
Foreword

The Asian perfumery legacy has had appeal in the West for many centuries, as the term ‘perfume’ itself indicates. Based on Latin roots, it means ‘through smoke’, in allusion to incense. This genre of aromatic materials, which are burned for the enjoyment of their olfactory qualities, has been important in Asian cultures for over two millennia or even longer. The term as such however, is modern European in origin and arose only at the beginning of the sixteenth century when Westerners became increasingly involved in Asia. Exotic aromatics were a contributing factor in the further exploration and colonisation of Asia in the following centuries, and make up notable trade goods to supply the globalising perfume industry to this day. Modern business could develop only thanks to the historical impetus and materials supplied from Asia. Its economic success finally led to the current interest in the sense of smell among scientists and their findings suggest the exceptional significance of this sense for the human experience. Thus, we need to assume that an important part of cultural history and understanding has been so far neglected in scholarly work, as fragrant phenomena have widely exited academic discussion. Specifically ritual activities often seem to include the use of aromatic substances.

The Collaborative Research Center “Ritual Dynamics” has thus been delighted to take up research in this field. Founded as an interdisciplinary research facility in 2002 and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, it has conducted fundamental research on all facets of ritual practices. Scholars of Assyriology, History, Indology, East Asian Art, History, Egyptology, Islamic and Jewish Studies, Medical Psychology, Religious Studies and others have collaborated with people from Asia who practice these rituals. Pursuing research under diachronic and intercultural perspectives has helped to establish cross- and transcultural theories and models on ritual phenomena and their historical development, continuous change, and mutual transfers. The Collaborative Research Center has especially welcomed collaboration and exchange with other research facilities and universities for special events in order to integrate special expertise into its research.

The Workshop “Perfumery and Ritual – The Use of Incense, Flowers, Distillates, and Aromatic Objects” was one such event; it led to the collection of essays in this volume. Organised by Dinah Jung under the supervision of Lothar Ledderose, ten international scholars met in Heidelberg in November 2010 in order to share their ethnographic experiences from or concerning Asia. The essays give a stunning report on the wealth of aromatics-related practices and fine objects in ritual and everyday life. However, they likewise make the enormous gaps of knowledge in this field tangible. As the director of the Collaborative Research Center, I am grateful to the round of invited and Heidelberg scholars

for their fruitful work of opening up new directions of ritual and transcultural studies for the future. I also would like to thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for having funded the Collaborative Research Center and for having made its work possible over many years.

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