and tableware, as well as the lighting and waitstaff. The attendant(s) responsible for the “Fragrance Post (香藥局)” was in charge of setting out various types of incense, incense holders and censers and always had to be at the ready to take away the burned-out ash and replace it with fresh incense.

The banquets of the Song Dynasty were really no different than the ones we hold in large restaurants nowadays—the banquet halls are dressed up to the nines, showing off paintings and calligraphy by famous masters, just like in the saying: “Arranging flowers from all four seasons, hanging paintings by the masters, dressing up the shop front, selling exotic teas all year round...” We can still see the equivalents of those Song attendants always at the ready to refresh our tea, sing, serve fruit or sometimes even light incense. It’s not hard to imagine the deeper layers of cultural inheritance behind this popular modern dining culture. Also, much of this attention to detail is echoed in the way we arrange a *chaxi* for tea today.

Song Dynasty scholars were more inclined toward elegant and refined gatherings, such as the one in Emperor Song Huizong’s painting titled *Literary Gathering*. (We have printed this picture twice, first in April of this year. Have a look!) The painting depicts an outdoor tea gathering beneath some majestic trees. In the background behind the trees is a stone table with a three-legged cauldron and a *Qin* (Chinese zither), and in the foreground are four servants

preparing tea. The servant on the left is heating the water in a tea pitcher, while the attendant in the middle scoops the whisked tea. On the banquet table are six vases of flowers, and the surrounding scenery is, well, worthy of a painting—it really gives a rich impression of the refined life that Song aristocrats led; a life of banquets replete with incense, tea, flowers, paintings, and the gentle sounds of *Qin* music. Similar scenes were also depicted in murals discovered inside the Liao tombs in Xuanhua County, Hebei, as well as tea-themed paintings—some of the murals brought together tea, incense and flowers all in one scene.

In the Song era, these “Four Pastimes” reflected a growing appreciation for aesthetically pleasing sights, smells, and environments as a part of everyday life. Burning incense was not only a symbol of the royal court and the aristocracy; it came to be seen as an essential part of dignified and refined conduct for scholarly officials. Brewing a cup of tea with clear, freshly drawn water also represented the height of elegance.

Combining Tea and Incense: Natural and Scented Teas

The tea industry flourished and diversified during the Tang Dynasty. Tea became ubiquitous throughout China, with scholars still setting the standard for proper appreciation of its flavor. For example, in his classic *Tea Sutra*, tea master Lu Yu wrote about the origins of tea and various methods of producing and drinking it, as well as types of tea equipment. Another writer, Pei Wen, sang Tea’s praises in his *Writings on Tea*: “Its quality is fine and clear, its flavor grand and pure; its effects are soothing and calming, harmonious and balancing.” The emergence of the practice of *Gongcha* (貢茶)—offering tea as an imperial tribute—in the Northern Song Dynasty resulted in the emergence of a different side to Song tea, one of refinement and luxury. This practice of offering tea tributes didn’t just result in the royal family having



ample personal supplies; in addition, tea tributes formed an important source of income for the imperial household, and were a major part of national finances. The Song Dynasty’s imperial records of “Food and Goods” attest that “yearly tea tributes provide income for the whole country.”

One of the unique characteristics of *Beiyuan* tea, a well-known tribute tea from Fujian, is the way the tea is scented. The *Beiyuan Records* contain a description of the process for adding camphor to perfume a certain variety of tea. Note that the “camphor” referred to in Song records is what we now call “Borneol,” or “Borneo camphor.” It’s produced from the resin of the camphor tree and takes the form of snowy white crystals with a sweet, cool fragrance.

What, then, was the aim of adding camphor to the tea? The idea was to add another layer of perfume to the tea’s own natural fragrance. Ding Wei, a Song official who oversaw tea production, also recorded a description of perfuming tea with musk in his poem “Brewing Tea.” In the poem he describes adding “the faintest hint of musk”—when scenting tea in this way, one must strike just the right balance so as not to detract from the natural fragrance of the tea.

Song official and calligrapher Cai Xiang also makes mention of adding perfume in his *Record of Tea*, where he describes how to make a paste using camphor to enhance the fragrance of the tribute tea. As far as the ratio of

camphor to be added, we can look to Zhuang Chuo’s *Assorted Essays*: “When scenting tea with camphor, one thread of camphor per *jin* will suffice for the fragrance to last a long time.” (One *jin* is 600 grams). In *Chinese Plants*, we find this excerpt: “The delicate scent of camphor is first among all fragrances, and is most suited to tea, though too much will drown out the tea’s natural aroma. Among all things upon this Earth its fragrance is without compare.”

As the practice of scenting tea became common for royal tributes, the fashion also caught on among ordinary folks. The *Shilin Guang Records*, a Song Dynasty reference book, mentions scenting tea with various combinations of incense, including musk, ambergris and camphor. In the fourth chapter of *Chen’s Catalogue of Incense*, titled “Perfumed Tea,” we also find mention of Chinese Aloeswood (produced from trees of the genus *Aquilaria*) among the fragrances used.

