



# Aquilaria

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# Aquilaria and the Origin of Hong Kong

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## Abstract

The paper examines the history of Aquilaria from different cultural sources of different periods, and how they shaped the narratives of Hong Kong, one of the most iconic cities in Asia. From the British colonial description of Hong Kong as a ‘barren rock’ to the more recent rediscovery of the Chinese accounts of pre-colonial Hong Kong as a thriving trading hub of aromatics, our understanding of Hong Kong and its role in the region depended heavily on researchers’ understanding and interpretation of historical sources. The aromatic tree was widely transplanted and cultivated in South China, to the extent that for nearly a millennium it was considered an indigenous produce, albeit exotic in origin. Looking further beyond China, Indian records reveal a vast, ancient global network of trade of exotic goods and aromatics. More enigmatic is the evidence that suggests Southeast Asia might be the true origin of Aquilaria, with an enduring connection with the southern coast of China.

本文從古今不同文化圈的文獻記載，窺探莞香與沈香的歷史，了解不同歷史敘述中的香港。香港作為亞洲傳奇之都，在過去英殖民時代，其早期的面貌一直被描述為一堆貧瘠的石嶼(‘barren rock’)。二戰後的本地歷史學家，考究明清及以前廣東地區有關莞香種植和香料貿易的記載，探索香港與鄰近地區的關係，為香港歷史研究翻案。如何構建香港的歷史定位，在很大程度上取決於學者對歷史材料的理解、分析和演繹。儘管沉香作為異域之香的歷史無庸置疑，在華南地區被廣泛移植和培植成為莞香，過去近千年來，一直被國人視為原產物。若把眼光再放遠一點，古印度有關沈香的文獻，時空內涵更遠更廣。東南亞作為沉香真正的起源地，其有關莞香與沈香的記載，尚有大量值得探索的空間。這些不同語料的記載，交織出一幅跨文明、越洋貿易網絡的圖像。

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The research for this article is the sort of work our students are exposed to at the Needham Research Institute (NRI) Summer Scholars’ Retreat as they explore topics related to Science and Civilization in China and prepare their own investigative studies.

# 1. The Fragrance of Hong Kong

*Aquilaria sinensis* is a plant found and cultivated in the southern parts of China including Hong Kong. Known locally in Chinese as *tuchenxiang* 土沉香, *guanxiang* 莞香, and many other names. The plant is best known for its fragrant wood, known as Agarwood or *chenxiang* 沉香 in Chinese, when aromatic resin is produced after the plant is traumatized. Agarwood incense made from some varieties of *Aquilaria* is highly valued in Chinese society with a long history since the first millennium and is widely used even today in Chinese temples of different religious affiliations, creating a unique smellscape in Asia in general.

The history of *Aquilaria* has a unique connection to Hong Kong, literally “fragrant harbor” in Cantonese (香港 *Heung<sup>1</sup> Gong<sup>2</sup>*) as scholars now believe that the fragrance refers to the aromatic products derived from *Aquilaria*. But only until recently, the narrative of Hong Kong and its fragrance was a different one. For the British, the history of Hong Kong, literally the “fragrant harbor”, began with the discovery of an island along the southern coast of China, later known as the island of Hong Kong. This island was famously denounced as a “barren island with hardly a house upon it” by the British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston (1784–1865) just before the Crown Colony was founded in 1842 (Palmerston, 1841), three years after the first Anglo-Chinese war, also known as the First Opium War, broke out in 1839. Hong Kong was a nondescript, exotic island to the Europeans who sought commercial, proselytizing, and later imperialist opportunities in the Far East since the sixteenth century. In 1844, John Robert Morrison (1814–1843), son of the British missionary Robert Morrison (1782–1834), wrote in the second edition of his work, *A Chinese Commercial Guide*, one of the earliest explanations of the name of Hong Kong extant in the English language (Morrison, 1844, pp. 70–72):

On the [southwestern] side [of the island of Hongkong], there is a cove and a cascade, where ships used to water, named *Hiángkiáng* 香港 ‘Fragrant streams,’ which has given name to the whole island.<sup>1</sup>

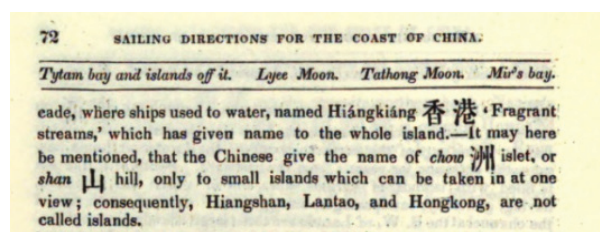
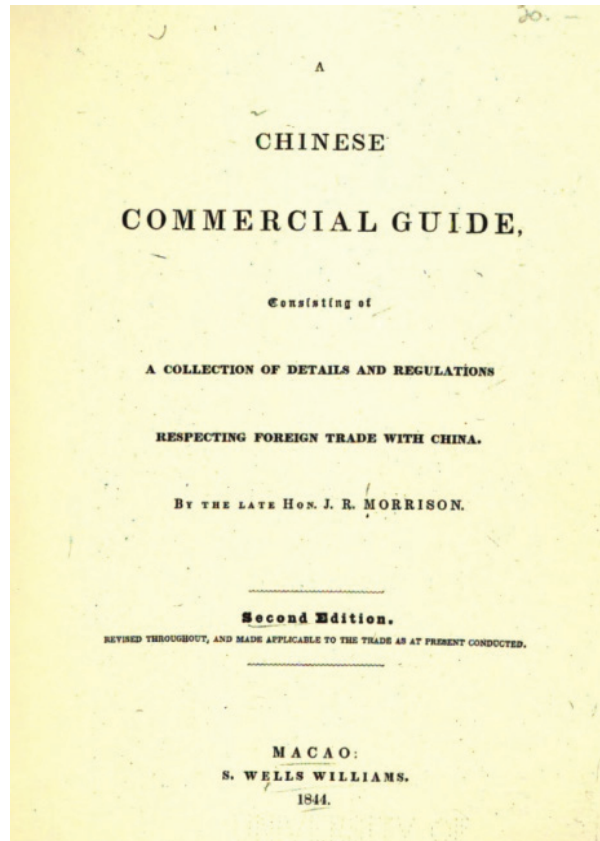


