

# A Study on the Secularization Evolution of Incense Burners in the Tang and Song Dynasties

Xiaoyu Yang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, Wuhan, Hubei, China

## ABSTRACT

As the two most prosperous dynasties in the development history of Chinese incense burners, the Tang and Song dynasties were the climax of the development history of Chinese incense burners, with abundant existing traceable materials. This paper takes the economic, cultural and technological development of the Tang and Song dynasties as the background, explores the role of the social environment and aesthetics in promoting the development of incense burners, as well as the influence of the introduction of religious culture on the design of incense burners, and analyzes the performance of the secularization process of incense burners in the Tang and Song dynasties.

**Keywords:** *Incense burner, Secularization, Tang and Song Dynasties.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a country with a long cultural heritage, China has been quite distinctive in the design of each dynasty and each generation. This paper attempts to synthesize the evolution of the shape, pattern, and material of incense burners in Tang and Song dynasties and conduct a horizontal comparative study, extracting the evolutionary characteristics of typical wares in both dynasties, summarizing the rules of style transformation, analyzing the evolution of the secularization of incense burners in Tang and Song dynasties from multiple perspectives, and using incense burners as a vein to present the cultural and spiritual changes in ancient China and provide ideas for modern design.

## 2. STUDY ON THE CONCEPT AND ORIGIN OF INCENSE BURNERS

Since ancient times, China has had the habit of using incense, and incense burners were born with the development of incense culture and gradually became independent from the many ancient utensils. Incense burner is the most important part of incense ware and has a variety of shapes, such as Boshan burner, multi-footed burner and bionic burner, and the materials used range from bronze, ceramic to

gold, silver, enamel and jade. Incense burners are either used for smoked clothes, decoration, or worship to the gods. Different shapes, patterns, materials, etc. were derived from the dynasties due to the different purposes and ways of use, containing the characteristics of the times. Zhao Xihu of the Southern Song Dynasty believed that "Only Boshan burners were used in the prince's palace during the Han Dynasty, and the system of incense burners began here"<sup>1</sup>. Since then, incense burners began to develop rapidly. Bionic burner, multi-footed burner, long-handled incense burner and other incense burners with characteristics of the times gradually became active in the long river of history and were widely spread. Their shape and material were all different according to the social, economic and cultural characteristics of the era in which they were made. The development of ancient Chinese incense burners was colorful, and in its rapid development of the Tang and Song dynasties, it presented a situation from complexity to simplicity.

---

1. By Zhao Xihu, Southern Song Dynasty. The *Dongtian Qinglu Ji* is also known as *Dongtian Qinglu*, an ancient Chinese work on the evaluation of cultural relics.

### 3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### 3.1 *The Development of Porcelain Industry*

The development of the porcelain industry in the Song Dynasty was inseparable from the meticulous and rigorous workers of the Song Dynasty. They improved the porcelain-making materials and tools of the previous dynasty, using porcelain stone materials with a high degree of weathering to improve the mineral content; at the same time, they used stone turntables and used iron bearings for reinforcement. They used the "fire lighting" technology of the previous dynasty, while developing a new firing method. All of this led to the unprecedented development of the porcelain industry in the Song Dynasty. In addition to the folk kilns, the Song Dynasty also saw the emergence of official kilns set up by the court itself to produce different porcelains for different needs. All of the above allowed the Song Dynasty kilns to efficiently and steadily supply a large number of incense burners to meet the social needs of the time.

#### 3.2 *The Silk Road*

During the Tang Dynasty, the country was in close contact with the rest of the world, and the Silk Road allowed for the integration and spread of foreign cultures. As a result, Western gold and silver wares were also introduced to China, as can be seen from the funerary objects scattered along the Silk Road. At the same time, Western gold and silver processing techniques were also introduced during the Tang Dynasty and applied to the local incense burners. The gold and silver wares of the Tang Dynasty were influenced by foreign cultures, and their shapes and ornaments were mostly based on foreign images, but the whole contained the unique style of the Tang Dynasty, creating gold and silver incense burners with Chinese characteristics with distinctive Tang style, and completing the transformation of gold and silver wares into Chinese.

