

# THE MANY KINDS OF ALOESWOOD INCENSE

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*There are many ways to categorize Aloeswood dating back centuries. Learning the different kinds of Aloeswood is a good way to start one's journey into the world of incense, incense for tea or even into traditional incense ceremony. Learning how and where Aloeswood comes from, as well as the many ways Chinese people have differentiated it in terms of kind and quality creates a context for our education.*

China's most important Materia Medica, *Compendium of Medical Herbs*, classifies Aloeswood in the category of "tree" and explains the name as follows: "The placing of this heartwood in water and submerging it gives Aloeswood the name 'Sinking Water (沉水)' or 'Water Submerged (水沉).' Half-submerged incense is called 'Stack Incense (棧香)' and incense that floats is called 'Yellow Ripened Incense (黃熟香).' *The Will of Southern Vietnam* (南越志) indicates that people paid their taxes with 'honeycomb incense,' because Aloeswood has a honeycomb aroma (蜜脾). Aloeswood is also referenced in the *Brahmana*, called by the name 'Aloesu,' and is thought to be sacred."

Aloeswood is the resin that is emitted by *Aquilaria* trees infected by a specific type of mold, cancer or induced by human intervention. Because the resin has a fine texture and is heavier than water, it sinks when placed in water, which is why it was sometimes called "Water Submerged." The uniqueness of a wood

that sinks is why Aloeswood was categorized by its ability to sink over time. However, not all Aloeswood will sink when placed in water. Whether or not it sinks depends on the amount of resin, which is often commensurate with quality. However, there is a kind that floats, though it will be half-submerged. That kind of Aloeswood is called by many names: "Stack Incense (棧香)," "Letter Incense (箋香)," and "Handling Water Incense (弄水香)." Aloeswood that floats on the water's surface is called "Yellow Ripened Incense," though some kinds of Yellow Ripened Incense and Sinking Red Soil (紅土沉) types of Aloeswood also sink in water. Actually, due to the confusion surrounding which types sink or float, there are much better ways to distinguish the many varieties of Aloeswood. It is, for example, much more clearly classified by the distinctive features of its scents, the different parts of the tree the resin is produced on or within, the production method or, as we'll soon see, the shape of the incense wood.

The Chinese name "Sinking Incense (沉香)" first appears in his-

torical records about two thousand years ago. In approximately 110 B.C.E., Aloeswood appeared on a list of tribute gifts given to the Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (141–87 B.C.E.). It is recorded to have come from places like Vietnam, and in China, Hainan, Guangdong and Guangxi. At that time, only court nobles used Aloeswood incense. Before entering the palace hall, the court counselor would use a censer to purify his clothing before attending court. For similar reasons, chamberlains who served the emperor at close quarters would also keep something fragrant in their mouths when speaking in order to mask bad breath. This ancient kind of gum (known as "chicken tongue incense, 雞舌香") is generally thought to actually have been made of cloves, but Han Ji of the Western Ji Dynasty (西晉人嵇含) suggested that it was actually a type of Aloeswood.

Han Ji, known for both his literary and military prowess, was the grandnephew of Kang Ji, a member of the legendary "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (竹林七賢)," a very renowned group of scholars, poets,

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authors and musicians who are still famous today. While enveloped by a nation at war, he traveled the breadth of China, writing poetry and essays that were inspired by the local traditions and customs of every place he went. For instance, after visiting a rarely seen bamboo forest in southern China, he compiled his work, *The State of Vegetation in Southern China*. This botany essay, written in the third century, meticulously describes the “honey fragrance tree (蜜香樹),” named for its sweet fragrance, which came from what is today northern Vietnam.

This “honey fragrance tree” (the *Aquilaria*) produces different kinds of Aloeswood depending on the part of the tree in which the resin is produced. “Sinking Incense (沉香),” is heartwood resin from the tree’s dense center—heavier and thicker, it is also more fragrant and rich in oils, which is why it sinks. “Chicken Bone Incense (雞骨香)” is produced in the heartwood of a smaller, less dense tree trunk; “Yellow Ripened Incense (黃熟香)” is produced in the roots; “Stack Incense (棧香)” is produced

on the outside of the trunk; “Green Cassia Incense (青桂香)” is produced in the branches; and “Chicken Tongue Incense (雞舌香)” is produced near the top of the tree. Almost all Aloeswood comes from the *Aquilaria* tree, just from different parts.