Scenting tea was one of the defining characteristics of Song Dynasty tea practice. It wasn’t regarded with universal enthusiasm, though—for example, Cai Xiang expressed his disapproval with the lines: “When drinking tea, the people of Jian’an never add incense to it, for fear of smothering the tea’s true flavor.” Ming Dynasty tea connoisseur Xu Cishu also voiced his distaste for the practice: “Tea is first steeped in water, so that it loses its true flavor;



and on top of that, it is blended with perfume, so that its aroma is obscured—I cannot see how this could produce any sort of fine result.”

However, scholarly disapproval certainly wasn't enough to quell the widespread craze for perfuming tea and didn't deter people from drinking it. According to records and novels penned in the Song Dynasty, tea infused with incense even had medicinal properties: it was effective at regulating Qi and presented a very practical way of looking after one's health. Among scholars, too, were those who enjoyed perfumed tea. Zhu Quan, another Ming tea expert, wrote about scenting tea using flowers in his *Tea Manual*: “Any fragrant flower can be used; when the flowers are in full bloom, place two layers in a bamboo basket, separated by paper—tea on top, and flowers on the bottom. Seal it well, and open it every night to replace the old flowers with fresh ones. After a few days, the tea will have a lovely fragrance. In place of flowers, one may also use camphor incense.”

Whether you prefer to savor the natural flavors of your tea or infuse them subtly with flowers or incense, all of these methods have contributed to the diversity of Chinese tea culture.

Incense at Modern-Day Tea Gatherings

As we've seen, tea and incense are both quintessential aspects of Chinese culture. They are beloved by nobles and scholars, yet embraced by ordinary people; important as part of religious ritual, yet also an everyday staple; a symbol of refined culture, but also at home in households throughout the land.

With the popularity of tea gatherings and incense rituals in modern times, people don't see drinking tea and burning incense simply as a way to delight the physical senses; rather, they hope to use these practices as a way to bond with friends, and to achieve a sense of peace and balance in spirit, mind and body.

There's a certain tranquility to be found in moments of quiet solitude spent slowly sipping tea, burning incense, reading the *Book of Tea* or the *Catalogue of Incense* and absorbing the insightful commentary of ancient scholars. And to me, the true essence of a good life is to gather with a few close friends somewhere between forested mountains and clear water, to set up your *chaxi* and enjoy the fragrance of the incense, passing an afternoon in conversation while watching the changing of the clouds and the swirling of the water. To describe such a day, I can't think of a better word than “Heavenly.”

A person savoring tea and incense in solitude will never feel lonely, but even more joy is to be found in gathering a group of good friends to sit quietly or join in conversation while enjoying the slow beauty of sipping tea surrounded by the fragrance of incense. In the words of Qing Dynasty poet Nalan Xingde, “a day spent enjoying tea, incense and idle conversation is a happy day indeed!” Just one or two people is a wonderful number for a *chaxi*, too; you'll find there's a lightness and vividness to your experience which is due not simply to the tea or the incense, but to having time alone, or to the meeting of like minds.

As for how to incorporate incense into a tea gathering, I'll offer three suggestions from my personal experience—but first, let's take a look back into history once more to explore the origins of these three types of incense that you might use at your tea table.

Traditional methods of burning incense varied throughout history. In the Han Dynasty, it was customary to light the incense directly, whereas in the Tang and Song it was usual to separate the incense from the flames by placing it on a thin sheet of metal or some similarly flat material. Two examples of incense burners where the incense was lit directly were unearthed from the tomb of a Han Dynasty noblewoman at the Mawangdui excavations in Changsha. Both burners still contained traces of used incense—one of them held the ashen

remnants of vanilla grass and roots; the other was filled with vanilla grass, galangal, magnolia buds and lovage root.

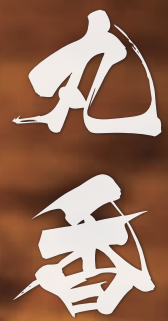
Incense burners that separated the incense from the flames were popular from the Tang and Song onwards, with the incense placed on fine plates of silver or mica. The Tang poet Li Shangyin, in his *A Song of Incense*, wrote of “the reddish beast, on its sheet of mica.” The line refers to the way the animal-shaped incense cake sends off reddish flames when placed on the mica flakes. Silver is another very pretty material that can be used, as Yang Tingxiu's “Incense Poem” mentions: “The porcelain censer is green as water; the fragile silver is paper-thin. The fire is steady and holds its flame; no wind can blow beneath its screen.”

When it comes to choices of fragrance, there is incense developed from a single material to sophisticated blends of different ingredients. Single-scent incense usually involves shaping the raw ingredient into sheets or lumps—the most commonly used materials are things like Aloeswood and sandalwood. Blended incense is made by combining various different ingredients to make a fine powder; after the correct balance of fragrance is achieved, the incense powder can be used directly or formed into various shapes such as balls or sticks.