Figure 1. J.R. Morrison (1844). *Chinese Commercial Guide*, second ed., (a) front cover, (b) p.72. (Source: babel.hathitrust.org)

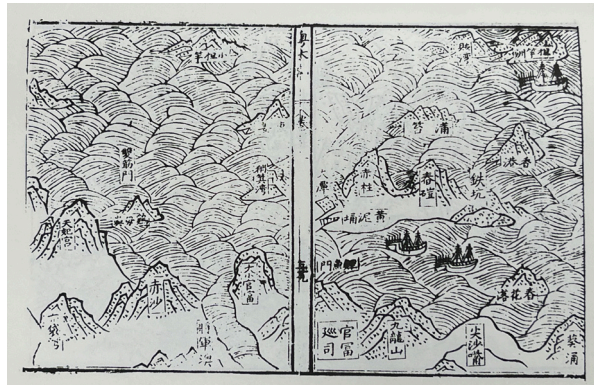
What was fragrant about the island of Hong Kong? The fragrance was thought to be referring to the sweet water from a certain waterfall, sought after by the seafarers in the region (Abel, 1818, p. 60)<sup>2</sup>. But Hong Kong was known to the Chinese centuries before the Western occupation — it was neither barren nor nondescript in any sense. In a 1595 Chinese map from Guo Fei 郭棐’s *Yuedaji* 粵大記 (“Comprehensive notes on the Cantonese [region],”), the southwest corner of an outlying island was labelled with the characters “香港”, whose Cantonese pronunciation *Heung<sup>1</sup> Gong<sup>2</sup>* was the

<sup>1</sup> On the popular but problematic translation “fragrant harbour,” see Lam, 2019, pp. 37–39.

<sup>2</sup> Now Waterfall Bay 瀑布灣, near Wah Fu Estate 華富村, next to Cyberport 數碼港. This explanation was, however, refuted by Chang (1963, p. 83). See remarks also by Decaudin, 2019; Wordie, 2022.

basis for the latinized transcription, first “Heong Kong” and later “Hong Kong” (Lam, 2019, pp. 39–47).<sup>3</sup> It is now generally accepted that Hong Kong referred first and foremost to the ancient village of *Heung<sup>1</sup> Gong<sup>2</sup>* (now Aberdeen), not far from the aforementioned waterfall, from a geographic point of view.

However, Hong Kong was more than just a village with a pretty name.<sup>4</sup> In the 1950s, Cantonese scholar Lo Hsiang-lin 羅香林 (1906–1978) and his student Chang Yuet-ngo 張月娥, both from the University of Hong Kong, began to explore the pre-colonial history of Hong Kong based on historical sources in Chinese. They pointed out that the fragrance refers in fact not to the water, but to the aromatic trees from the Dongguan 東莞 region adjacent to Hong Kong and the latter’s role as a once thriving regional commercial hub of aromatics, produced from the fragrant wood *Aquilaria* (Chang, 1963).



**Figure 2.** Guo Fei 郭棐 (1595). *Yuedaji* 粵大記. Fasc. 32. ‘Guangdong yanhai tu’ 廣東沿海圖. (Source: Guangdong renmin chubanshe ed. 2014: 941)

In recent decades, more in-depth and highly specialized scholarly studies from different disciplinary angles on *Aquilaria* have emerged, revealing a bewilderingly rich, transcultural and also material history of the aromatic tree. Jung (2013) offers a comprehensive, richly annotated account of the cultural history of Agarwood, the aromatic produced from the *Aquilaria*, in East Asia, focusing on China and Japan during the premodern period. Pleasantly illustrated and more accessible is Wei (2014), translated into Chinese from an unpublished English monograph, which connects *Aquilaria* with the history of Hong Kong and the neighboring Cantonese region using both historical

and contemporary sources. A book volume titled *Agarwood: Science Behind the Fragrance*, edited by Mohamed (2016), provides some of the most updated scientific, in particular, botanical studies of the plant and the fragrance. López-Sampson and Page (2018) examines the historical use and trade of Agarwood from a transcultural perspective using sources across Eurasia with a helpful bibliography. More recently, Fang (2023) completed her doctoral thesis at Cambridge University, an investigation of “smellscape” in Medieval China with some enlightening discussions on the intercultural factors in the historical trading and application of aromatics. In the following sections, my focus shall be the individual sets of key textual sources by their languages and review the scholarly account and insight that have been gleaned from them.