Aloeswood incense is not only categorized by the part of the tree it comes from, but also from the geographic location in which it originates. Besides Southeast Asia, trees that make Aloeswood resin are also found in Hainan (though very rarely nowadays), where they were referred to as “Fine Jade Resin (瓊脂).” Aloeswood from Guangzhou is referred to as “Smiling Fragrance (莞香).” Tradition has it that the young women responsible for washing and drying Smiling Fragrance hid the best pieces of the Aloeswood in their corsets and secretly mixed it into their cosmetics, leading to its alternate name, “Daughter Fragrance (女兒香).” Aloeswood sometimes takes its name from the region it comes from, but the reverse is also true in that there are places named after the incense they produce.

According to modern research, the regions of Dongguan, Liyuan (modern-day Sha Tin, Hong Kong), and Shaluowan (the west side of Lantau Island) all transported their incense to Jianshatou (modern-day Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong). The incense was then transported via sampan boats bound for the port of Shipaiwan and was then distributed to the rest of the island, collected for distribution to the Mainland or exported to other ports abroad. This port city became known as “Hong Kong,” which means “Incense Port (香港)” or “Fragrant Harbor” in Chinese. Although Hong Kong’s incense market no longer exists, the city has since gone on to world-renowned fame, known also as “The Pearl of the East.”

The easiest way to differentiate Aloeswood is on the basis of its shape. “Tooth Incense (牙香)” is said to be about the size of a horse tooth; “Leaf Incense (葉子香)” is shaped like a thin leaf; “Chicken Bone Incense” is full of small gaps, which ancients thought resembled a chicken bone; “Polished Incense (光香)” has the external appearance of lustrous,

colorful rocks; “Water Turban (水盤頭)” is large and has a soft texture; and “Penglai Incense (蓬萊香),” named after the mythical island of immortals, is huge, shaped like a large mushroom with a small bamboo rain hat.

Aloeswood is often also named after its color, such as the “Spotted Partridge (鸕鶿斑),” which has brown, black and white spots like partridge feathers (some people think this is a type of Yellow Ripened Incense); “Striped Tiger (虎斑),” which has alternating black and yellow stripes; and “Yellow Candle (黃蠟),” which produces a dark yellow oil that is soft and waxy.

The Song Dynasty chancellor, Wei Ding, wrote *Commentaries on Heavenly Incense*, which divides Hainan Aloeswood into “Four kinds, twenty shapes.” The four kinds are “Sinking (沉),” “Stack (棧),” “Raw (生結),” and “Yellow Ripened (黃熟).” Some of the shapes are “Gentle Black Square (烏文格),” “Beeswax (黃蠟),” “Thigh High (洵髀),” “Bone (若骨),” “Kunlun Plum (崑崙梅格),” “Carved Larvae (蟲鏤),” “Umbrella Bamboo (傘竹格),” “Reed Leaves (茅葉),” and “Spotted Partridge.” In the Qing Dynasty *New Dialect of Guangdong* and *Notes from Guangdong*, there are more than a dozen different alternative classifications for Aloeswood, such as: “Iron Bone (鐵骨),” “Black Horn (烏角),” “Rapid Oil (油速),” “Embroidered Hemp Bag (錦包麻),” “General’s Pocket (將軍兜),” “Caltrop Shell (菱殼),” and “Carp Flake (鯽魚片).”

As experts began to study Aloeswood incense, its production also became a source through which the different types of incense were separated. Among them there are “Quickly Finished Incense (速暫香),” which does not take long to be produced by the tree; “Rapid Oil,” which is also formed quickly, but has a thick and oily texture; “Collapsed Frame (倒架沉),” which falls to the ground after being produced and usually contains wood fibers; “Yellow Ripened Incense,” which is usually fermented, but not entirely; and “Sinking Incense from the Earth (土沉香),” which is dug up from the ground, where it has

been fully fermented by microorganisms that have already decomposed its vascular tissues. However, back in the day, all of Hainan’s locally-produced Aloeswood incense was called “Sinking Incense from the Earth (土沉香),” whether it was actually dug up or not, in order to distinguish it from other kinds. In Taiwan nowadays, that which is called “Sinking Earth (土沉)” still refers to Aloeswood that was completely mature upon being dug from the ground.