So, when adding incense into your tea rituals, the tea is at the forefront, with incense in the background. You can choose whichever incense you like to compliment the theme and ambiance of your *chaxi*; “stamped” or “molded” incense, incense balls and incense sticks are all suitable choices. (A proper incense ceremony, roasting the higher-grade woods over coals in a bed of ash, is not really suitable for tea, as it deserves its own time, space and attention. However, you could perform the two ceremonies consecutively.)

茶 A gorgeous Song Dynasty jar made into a censer by adding a hand-carved wooden lid.





Incense Balls (丸香)

An alternate method of using loose incense powder is to mix it with a sticky substance such as honey, date paste, or pear juice in a mortar and pestle and then roll the mixture into small balls or cakes.

This method of using honey as a bonding agent in incense balls originated from ancient medicinal practices. Han Dynasty physician Zhang Zhongjing (142–219 C.E.) cites methods of using honey to make pills in two of his books. Blending incense powder with honey transforms the powder into a soft, malleable substance and allows it to hold its shape. The honey also adds its own note to the overall fragrance of the incense. However, be careful not to use too much honey, or the incense will become too sticky and won't hold its shape.

The next step after adding the honey is to pound the incense. Once the powder has been evenly mixed to the appropriate consistency in a porcelain bowl, it needs to be pounded until the powder and honey are completely combined into a gluey paste. Then the incense paste is hand-rolled into glossy balls and dried in the shade.

The third step is to decorate the incense balls (also called “dressing” them) with a fine powder. This part of the process is optional—dressing them can change the color of the incense balls or add another layer to the fragrance. For example, in ancient times, people used to swirl the balls in “Dragon Musk” (a mixture of musk and ambergris) to heighten their fragrance. It can also be purely decorative, like using gold or silver leaf, for example.

The fourth step is storing the incense balls to allow the fragrance to deepen and mature. The storage time depends on the ingredients of the incense; different types can take anywhere between 2–3 days to more than a month to mature. This storage time allows the fragrance to settle and the smells of the various ingredients to mature into a unified and harmonious aroma. To prevent the fragrance from fading, the incense balls are usually sealed inside good-quality porcelain jars.

One of the great things about this type of incense balls is that they are moist and easy to shape, and are a very convenient way to make and use your own incense blends whenever you like. This presents a perfect opportunity to explore and express your own personal relationship with scents. To burn incense balls, you can place the incense on a thin plate over a gentle charcoal flame. Both mica plates and fine silver leaf are suitable for this, and both give a beautiful visual effect. (They can also be lit directly to smoke, but are better when roasted as they burn quickly.)

Stick Incense (線香)

For most people, stick incense is probably the most familiar form of incense, especially in temples, where you can see them burning at every altar, their haze of fragrant smoke inspiring a deep spiritual feeling. In traditional Taiwanese culture, stick incense is used to make offerings to one's ancestors, and is burned as part of religious ceremonies. You often see this type of incense formed by dipping slender bamboo sticks in water, then in a sticky powder containing the fragrant ingredients (often cedar powder, 楠仔粉). The finished incense sticks are then left to dry.

Stick incense comes in many different forms. As early as the Yuan Dynasty, incense sticks had already appeared in the form of fragrant ingredients wrapped with paper to make long thin shapes, while in the Ming Dynasty it was common to bury a string in the incense powder to make a type of string incense. Another method was to suspend the incense using a thread of silver.

When using incense sticks as part of your tea ceremony, it's ideal to use homemade ones if you can. You can blend the incense powder as you would for stamped incense, then add a sticky powder (available from most incense retailers; it is made of an odorless sawdust) instead of honey or date juice, and shape the incense into long batons instead of balls—the thickness is entirely up to you. After drying them in the shade, the incense sticks are ready to use straight away.



Stamped Incense (印篆香)

“Stamped” incense is made by grinding the right combination of fragrances into a loose powder, then using molds or “stamps” to shape the incense powder into beautiful patterns. In ancient times this type of incense was referred to as “*Yin* (印) incense,” meaning “printed” or “stamped.” The winding patterns imprinted in the incense resembled the shapes of *Zhuan* script, the style of calligraphy used in stamped seals, so it is also referred to as “*Zhuan* (篆) incense,” and is sometimes also called “*Qushui* (取水) incense.” The Song philosopher Liu Zihui wrote a poem about awakening from a daydream to find that “the incense had burned away, leaving a dish of flowers.” This poetic description refers to the beautiful patterns visible in the traces of ash that the incense leaves behind.

Stamped incense can also be used to mark the passing of time—in meditation or prayer for instance—though the types of fragrance that the incense powder is made of, as well as how densely it's packed during molding, will both have an influence on how quickly it burns. Also, the powder itself must be stored in a dry place. If the humidity is too high, it will clump and often not burn all the way. There is great pleasure to be found in measuring the passing of time in cups of tea and stamps of incense.