## 2. Exotic but indigenous aromatics?

### 2.1 The Chinese account

The aromatic wood cultivated historically in southern Guangdong and to some extent still growing wild as an indigenous, though endangered species, is classified as *Aquilaria sinensis*.<sup>5</sup> An early fourteenth-century account of an aromatic tree from the Guangdong region, known variously as *lǎnxiāng* 欖香, *báimùxiāng* 白木香, or *qīnggūitóu* 青桂頭, refers likely to this species of *Aquilaria* (Chen & Lü, 1995):

欖香：新會上、下川山所產白木香，亦名青桂頭。其水浸漬而腐者，謂之水盤頭。雨浸經年，凝結而堅者，謂之鐵面。惟欖香為上香，即白木香材，上有蛀孔如針眼，剔白木留其堅實者，小如鼠糞，大或如指，狀如欖核，故名。其價舊與銀等。今東莞縣地名茶園，人盛種之，客旅多販焉。

*Lǎnxiāng* (lit. “olive aromatics”): The *báimùxiāng* [trees] produced in the hills of the upper and lower rivers of Xinhui are called also *qīnggūitóu*. Those which rotted due to soaking in water are called *shǔipántóu*. After getting soaked in rainwater for years, those solidified and hardened are called *tiěmiàn* (“iron-face”). Only *lǎnxiāng* is considered the best aromatic [tree], that is, the aromatic materials of the *báimùxiāng*. On it there are burrowed perforation with the size of a pin-eye. One removes the white wood to preserve the hardened part. They could be as small as mouse

<sup>3</sup> The dialectal origin of Heong Kong vs. Hong Kong remains debatable. Chang (1963) suggests that “Hong Kong” was a Tanka, rather than a Cantonese or Hakka pronunciation. However, as Prof. Richard Simmons of the University of Hong Kong points out to me (personal communication), the transcription is not necessary accurate to start with due to a variety of factors including the British speaker’s ability to distinguish vowel qualities and the limitation of English orthography. Note that other rarer transcriptions such as Morrison’s *hiang kiang* also existed.

<sup>4</sup> On the Ming-period village of Hong Kong, identified as 香港圍 or simply 香港, see Lo 1963; Chang 1963; Lin 1985, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> Current distribution of *Aquilaria sinensis*, or “Chinese Agarwood,” may be found in the IUCN Red List database ([www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org)). Zhang, Li, et al (2012), and Wei (2014) provide some insight into the current cultivation and commercial practices.

droppings, and as big as the size of the thumb. It has the shape of an olive pit and is thus named. In the past its price was equivalent to that of silver. Today many people plant it in great number in Chayuan (“tea garden”), a place in Dongguan, and it is traded in abundance by itinerant merchants.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 3a.** Two specimens of *Aquilaria sinensis* in the Biodiversity Garden on The ISF Academy campus in Pokfulam, Hong Kong

Scholars such as Chang (1963) suggest that *Aquilaria sinensis*, or at least a variety of it, was known to the Chinese as early as the Tang period. However, as Joseph Needham cautioned, a specimen of *xiang* 香 in Chinese may refer to a broad variety of unconnected genera (e.g., cloves, patchouli), plant-derived materials (e.g., frankincense, elemi, liquidambar), or even non-plant materials (Needham, 1973).<sup>7</sup> Today, *Aquilaria sinensis*, belonging to the family Thymelaeaceae, is often considered to be equivalent to what some Chinese botanists call *guānxiāng* / *gwun<sup>2</sup> heung<sup>1</sup>* 莞香 (aromatics from [Dong]guan). It is a term that is first mentioned in Qu Dajun’s 屈大均 (1630–96) *Guangdong xinyu* 廣東新語 (“New accounts of Guangdong”), a miscellany on Cantonese matters written in 1678 (Qu, 1985).<sup>8</sup> There is no reason to believe that *Aquilaria sinensis* was the only aromatic wood traded in Hong Kong and the



**Figure 3b.** Illustration of *Aquilaria sinensis* (Lour.) Spreng. (Source: www.herbarium.gov.hk). I thank Dianna Ibarra and John Craig for sharing with me the history of the trees and the concept of the garden

neighbouring region. As a genus, *Aquilaria*, from which Agarwood was produced from a variety of species, was certainly the best known (Lee & Mohamed, 2016).<sup>9</sup> Agarwood, the resinous wood produced from the *Aquilaria* tree after it was infected by a parasitic mould due to natural or artificial injury, is properly known in Chinese as *chénxiāng* 沉香, literally “deep-” or “sinking fragrance.” This refers possibly to its unique fragrance, dark colour, or high density. The last explanation is mentioned in a note to the sixteenth-century *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 of the famed pharmacologist and physician Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–93):

木之心節，置水則沈，故名沈水，亦曰水沈，半沈者為棧香，不沈者為黃熟香，《南越志》言交州人稱為蜜香，謂其氣如蜜脾也，梵書名阿迦噓香。

The core part of the trunk sinks when placed in water and is thus called *chénshuǐ* (“sink-in-water”), or *shuǐchén* (“water-sunk”). Those sink halfway are *zhànxiāng*. Those do not sink are *huàngshúxiāng* (“yellow mature fragrance”). According to the *Gazetteer of Nanyue*, they are called *mìxiāng* (“honey fragrance”) by people from Jiaozhou because it smells like honeycomb. In Sanskrit, it is called the fragrance of *agaru*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Chen and Lü (1995), *Dade nanhai zhi* 大德南海志, fasc. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Science and Civilisation of China, V.2.131–143, following Li, 1940, pp. 186–190.

<sup>8</sup> Fasc. 26. Qu 1985:674–78. Guanxiang was known by other names such as *Tuchenxiang* 土沉香, *Yaxiangshu* 牙香樹, and *Baimuxiang* 白木香.

<sup>9</sup> For relationship among various *Aquilaria* species and their distributions, see Lee and Mohamed, 2016, pp. 4–9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ben cao gang mu*, 1593/1041 (J. ed.). All translations by author unless otherwise indicated.