Though all these methods of classifying Aloeswood are still used in incense shops and among connoisseurs today, the primary way to distinguish it is by its fragrance. It is incense, after all. And, though Aloeswood is generally submerged in water and dried, calling for a categorization based on whether it sinks or not, there are some exceptions. For example, there is a special type of Aloeswood called, “Rare Cedar (奇楠),” which cannot be submerged in water due to its congealed, oily composition. But its wonderful fragrance makes it superior among the kinds of Aloeswood one encounters nowadays. Of course, incense that has a wonderful fragrance and can be submerged in water is considered the best of the best.

## Features of Aloeswood Incense

### Shape

The Song Dynasty poet Fan Chengda (范成大) said of Hainan’s Sinking Earth (土沉): “If the chestnut shade is horn-shaped, if it has a monk’s hood, is covered in Zoyisia mold, and if its bamboo leaves are beautiful and light as paper, then submerge it in water.” In *Historical Studies on the Trade of Incense and Medicine in the Song Dynasty*, overseas Aloeswood incense is described in this way: “Thus, a millennium of dead trees has produced incense like ‘Rock Laurel (石桂),’ like ‘Fist (拳),’ ‘Elbow (肘),’ like ‘Phoenix (鳳),’ ‘Peacock (孔雀)’ and ‘Snapping Turtle (龜蛇),’ like ‘Mist (雲氣),’ and like ‘Immortal Deity (神仙)’ that, when burned, will fill a house with a fragrance that does not disperse for at least three

days.” The use of “like” so many times is poetic in Chinese, alluding to the many shapes of Aloeswood. Why are there seemingly limitless metaphors for the shape of Aloeswood? This is because Aloeswood resin can be produced in the tree’s roots, trunk, branches, between the bark and heartwood or in cavities made by man, animals or even microorganisms. Each type of resin takes a variety of different shapes as a result. Even when the wood around the resin rots and falls from the tree to the ground, the shape and structure of the resin continue to change as it decays.

When Aloeswood hibernates in the ground for a long time, it produces more resin that flows downward. When it is collected, its backside tends to have wooden particles from the ground. This gave rise to the so-called “Rain Head (雨淋頭),” “Turban (包頭),” “Wrapped Shell (包殼),” and other kinds of circular, shell-shaped Aloeswood. The tree’s core often produces a high quantity of course but good quality “Sinking Horn (角沉).” The “Sinking Slice (片沉)” is close to the tree bark’s surface. If the resin depends on the tree bark for production, it is named “Green Cassia (青桂).” And untreated thin slices that have been in the ground for a long period of time are called “Dragon Scales (龍鱗).”

When you couple the many shapes and sizes of Aloeswood with the fact that incense is an artistic pursuit (and add a dash of the Chinese fondness for poetry), you get lots of poetic metaphors describing the different shapes of Aloeswood. In truth, every piece of Aloeswood incense is unique and such categories only go so far. And, of course, the exceptionality of each piece of Aloeswood is also poetically known as “Heavenly Engraving.”

### Color

As for the colors of Aloeswood, its veins are also quite different in each variety. Usually, incense resin wedged into the center of the tree is a rich brown, almost black in color, while the tree’s vascular tissues are a light white or yellow color. This gives rise to the yellow and black striped



appearance in some Aloeswood. These yellow and black striped varieties are called “Striped Tiger (虎斑),” “Iron Bone (鐵骨),” and “Crane Bone Dragon Tendon (鶴骨龍筋).” When each vein is clearly distinguishable, this variety is called “Sinking Horizontal Partitions (橫隔沉).” Incense with skewed, interlocking veins that look like bird feathers is called “Mandarin Duck’s Back (鴛鴦背).” Varieties with spots are called “Spotted Partridge (鸕鶿斑),” and varieties with oily, glossy insides that look like rotten wood are called “Embroidered Hemp Bag.” In *New Dialect of Guangdong*, veined varieties of Aloeswood incense were classified as “Flower Gone (花鏟),” because “the tree and the fragrance are mixed together and cannot be unmixed. Remove the tree and the remainder will be fragrance.”