The development of maritime technology in the Song Dynasty brought about the rise of the Maritime Silk Road, with its complex variety and spectacular quantity. *The History of the Song Dynasty · Primary Chronicle of Emperor Taizu of Song* records that "The gifts of gold and silver, pearl vessels, rhinoceroses and elephants, and incense and herbs from State of Wuyue were in the tens of thousands. *The History of the Song*

*Dynasty · Food and Goods, Volume 7 of Part 2* records: "The fund of the Song Dynasty, in addition to tea, salt and alum, was obtained from incense. Its profits were huge, so the government dominated its market".<sup>2</sup> It can be seen that spices accounted for a great proportion of economic income in Song Dynasty. The characteristics and use of spices were different, leading to the derivation of more ways of using incense burners and stimulating their further development.

#### 3.3 *The Prevalence of Incense Culture*

The spread of Buddhism also stimulated the spread of incense culture. In Buddhism, the incense burner is highly representative as an offering utensil. It symbolizes people's good visions and blessings, and is also able to ward off evil spirits. This is why it is often used in Buddha worship activities and has pushed incense culture to its peak.

During the Song Dynasty, as the economy continued to develop, incense was introduced into the homes of ordinary people. Zhao Ji, Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, has a picture of an incense burner in front of a table in his painting *Listening to a Guqin* ("Figure 1"). The society of the time put mental pursuits above material arts, and literati were valued in this period. During the Song Dynasty, four elegant things were popular among the literati — hanging paintings, whisked tea, arranging flowers, and burning incense. These gave a great impetus to the development of incense culture.



Figure 1 Listening to a Guqin.

During the Song Dynasty, the use of incense no longer concentrated in the ruling class, but entered the homes of the common people. Stores dealing in spices became commonplace, and incense stores could be found in the streets and alleys. The refined

---

2. *The History of the Song Dynasty · Food and Goods, Volume 7 of Part 2*, Zhonghua Book Company, 1977 edition.

scholars and the common people loved to use incense, and the society of the Song Dynasty showed an elegant atmosphere of using incense.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF THE SECULARIZATION EVOLUTION OF INCENSE BURNERS IN THE TANG AND SONG DYNASTIES

##### 4.1 *The Modeling from Complexity to Simplicity*

The shape of incense burners in the Tang and Song dynasties combined almost all the shapes of incense burners of all dynasties and the exotic cultures of the time, which could be said to be a collection of the great achievements of the world. The main embodiment of the secularization of incense burner in the shape was that the decoration was from complex to simple, the volume was from large to small, and the lines were from curved and changeable to smooth. But either way, the possibility of large scale production was opened up. Taking the multi-footed burner with the most extant and available data as an example, during the Tang Dynasty, the height of multi-footed burners was mostly 10~15cm and the diameter was mostly 14~16cm, while during the Song Dynasty, the height of multi-footed burners was mostly 8~10cm and the diameter was mostly 4cm and 14cm. This shows that the overall size of the Song Dynasty multi-footed burner is smaller compared to the Tang Dynasty, which makes it easier to carry around on a daily basis. When the multi-footed burner was developed into the Tang Dynasty, the most distinctive one was the silver incense burner with a gilt recumbent turtle and lotus flower patterns (as shown in "Figure 2"), which was 29.5cm high and 25.8cm wide at its widest point. The gilt curling grass pattern covers the entire lid of the burner, and the top of the burner is decorated with three layers of lotus petals. The shape of the lotus flower is not lost from a distance, and the detailing is obvious when viewed up close. The body of the burner is covered with flowing cloud patterns and surrounded by poured animal feet with a magnificent unicorn head at the upper end of the foot. The head of the animal is connected to the body of the burner, echoing the flowing cloud patterns, as if being among the flowing clouds. A studded knotted colored ribbon loop is suspended between the two feet. The ribbon is diamond-shaped with four knots, showing the grace and

elegance of the Tang Dynasty creations, which is the pinnacle of the metal stove-making process.