If this citation from the *Nanyue zhi* 南越志 (“Gazetteer of Nanyue”), a fifth-century work no longer extant, is to be trusted, the history of Agarwood as an exotic aromatic from Southeast Asia could be over 1,500 years old. The uniqueness and rarity of Agarwood made it a commodity of high commercial value. Through the course of Chinese history, Agarwood grew in status to become an exotic, luxury item imbued with deep cultural and spiritual meanings (Wei, 2014).

Recent scholarship on the local gazetteers and early Chinese references, such as those we have seen earlier, revealed a bewilderingly rich history of aromatic trade in the Guangdong region from as early as the Yuan period in the thirteenth century. During the Ming period in the sixteenth century, the cultivation of aromatic woods extended from southern Guangdong to the less populated coastal region (such as where the New Territories and the Lantau Island now are), which were all under the administration of Xinhui 新會 (Yong, 1948, p. 69; Wei, 2014, pp. 127–34).<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested that the aromatic products were processed near *Mong<sup>4</sup> Kok<sup>3</sup>* 芒角 (*mong<sup>4</sup>* refers possibly originally to aromatic plants, now *Wong<sup>6</sup> Kok<sup>3</sup>* 旺角), brought to the dock of Tsim Sha Tsui [zim<sup>1</sup> sa<sup>1</sup> zui<sup>2</sup>] 尖沙嘴 (lit., sharp sandy protrusion), where Heung Po Tau [heung<sup>1</sup> bou<sup>3</sup> tau<sup>4</sup>] 香埔頭 (lit., fragrant dock) was located, and were eventually ferried to Shek Pai Wan [sek<sup>6</sup> paai<sup>4</sup> waan<sup>1</sup>] 石排灣 (now Aberdeen in southern Hong Kong Island) for bulk trans-shipment to various parts of southern China up to the Yangtze River, and to a lesser extent, Southeast Asia and beyond (Yong, 1948, p. 68; Chang, 1963, p. 87).

This thriving intraregional and interregional trade was, however, put to an abrupt stop in 1661, when the Manchu Qing court issued an edict to evict all inhabitants within 50 *li* (c. 29 km) from the coastline (Xiao, 2021, pp. 18–22; Wei, 2014, pp. 96–100; Chang, 1963, pp. 87–88). The reason behind this drastic measure was due to the new Manchu rulers’ inability to crush the Ming loyalists, whose remaining maritime force fled to Taiwan while maintaining ties with the coastal communities on the Mainland. Although the eviction lasted only until 1665 and the coastal regions including Hong Kong were reinhabited by 1684, the indigenous communities and commerce were practically decimated during these two decades and never recovered. They were replaced largely by Hakka

and other migrants, who later transformed the outlook of the region by their rustic lifestyle. By the time the Europeans reached Macau in the early sixteenth century and later Hong Kong a century later, Hong Kong was indeed a rather desolate place with a scatter of fishing and farming villages, and with no memory of its past.

Without archaeological evidences, it may remain disputable to what extent this pre-colonial aromatic trade in Hong Kong ever thrived, as Yong’s (1948) account, cited by Chang (1963) and Wei (2014), remains speculative. However, when juxtaposed against each other, both the Chinese and the British accounts contain no contradictions to each other. The post-Ming Hong Kong had stepped back in time in both cultural and economic development. Not only had the interregional aromatic trade vanished, the local ones barely survived.

## 2.2 The Indian account

If *Aquilaria* was indigenized to become *Aquilaria sinensis* in China, and China was a producer and exporter of aromatics, to what extent was *Aquilaria* exotic to the Chinese? Although knowledge of aromatics is evident in the earlier Chinese records, only aromatic herbs and no aromatic woods appear to be known before the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) (Li, 1940, pp. 182–185). Records of exotic aromatics began to appear, often as tributes from friendly neighbours, subsequent to Emperor Wu of Han’s 漢武帝 (159–87 BCE) imperial expansion and his missions to the “West” in Central Asia, through what is now known as the Silk Roads (Hansen, 2017, p. 65). Exotic aromatics came also customarily from the “South,” i.e., from the coastal region of southern China and Indochina to the far end of the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf. In Needham’s (1991) survey of thirty-two animal- and plant-based aromatics described in historical Chinese pharmacopoeias and other technical works, fourteen came from South and/or Southeast Asia, and seven from other foreign lands.<sup>12</sup> For much of the Chinese history, aromatics have been inextricably linked to exotic and foreign places.

<sup>11</sup> Most notably, Lek Yuen 瀝源 (now near Shatin) and Sha Lo Wan 沙螺灣 (now near Chek Lap Kok International Airport).

<sup>12</sup> *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 2., p. 137 (Table 94).