After Aloeswood has been buried in the ground for a long time, its decaying process will hasten the decomposition of the wooden parts, leaving more resin, which makes the incense stronger and far superior to all others. This is called “Sinking the Whole Body (通體作沉).” After scraping back the weathered layer, a glossy black layer of resin will be uncovered. An untold number of Aloeswood pieces have been excavated from the soil, and many take on the color of the soil they were buried in, resulting in such names as “Sinking Red Soil (紅土沉),” “Sinking Yellow Soil (黃土沉)” and “Sinking Black Soil (黑土沉).” *New Dialect of Guangdong* mentions “Red Mist Flower Gone (紅蒙花鏟),” “Yellow Mist Flower Gone (黃蒙花鏟)” and “Muddy Fragrance of the Back of Mists (蒙者背香而腹泥),” expounding on how each kind of Aloeswood decayed and in what kind of soil.

As for the so-called “Rare Cedar” variety of Aloeswood, Chen Rang of the Qing Dynasty wrote in *Explanations from Abroad* (海外逸說), “The first person said ‘Yingge green,’ a color most difficult to come by, like oriole feathers. The next said it produced orchids and its color was a tender green and black. Yet another said it produced golden silk and its color was slightly black. One said it produced yellow candies and the next

said resolutely it was like ‘black iron,’ but all agreed it was oily and resinous.” Green, black and yellow are actually all colors found in pieces of Aloeswood due to the soil in which the weathering/fermentation process occurred. In reality, it would have been difficult to find soil-weathered Aloeswood that was the bright green of oriole feathers or the color of orchids. I believe that the numerous scholars the author consulted about this rare incense once again took poetic license, adding romance to their descriptions. However, the variety of descriptions, and the differences between them, cannot be entirely blamed on the “poetic penchant” of historical scholars. This is mainly because of the differences in how Aloeswood incense is formed in the tree, the geographic location it comes from, whether or not it sinks or floats, its various external appearances, and its fragrance and quality—all create the vast array of colors found in Aloeswood.

### Aroma

Traditional Chinese Medicine describes Aloeswood thus: “An incense that smells sweet, is cool, pungent, bitter, hemp-y, and acerbic.” Good-quality Rare Cedar can be placed directly on the tongue, and after a while it will produce a tingling or numbing sensation. Japanese incense traditions also describe Aloeswood as “pungent, sweet, salty, sour or bitter.” Though Aloeswood can be consumed (eaten or drunk in hot water like tea), the taste is actually a metaphor for the fragrance.

Only when Aloeswood is heated will its aroma truly unfold. The Song Dynasty poet Fan Chengda said of Aloeswood incense: “Its smell is always clear and warm, like the lotus flower, the plum flower, the goose pear and so on. When burned, its richness spreads out, its vapor crosses and fills the room; the fragrance arises from all sides until the ember burns out. Fine Aloeswood incense is glorious and delicate, naturally sweet like a subtle aroma of fruit, melons, flowers or honey. Each fragrance is entirely different. From the first whiff, a gentle

aroma fills the nostrils, while the next breath carries a pungent fragrance that will overpower the shallow mind. Pure Aloeswood incense can seep through the lungs, enter the Qi and quite peacefully clear the heart, liver, spleen, lungs and kidneys. With calm, deep serenity, one reaches a peace beyond the tumult of ordinary thoughts. The senses then grow sharp and more conducive to self-cultivation.”

Because Aloeswood has such a pure and elegant fragrance, it has been figuratively called “The Incense of the Venerable (香中閣老).” The Ming Dynasty doctor Lian Gao (高濂) once took the time to write down the characteristics of every type of fragrance. He called Aloeswood “the incense of calm and grace.” He went on to say, “Under the desolate misery of the waning moon, burning this incense can ease your spirit and relax your mind.” Rare Cedar became the incense of the nobility in ancient China and Japan, and was described as a “White moon on a clear night, pointing out the icy chords of the birds, long whistles in an empty home and the northernmost peak of a dark-blue mountain range.” Aloeswood produces a fragrance that can be diluted and blended well with other fragrances without conflicting with them, and has also been added to medicine for the same reason. Aloeswood can be harmoniously blended with all kinds of substances, becoming an integral component to the whole of the mixture. In the manufacturing of modern perfumes, Aloeswood has become an essential stabilizer. Compared with perfumes that are loved by the mainstream, the subtle, natural, light and meaningfully lingering aroma of Aloeswood is deeper and more profound than a mere smell. Aromatherapy can dispel disease and awaken the spirit. Due to the rich resin of Aloeswood incense, its fragrance goes deeper and is also lighter, filling the body as well as the room without overwhelming either. Before moving to a new home or driving a new car, Aloeswood incense can purify your space. This sacred treasure is much more than just a fragrance for enjoyment!