In the Song Dynasty, the shape of the multi-footed burner abandoned the complexity of the Tang Dynasty and simplified the complex shape. The Longquan kiln plum green three-legged burner of the Southern Song Dynasty (see "Figure 3") is gentle and elegant in color, unlike the flamboyance of the previous dynasty. The mouth is slightly folded out, the neck is shallow and the belly is bulging, and the whole piece is simply decorated with a raised bow string pattern connecting the neck and belly to the bottom of the three-legged foot, a style that is quite different from that of the previous dynasty.



Figure 2 The silver incense burner with a gilt recumbent turtle and lotus flower patterns.



Figure 3 The Longquan kiln plum green three-legged burner of the Southern Song Dynasty.

##### 4.2 *Realistic to Freehand Patterns*

During the development of incense burners in the Tang and Song dynasties, the pattern gradually faded away from the color of the ruling class with the change of dynasties and became more lifelike, and the object of its decoration also fell from the ruling class to the common people.

Incense burners of the Tang Dynasty were mostly made of gold and silver. Among the available information of incense burners, there are very few bright, clean and unadorned incense burners, and most of them are decorated with complicated patterns. During the Tang Dynasty, the lotus flower pattern had already separated from the religious meaning contained in the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, and was more combined with the Chinese national aesthetic sentiment, which had the symbolic meaning of reflecting the rich and noble life and the realistic scene of love between husband and wife<sup>3</sup>. The shape also shed the color of God and Buddha and became rounded. And in the Song Dynasty, the pattern of the lotus flower became square, with a wider base and a more simple overall shape compared to the previous dynasty. Besides, the arrangement of the lotus petals was also influenced by Neo-Confucianism, being symmetrical and neat. This was in line with the aesthetic of the literati who were introverted and refined.

In the Song Dynasty, the majestic lotus flower was held by Bodhisattva, but at the time it was used in common people's clothes and jewelry. This shows that the incense burner with lotus flower patterns in the Song Dynasty was more popularized. The shape of the incense burner is more elegant and free, more relaxed than in the Tang Dynasty, and more popular among the people.

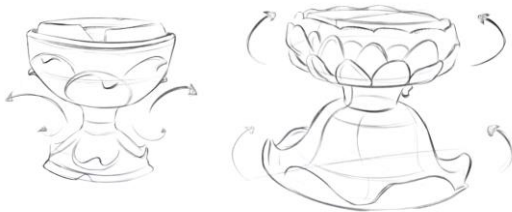


Figure 4 Tang Dynasty, porcelain incense burner with relief lotus feet in celadon glaze (left), Ru kiln incense burner with lotus base (right).

Not only the lotus flower pattern, but also the changes of the animal-face pattern are extremely obvious. In the Tang Dynasty, the animal-face patterns were more elaborate and ornate, and the shape was realistic and grand, with great momentum. In the Song Dynasty, they were replaced by wild geese and ducks, which could be

3. Zhang Xiaoxia, "Heavenly Glory and Splendor — A History of the Development of Ancient Chinese Botanical Decorative Patterns", Shanghai Cultural Publishing House, 2010 edition.

seen everywhere in folk. Even the shapes of tigers and lions were more abstract and cute. The shapes were less complicated than the previous dynasty and had a more streamlined sense.

### 4.3 Luxurious to Rustic Materials

The Tang Dynasty was a powerful state, so there were a number of extremely ornate and beautifully decorated incense burners made of gold and silver. The main materials of incense burners discovered during the Tang Dynasty are silver and silver-plated gold, with silver and silver-plated gold incense burners being the most common<sup>4</sup>. In addition to the raw materials, more gilt, inlaid gold and silver are used as the raw material for the decorative patterns embellished on various parts of the incense burner. A gilt-gold silver incense ball with bird and flower patterns (as shown in "Figure 5") may be used as an example. The ball is 5.1 cm in height and about 4.8 cm in diameter, being exquisitely elegant, with a silver body and gilt outer layer.