			China indigenous		South-east and South Asia imported	Western Asia, Europe, Africa, imported
			early	later		
	aloes-wood (garroo)	<i>chhen hsiang</i>		*	*	—
A	ambergris	<i>lung hstien hs.</i>	龍涎香	—	*	—
	anise	<i>hui hs.</i>	茴香	*	—	*
	basil	<i>lo lè hs.</i>	羅勒	*	—	—
	bdellium (earlier)	<i>an hsi hs.</i>	安息香	—	—	*
	benzoin (later)	<i>an hsi hs.</i>	安息香	—	*	—
	Baros camphor (1-borneol)	<i>lung nao hs.</i>	龍腦香	—	*	—
	chang camphor (d-camphor)	<i>chang nao hs.</i>	樟腦香	*	*	—
	sémhong camphor (1-camphor)	<i>ai na hs.</i>	艾納香	—	*	—
	cassia (cinnamon)	<i>kuei hs.</i>	桂香	*	*	—
	citronella	<i>mao hs.</i>	茅香	*	*	—
A	civet	<i>ling mao hs.</i>	靈貓	*	*	—
	clove	<i>ting hs.</i>	丁香	—	*	—
	costus [see putchuk]			—	—	—
	elemi (brea)	<i>tan thang hs.</i>	薔糖香	—	*	—
	frankincense	<i>ju hs.</i>	乳香	—	*	*
	galbanum	<i>phi chhi hs.</i>	鬍齊香	—	—	*
	gardenia	<i>chih tsu hs.</i>	梔子香	*	*	—
	garroo [see aloes]			—	—	—
	jasmine ( <i>offic.</i> )	<i>yeh hsi ming hs.</i>	耶悉若香	*	*	*
	jasmine ( <i>Sambac</i> )	<i>mo li hua hs.</i>	茉莉花	*	*	*
	laka	<i>tsu thêng hs.</i>	蘇合蘇	—	*	—
	liquidambar (later)	<i>su ho hs.</i>	蘇合	—	*	—
A	musk	<i>shé hs.</i>	麝香	*	*	—
	myrrh	<i>mu yao hs.</i>	沒藥	—	—	*
A	onycha	<i>chia hs.</i>	羶甲香	*	*	—
	patchouli	<i>huo hs.</i>	藿香	*	*	*
	putchuk (costus)	<i>kuang mu hs.</i>	廣木香	—	*	*
	rue	<i>yün hs.</i>	芸香	—	*	—
	sandal	<i>than hs.</i>	檀香	—	*	—
	spikenard	<i>kan sung hs.</i>	甘蘇香	*	—	—
	storax (earlier)	<i>su ho hs.</i>	蘇合	—	—	*
	terebinth	<i>tu nou hs.</i>	篤耨	*	—	—
	walnut-gum	<i>pi li hs.</i>	皮梨	*	*	—

Figure 4. J. Needham (1974: 137), Table 94, “Constituents of incense, and other aromatics.”

It has been suggested that Agarwood originated from India (Ridley, 1901, p. 77). The argument has been largely linguistic and etymological. The English word Agarwood was ultimately derived from the Sanskrit word *agaru* अगुरु, which is attested in early Indian literature such as the *Mahābhārata* and Pali Buddhist texts, both dated to some centuries before the Common Era (López-Sampson & Page, 2018).<sup>13</sup> *Agaru* was mentioned also in the *Dhanvantarighaṇṭu*, a fourth-century CE botanical glossary, together with some of its unique attributes such as hardness and heaviness like “iron” (*loha*) and “injury by worms” (*kṛmijagdhā*).<sup>14</sup> While the precise identification of *agaru* is difficult, an important clue may be gleaned from *Bhāvaprakāśa*, a sixteenth-century medical text, which is likely in turn based on much earlier sources:

कृष्णं गुणाधिकं तत्तु लोहवद्वारि मज्जति ।

अगुरुप्रभवः स्नेहः कृष्णागुरुसमः स्मृतः ॥

*kṛṣṇaṃ guṇādhikam tat tu lohavad vāri majjati |*  
*aguruprabhavaḥ snehaḥ kṛṣṇāgurusamaḥ smṛtaḥ ||*

Blackness is [a particular type of Agarwood’s] predominant feature and it sinks in water like iron. The best of Agarwood is smooth and it is considered to be the same as the Black Agarwood.<sup>15</sup>

This “sinking” property of the Agarwood is reminiscent of the description of *chénxiāng* in the *Bencao gangmu* (§2.1). Since the latter in fact cites the Sanskrit name *agaru*, it becomes apparent that the Chinese and the Indians had the same identification of the Agarwood or a particular variety of it.

<sup>13</sup> López-Sampson and Page 2018: 110–111. Although aromatics are mentioned in various Vedic texts, the claim that Agarwood was known specifically in ancient works such as the *R̥gveda* appears to me untenable.

<sup>14</sup> *Dhanvantarighaṇṭu*, Candanādivarga 24.1: *agaru pravaram loham kṛmijagdham anāryakam*.

<sup>15</sup> *Bhāvaprakāśa* 6.23. It is possible that its author Bhāvamiśra excerpted or paraphrased the verse from another earlier text.

Recently, David Shulman pointed out that *akil* (அகில்), the Tamil word for Agarwood from which the Sanskrit *agaru* was ultimately derived, was the source of the Hebrew word for the same aromatic plant, *ahal* (m. sg.; *ahalim*, m. pl.), as attested in the Hebrew Bible (Shulman, 2016, p. 20).<sup>16</sup> Beside its aromatic properties, the Agarwood was widely known to the south Indians for its medicinal use with its antimicrobial and antimalarial properties. This Dravidian-Semitic connection pushes the history of Agarwood and its long-distant trade to the second millennium BCE. It furthermore identifies the locus of Agarwood trade to be in the region of the Dravidian country, i.e., South India. However, did Aquilaria in fact grow in India or were different species of Aquilaria cultivated in the South Asian subcontinent just like *Aquilaria sinensis* was in China?