Figure 5 A silver incense ball with bird and flower patterns.

In the Song Dynasty, gold and silver incense burners gradually faded out of people's view due to the aesthetic tendency of simplicity and elegance. The material of incense burners also shifted to ceramics, showing secularized and living characteristics. In the Song Dynasty, the overall use of gold and silver incense burners accounted for a very small proportion in all unearthed incense burners. Ceramic incense burners accounted for 90% of the whole society, followed by copper and jade. During the Song Dynasty, there were great innovations in porcelain materials, incense burner molding, and firing techniques. Glaze colors such as celeste blue glaze, hare's fure glaze, ceramic whiteware, celadon, red porcelain, black porcelain,

4. Ran Wanli, "A Study of Metal Incense Burners in the Tang Dynasty", in *Relics and Museology*, No. 2, 2000, p. 13

etc. blossomed in radiant splendor. Although the elaborate and exquisite gold and silver wares of the Tang Dynasty created a large number of incense burners that are also astonishing today, the innovations in glaze colors by the people of the Song Dynasty also brought new possibilities. ("Figure 6", "Figure 7")

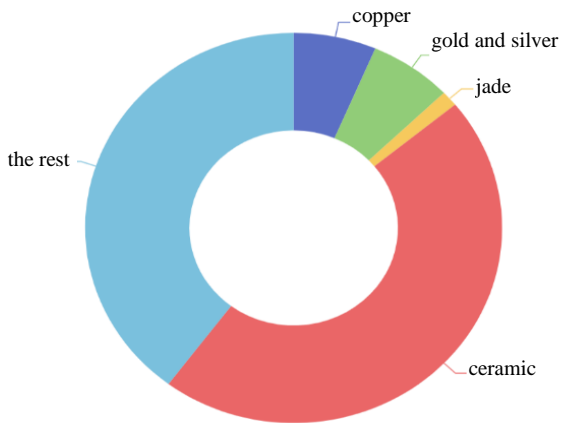


Figure 6 Incense burner material pie chart of the Tang Dynasty.

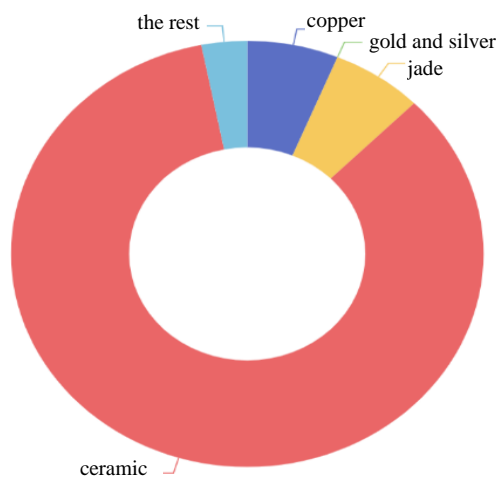


Figure 7 Incense burner material pie chart of the Song Dynasty.

#### 4.4 Symbolic to Practical Utility

When the incense burner was developed in the Tang Dynasty, it penetrated into every aspect of noble life, symbolizing their noble status. Under the aesthetic trend of extravagance, the Boshan burner and the lion-shaped incense burner were symbols of spirituality and religion, while the silver incense ball was a symbol of class. In the Tang Dynasty, it

is recorded in The Sound and Meaning of the Tripitaka: "The so-called incense cone is a round vessel for burning incense. The inner layer has a well-designed structure. Although the outer sphere rotates, the inner layer remains stable, always upward, and does not tilt."<sup>5</sup> "No pure gold and pure jade shall be used for the food utensils of officials below the first rank." This provision clearly raises the gold and silver ware to the status hierarchy.