### 2.3 The Southeast Asian account

Beside the abundant Chinese and Indian records, the Agarwood indigenous to various parts of India and Southeast Asia was first described by the Portuguese naturalist Garcia de Orta (1501–1568), who named it *garo*, from Malay *gaharu*. It is generally thought to be produced from the species *Aquilaria agallocha* or *Aquilaria malaccensis*, lit. “Aquilaria of Malacca.” (Lee and Mohamed, 2016, p. 2) The Malay word for Aquilaria is *agila*, reflecting once again the historical tie between Southeast Asia and South India with a Sanskrit/Dravidian connection (§2.2). As a genus of plants, Aquilaria was first established by the botanist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) in 1783, replacing its Latinized Greek synonym *agalochum* (ἀγάλοχον).<sup>17</sup> The plant is subsequently known also by other names such as Aloeswood, Eaglewood, and so on, each has its own convoluted etymology and history of use in different parts of the world.<sup>18</sup> The entanglement between Malay and Indian languages is no different and is the result of the complex historical interaction between the two cultures, the Indians and the Indomalesians, with the former being the literate and the more prominent one. One should not, however, assume that Southeast Asians “borrowed” their culture wholesale from India. In the case of the origin of Aquilaria, Southeast Asia cannot be easily dismissed, and one of the clues comes from the Indians themselves.

Among the many Sanskrit epithets of Aquilaria was *anāryaka* अनार्यक (lit. “non-indigenous” or “ignoble”), found in the verse we cited earlier from the *Dhanvantarighaṇṭu*.<sup>19</sup> In what sense and to what extent was Aquilaria “non-indigenous” to the ancient Indians? The geographical scope of the Ārya (“noble [land]”) is debatable as some may claim that even the east of Bengal, where Aquilaria is also found, may qualify as *anāryaka*. However, Aquilaria must have been in some sense foreign to the Indians. According to Jan Gonda, this foreign land lies somewhere in Southeast Asia in the Indomalesian region (Hoogervorst, 2011, pp. 192–3; Gonda, 1973, pp. 23–24), which had its own unique culture since Neolithic period, but had deep ties with India and China since the first millennium and possibly much earlier (Bellwood, 1997).

It is likely that beginning in the second millennium, the cultivation of *Aquilaria sinensis* spread from Southeast Asia to South China to meet the growing demand of the Chinese market. Given the history of the botanical identification and these linguistic links among the cognates, Aquilaria is now often considered to be equivalent to *Aquilaria malaccensis* and *Aquilaria sinensis* becomes “Chinese Aquilaria.” Today, Aquilaria is considered native to Southeast Asia, or more specifically, the Indomalesian region. Agarwood-producing Aquilaria is commercially cultivated across a vast region in Southeast Asia and to a lesser extent, some parts of India and southern China (Lee & Mohamed, 2016, pp. 6–17).

## 3. Aromatic trade on the Maritime Silk Road

The spread of Agarwood and its use across Asia reveals a remarkable connectivity among premodern cultures. This encounter of cultures would not have been possible without the technology of transport and trade, in particular, the ancient and long-lasting maritime network that connected China, Southeast Asia, India, and beyond. Compared to the land route Silk Road, the maritime Silk Road received far less attention than it deserved until recent decades (Bellina, 2014; Miksic, 2013). Beginning from the early centuries of the first millennium, trade and contact via the maritime Silk

<sup>16</sup> Citing Numbers 24.8; Proverbs 7.17, Song of Songs 4.14; Psalms 45.9, following Ridley 1901, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> There is no indigenous satisfactory etymology given to either the Latin and Greek words. The Greek word for Aquilaria, *agalachon/agallachon* (n.b. the *lll* variation), appears to be influenced by the word *agallein* (“to decorate”). The English word *agalloch*, just like its Greek and Latin equivalents, refers generally to the resinous Agarwood. The *l* in these stem, along with that of the Hebrew cognate, suggests a Tamil rather than Sanskrit connection (see below).

<sup>18</sup> By far the most curious derivation was eaglewood, which was based on the Portuguese *pão d’aguila* (wood of “aguila”), coined in the early 16th century. “Aguila” was confused with the Portuguese word for eagle, *águia*.

<sup>19</sup> See fn. 22.

Road underwent rapid growth, eventually overtaking its land route counterpart by the second millennium, with an astounding volume of inter- and intraregional trade in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean (Sen, 2003).

The growth of aromatic trade followed a similar trajectory, first as foreign exotics from the “Wild South” (*nanman zhi di* 南蠻之地) and beyond during the Wei-Jin period during the third century CE, transforming gradually into a court luxury supplied by a system of tributaries during the Tang period, and eventually a luxurious but common commodity in Chinese society by the Song Dynasty, when local cultivation of *Aquilaria sinensis* began (Hu, 2022; Wang 1958).

Our journey of aromatics brings us once again to the southern coast of China, where foreign ships first reached Chinese soil and ships of different nationalities, including those of the Chinese, set sail from China to the Indian Ocean. According to Lo Hsiang-lin, Tuen Mun 屯門 was once a bustling fortified seaport thanks to the thriving Persian and Arabic trade from the Tang period up to the fourteenth century (Lo, 1963, p. 27). The *History of Song* gives the record a 1150-day journey that Śrīśarman 娑里三文, an envoy from the Chola Kingdom (*Zhulian guo* 注輦國) undertook on a diplomatic mission in 1015 CE.<sup>20</sup> It illustrates a maritime route that connects South India with China: from *Nawudan* 鄒勿丹 (Nagapattan = Nagapattinam) to *Shalixilan* 娑里西蘭 (Sri Lanka), *Guluo* 古羅 (Kra = Malaya), *Sanfoqi* 三佛齊 (Samboja = Śrīvijaya, now Palembang, Indonesia), *Bintoulang* 賓頭狼 (Pāṇḍuraṅga, now Phannang, Vietnam), to *Jiuxingshan* 九星山 (lit. “Nine-star mountain,” which Lo identified as Tun Mun) before finally reaching Guangzhou (Lo, 1963, pp. 25–27; Feng, 1936, p. 64). The maritime network was doubtless very active, as illustrated by the recently rediscovered early seventeenth-century Selden Map (Batchelor 2013). If Agarwood was to reach China from the South Sea, one wonders if it travelled such route together with other exotic goods. While it is easy and thus tempting to see Southeast Asia as a series of expedient stopovers, it should not be forgotten that the Kingdom of Srivijaya was once

a major centre of culture and commerce, with some of the most impressive religious monuments ever created and a powerful military fleet, rivalling those of India and China. After the dissolution of the Srivijaya empire and the subsequent rise of the Ottoman empire which led to a decrease of Arabic and Persian trade in the region, resulting in a diminished role of the maritime Silk Road, the maritime connectivity between China and Southeast Asia has a remarkable continuity and remains to be robust for the Chinese up to the present time, as Wang (1958) illustrates in his masterful survey of ten centuries of *Nanhai* trade.