During the Song Dynasty, the literati communicated frequently, and the emergence of the "literary society" further promoted the secularization of incense burners. At this point, the use of incense burners was no longer limited to the court, ancestor worship, blessing and other occasions, but more often appeared in front of the literati's desks. The change in the use of occasions also made incense burners shed the coats of religious and class symbols of the previous dynasty, returning to elegance and simplicity, with elegant and generous colors, and a more lifelike function, with a shape and size more in line with people's daily use. The above-mentioned Longquan kiln plum green three-legged burner of the Southern Song Dynasty (see "Figure 2") is an example. The shape of the incense burner imitates the shape of a bronze li's shape, with a short head, a wide belly, a smooth interior, a pinkish blue glaze, a crystal but thick glaze, and an overall clear and elegant appearance. The height is only 9.9 cm, making it easy to hold and play with. The antique incense burner in Song Dynasty changed according to the change of the life style of the literati in Song Dynasty. From the material to the volume, it took the material, production, and taking and ease of use as the standard, and paid more attention to the use function.

#### 5. CONCLUSION: THOUGHTS TO TODAY'S DESIGN BROUGHT BY INCENSE BURNERS

The secularization of incense burners has a clear and distinctive vein, and its changes have presented different design styles with the influence of contemporary socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Although modern design differs from country to country in terms of geography and aesthetics, the evolution and development of its form is still of reference value. Design standards in today's world tend to lean towards the West.

5. Yang Haixia: "The Influence of Han and Tang Incense Customs on the Design of Incense Utensils", in Art Research, 2010 edition.

Although the secularization of incense burners occurred in China, it also fits with foreign standards, and the core of its secularization evolution is to meet the needs of contemporary people's use. In a time of globalization, if the design is blindly close to the Western aesthetic, it will lose the unique cultural heritage and social characteristics of China. As a country with a long history and cultural treasures, China should retain its own unique design aesthetic and local characteristics, and carry them forward.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Zhang Xuechen, Cao Yu, Han Anqi, Zhuo Fan. Study on the form of gilt-silver incense bag with flower and bird pattern and jewelry recreation [J]. Tian Gong, 2022(03):70-72. (in Chinese)
- [2] Qin Lixuan. Research on the design of female gold and silver headdress in Ming Dynasty [D]. Jiangsu University, 2021. DOI:10.27170/d.cnki.gjsuu.2021.001885. (in Chinese)
- [3] Xiang Yahua. Research on Majiang-type bronze drum ornamentation of the southeast of Guizhou Province [D]. Chongqing Normal University, 2018. (in Chinese)
- [4] Wei Jie, Gu Ping, Ma Xiaowen. Study on the Materials and Crafts of the Incense Devices in the Tang and Song Dynasties [J]. Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts (Art and Design), 2015(06):60-63+237. (in Chinese)
- [5] Peng Yanning. The Tang Dynasty the Gold and Silver Vessels Crafts Research [J]. Furniture & Interior Design. 2012(06):66-67. DOI:10.16771/j.cnki.cn43-1247/ts.2012.06.005. (in Chinese)
- [6] Chen Yan, Wang Xiaoshu. A History of Aesthetic Culture in China. Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing volumes [M] Shandong Publishing Group Limited. (in Chinese)
- [7] Wang Yanting, Shi Baoping "incense burner" [M]. Chemical Industry Press. (in Chinese)
- [8] Tan Qianxue. The custom of burning incense and incense burners in the Tang Dynasty [J]. Chinese Culture, 1997 (2). (in Chinese)
- [9] Duan Bingwen. Research on gold and silver sachets in the Tang Dynasty [J]. Journal of Minzu University of China, 2011 (4). (in Chinese)
- [10] Qin Hong. The ancient fumigating culture contained by incense fumigators collected in Shanghai TCM Museum [J]. Shanghai Arts & Crafts, 2009 (1). (in Chinese)
- [11] Chang Zheng. Incense products, incense utensils and incense culture [J]. The Voice of Dharma, 2005(7). (in Chinese)
- [12] Ran Wanli. Cultural interpretation on the social role of the gold and silver products of the Tang Dynasty [J]. Journal of Northwest University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), 2009,39(04):52-58. (in Chinese)