**Figure 5.** The Selden Map of China, early 17th century. Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 105. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Selden\\_map.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Selden_map.jpg)

<sup>21</sup> *Song shi* 宋史, 列傳248, 外國5.

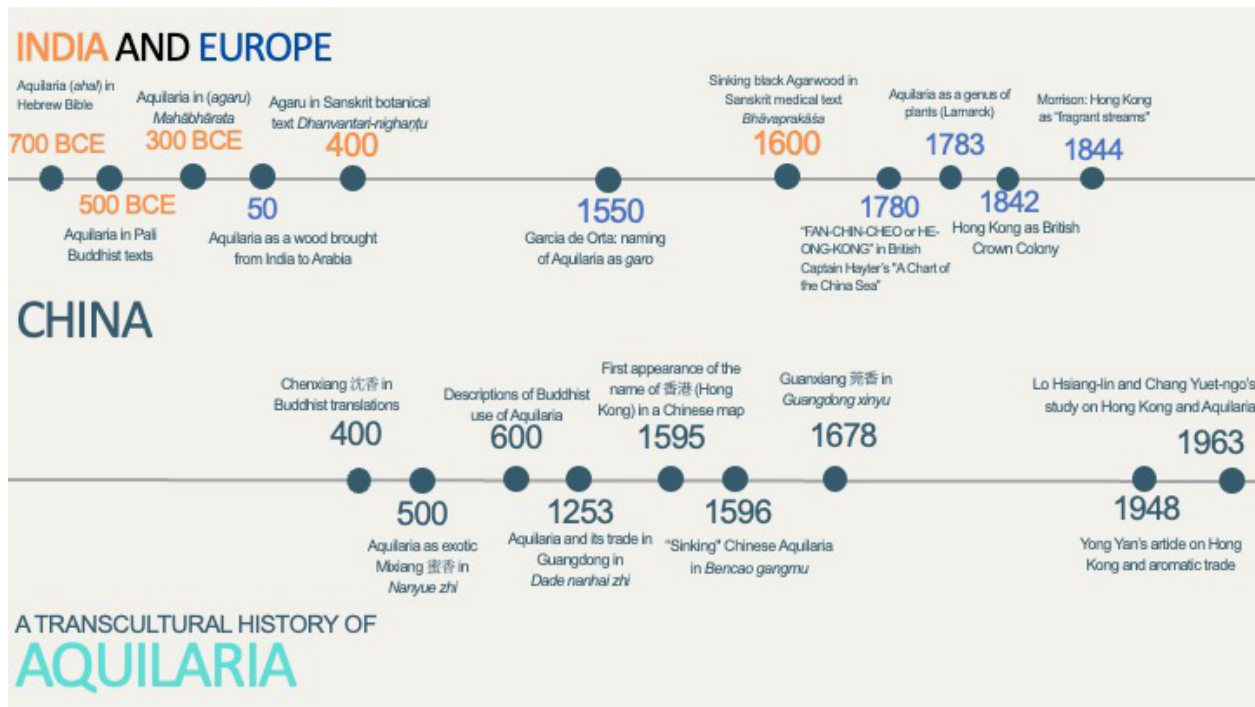


Figure 6. Aquilaria Timeline

## Conclusion

The exploration of the history of Aquilaria is a journey of historical encounters between Chinese and other foreign cultures beginning from the early centuries of the common era, where Hong Kong was part of story. Through the traversing narratives of the Chinese, the Indians, the Southeast Asians, and also later the Europeans, our understanding of how such encounter took place continues to evolve. The Chinese scholarship of the past seventy years on Hong Kong and Chinese aromatics reveals a rich history of pre-colonial intra- and interregional connectivity within South China, radiating toward the rest of Asia. On the other hand, the Indian account gives us a much broader perspective, both geographically and temporally, of the long-distant, transcultural trade of aromatics and exotic goods across Eurasia which once thrived in ancient time. Much closer to home, the evidences from Southeast Asia, the origin of Aquilaria, point to the close and immediate ties that link Chinese of the Southern region with their Southeast Asian neighbours, whose contributions should be duly recognized.

It may appear that the kaleidoscopic insights gleaned from the different sources are equally valid. But how should they be prioritised? A cursory examination of all post-Handover books on Hong Kong history by local Chinese authors reveals a noted tendency to overwrite colonial history with one of a broader

historical and geographical scope. The new narrative appears to be one firmly rooted in regional history and identity, predating the arrival of the British and thus undermining the old narrative of the ex-colonizers on one hand, and echoing the recent concept of Great Bay Area promoted by the Hong Kong SAR government on the other. But like the once thriving but now forgotten Port of Tuen Mun, Hong Kong had all along maintained a close tie to Imperial China and was an inextricable part of it; at the same time, it looks perpetually beyond the sea, seeing itself as part of a greater, more enduring, and cosmopolitan network of cultural and commercial exchange. It was this dual identity of Hong Kong that once drove the aromatic trade, and would likely remain one of crucial factors that maintain Hong Kong's role as a powerful, regional hub.

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《莞香》屬自發投稿性質的期刊，集結弘立書院教育研究團隊（見下方二維碼）與傳訊及社群處的努力，並在哥倫比亞大學師範學院的Transformative Learning Technologies Lab (TLTL) 的支援下出版。期刊涵蓋形形色色概述弘立書院社群師生及其他持份者思想生活的文章。大部份文章著重行動研究和課堂實踐對學生學習的影響，但也有一些文章深入探討撰稿人在自身感興趣領域所進行的各種議題研究。

Your feedback on *Aquilaria* is most welcome!





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## Editor's Note

Welcome to the Second Edition of *Aquilaria*!

The diversity of contributions in this second edition of *Aquilaria* showcases the depth and breadth of scholarship, research, reflexivity, and praxis within the ISF community of learners. Ranging from an examination of the history of the botanical species that lends its name to this journal, the incorporation of classical literature into international education, studies of social justice and sense of place in the environment, coding, living with artificial intelligence (with a nod to Stanley Kubrick), the great speeches of history, a tantalizing glimpse of ancient history in the form of the Cypriot Fertility Goddess, sharing whole school projects by Master Teachers, and culminating in a collection of insightful reflections on Computer Science and our Makerspaces, this second volume offers a rich and varied feast for the hungry reader. The level of scholarship is impressive, the breadth of subject matter is nothing short of remarkable.

The success of any learning community, essentially its effectiveness in fulfilling its purpose to promote 'learning', is manifested not just in its formal examination results, which largely reflect narrow, one-dimensional measures of academic performance, but in the richness and diversity of its culture and thought life, reflected in the conversations, speculations, and communications, both written and spoken, generated by the community. By this measure, *Aquilaria*, is a significant and worthy embodiment of these ideals and aspirations to be successful in learning. Through the pages of *Aquilaria*, The ISF Academy thought leaders are offered a friendly forum to cultivate and extend our thought life and a convenient conduit through which practitioners and researchers in our community can share ideas freely in the form of scholarly essays, and more personal reflections on work and study.

## 編者的話

歡迎賞閱第二期《莞香》

第二期《莞香》的投稿題材多樣，盡顯弘立學習者社群中學術、研究、反思和實踐的深度與廣度。無論是對本期刊同名植物品種的歷史考察、將經典文學融入國際教育、環繞社會正義和地方感的研究、編程、與人工智能共處（在此向電影大師 Stanley Kubrick 致敬）、歷史上偉大的演說、從塞普勒斯生育女神的角度探究古代歷史的驚鴻一瞥、資深教師分享的全校項目，乃至一系列對電腦科學和创客坊的深刻反思，第二期《莞香》為渴求知識的讀者獻上一場豐富多彩的盛宴。當中展現的學術水平令人印象深刻，所涵蓋主題的廣度亦是無可比擬的。

任何學習社群的成功，即本質上意謂其促進「學習」目標的成果，不僅顯露於正式的考試成績之上（這很大程度上反映出學術表現狹隘且維度單一的衡量標準），更從書面或口頭上的對話、推測和交流，彰顯於社群所衍生的豐富多樣文化及思想生活之中。由此可見，《莞香》是在成功學習的理想和志向中重要且稱道的體現。透過《莞香》的字裏行間，弘立的思想領袖可獲得一個培育並擴展自身思想生活的友好交流平台，也可藉著這個便捷樞紐與社群中的實踐者和研究人員自由分享學術論文，以及更多關於工作和學習的個人反思。

總結而言，作出告誡和鼓舞乃箇中關鍵。所有讀者需要注意的是，每一篇文章皆是作者自己所累積經驗的寫照，因此每篇都是彌足珍貴、活力的「進行中作品」，在本刊出版之後仍將為人津津樂道。這些思想一旦發表，將擁有自己的生命；我們難以預測它們將如何塑造弘立學習的未來。然而，發表思想這

In concluding, it is important to offer a final caveat and encouragement. The caveat for all readers is that each of these contributions reflects the accumulated experience of their respective authors and as such, each is a precious and dynamic ‘work in progress’ that will live on after the publication of this edition. These ideas, once shared, will take on a life of their own; it is difficult to predict how they might serve to shape the future of learning at The ISF Academy. The act of sharing, however, is supremely important to the life of our institution. It takes courage and commitment to share in this way; it also brings honor to the contributor. The encouragement offered at this time to all readers is to give consideration to sharing similarly thought-provoking contributions in a future edition of *Aquilaria*. There is, after all, more to each of us than meets the eye!

*Dr. Malcolm Pritchard*

一行動對弘立的成長至關重要。以這種方式分享需要勇氣和決心，同時亦令投稿者與有榮焉。我們謹此鼓勵所有讀者考慮在日後的《莞香》期刊中發表同樣發人深省的作品。畢竟，每篇作品都比我們想像中更精彩！

查永茂博士

## **A Note about Style**

Articles included in this publication are written for many different purposes. Any differences in style are due to the need to adhere to the format required for that purpose. Generally, the referencing style follows the American Psychological Association (APA) citation and format (7th Ed.), or Harvard style.

## **關於文體的說明**

本刊所刊載的文章出於多種不同的目的而撰寫。因此，文題風格的差異是為了遵循特定目的所要求的格式。一般而言，引用文體遵循美國心理學協會 (APA) 引用和格式的標準(第七版)，或哈佛文體。

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