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0521021634 - The Trail of Time: Time Measurement with Incense in East Asia

Silvio A. Bedini

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This work is a fascinating compendium of information about a neglected aspect of East Asian culture and of the history of timekeeping. Incense timekeeping devices played important roles in early Chinese and Japanese social and technological history in addition to their use for measuring time. They served in rituals in Buddhist temples, as replacements for community water clocks in times of drought, as regulators of the flow of water to farmers for irrigation in agricultural regions, and in palaces and government offices for establishing time schedules. In China they became a favored feature of the studios of poets and scholars, a practice that continued to recent times, while in Japan they were also adapted for use in geisha houses.

This book will not only appeal to students of Chinese and Japanese history, but will also prove useful to museum curators and particularly to the fast growing body of collectors of these exotic devices in the Western world and in East Asia. Excellent illustrations range from early East Asian forms of timekeeping to a large variety of incense time-measures, with their intriguing functional designs, and beautifully executed decoration, demonstrating the highest quality of workmanship. The appendices include a catalogue of examples which have appeared in sales rooms in recent years.

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SILVIO A. BEDINI

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# THE TRAIL OF TIME

Time measurement with incense  
in East Asia  
*Shih-chien ti tsu-chi*



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For Joseph J. Kusaila  
(1921–1987)

Cambridge University Press

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As the curling smoke wafts sinuously aloft from a freshly lighted [incense] stick and the first faint whiff strikes the nostrils, a profound symbolism takes effect – even subconsciously. The glowing coal is the spark of life. The smoke signifies the incorporeality and evanescence of spiritual truths, while the fragrance demonstrates the tangible reality and actual penetration of these spiritual truths.

From unidentified ancient writings, quoted  
in *Altars of the East* by Lew Ayres (1956)

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## Preface

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The journey along the trail of time which led to the present publication began more than thirty years ago. At that time a clock collector in Los Angeles with whom I had been corresponding mailed me photographs of two “water clocks” he had unwittingly purchased by mail from an antiquities dealer in Japan. The objects illustrated could not conceivably have been water clocks, nor did they appear to be clocks at all. The collector was curious, however, and wishing to have them identified, offered me one of them in exchange for a satisfactory description. Any curiosity to be so easily acquired without cost was a temptation, and I set to work at once.

Inasmuch as the presumed timepieces had been shipped from Japan, the first sources to be explored were horological publications relating to Far Eastern countries. In due course the solution was found in the catalogue of N. H. N. Mody’s collection of Japanese clocks. Therein similar timepieces were illustrated and described as Japanese “incense clocks” (*kōbandokei*), a category little known to Western collectors.

Fulfilling his promise, the collector presented me with one of the two he had acquired, with the consequence that my own curiosity increased, and I was determined to learn more about the measurement of time with incense.

During the next few years the search led to the discovery of another category of “incense clocks,” Chinese incense seals. Again the quest for information brought about the development of a considerable correspondence, with horological scholars and collectors in the United States and Europe, curators of Oriental art, and university professors of Far Eastern languages and literature.

The interest generated among Far Eastern specialists in the academic world was most reassuring and rewarding. Each contributed a little more to my knowledge, cooperating by suggesting other early Chinese writings, copies of which I obtained from the Harvard-Yenching Institute and other sources, and rendering translations.

Their patience proved to be endless, many extending considerable effort and time on my behalf. Gari K. Ledyard, then at the University of California at Berkeley, for example, translated major sections of the *Hsin tsuan hsiang p’u*

and the *Hsiang ch'eng* of Chou Chia-chou, which formed a vital base for the study on which I was engaged.

My research eventually resulted in a monograph which was published in 1963 by the American Philosophical Society in its series of *Transactions*, with the title *The Scent of Time: A Study of the Use of Fire and Incense for Time Measurement in Oriental Countries*.

During the succeeding years numerous inquiries which came from museums and collectors encouraged continued study, undertaken from time to time during the next two and a half decades. Bit by bit a substantial amount of new data on the use of incense for time measurement came to light, making it possible to produce this entirely new and much more comprehensive work on the subject.

A major windfall was the acquisition for my personal library of the extremely rare work, *Yin hsiang t'u p'u* of Ting Yün (Ting Yüeh-hu). This slim two-volume work consists of designs of one hundred covers and templates of Chinese incense seals derived from archaic forms, compiled or designed by a Chinese scholar in the late nineteenth century. These are accompanied by dedicatory prefaces by his friends and associates. Printed entirely from wood block in a variety of esoteric scripts, several attempts to have the work translated ended in failure due to the difficulties presented by the scripts. Eventually the project was undertaken by Kirby R. Vining, who devoted many months of difficult study to the work. This collection of designs and writings made it possible to add yet another chapter to the story, as incense seals of these designs were found and studied in private collections.

The history of time measurement with incense in the Far East has never heretofore been fully reported even in native writings. Other than occasional brief mentions in modern Japanese works for clock collectors, its history survives in Chinese and Japanese state records and remote documents which were sought out with considerable effort and translated.

At the time this research was first undertaken, incense timepieces were virtually unknown in the Western world, not only to horological scholars and collectors, but also to curators and historians of Far Eastern art and technology.

While engaged in this project, it was quite by accident that I discovered several Chinese incense seals for sale in New England by antiquities dealers. A systematic search of other shops revealed a few more, generally buried in the storerooms, making it possible to acquire a number of Chinese incense seals for study. Generally they were sold to me as hand warmers, opium stoves or incense burners. Never once was their true function identified. In the course of time it was possible to acquire more examples and study others found in private collections and shops on the West Coast.

The publication of *The Scent of Time*, however, brought about a fast growing

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awareness of the purpose of “incense clocks.” The monograph had immediate substantial distribution not only to American and European clock collectors but also to those in Japan. A community of collectors of incense seals developed, with the consequence that prices realized for these devices rose rapidly. In addition to the incense seals that made their way across the Pacific in years past, a substantial number of them have been brought out of mainland China in recent years by traders, after it was opened to Western commerce. The growing number of collectors continues to exceed the number of surviving incense seals available, however.

For the most part, the Chinese incense seals which have appeared on the market in recent years are of nineteenth-century vintage, many of exquisite form and decoration. Earlier examples are virtually impossible to find and are particularly prized. The Japanese *kōbandokei* have been produced in much more limited numbers and consequently are extremely rare. It is believed that a few early incense seals still survive in Buddhist temples and perhaps among the possessions of old families in China and Japan, neglected or used merely as common incense burners; their original function long forgotten and now unknown.

Although in modern times the incense time measurers have been reduced to the status of decorative curiosities and categorized as examples of applied art rarely found in museums, for centuries they nevertheless played a significant role in the ordering of the religious and civil life of Far Eastern countries, and as such deserve a place in the history of the Far East.

## Acknowledgments

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Over the course of the thirty years and more that I have been engaged in research on time measurement with incense in the Far East, I have accumulated a tremendous debt to the many scholars, librarians, museum curators and collectors who contributed their generous and interested assistance.

For my earlier work, *The Scent of Time*, the contents of which have been incorporated in the present text, vital assistance was provided primarily by Gari K. Ledyard, who translated some of the most important texts. In my subsequent research, I am equally indebted to Anthony J. Cannon and Richard J. McGhee for their translations of Japanese texts, and particularly to Kirby R. Vining, who has translated the dedicatory prefaces of Ting Yün's memorial volume and numerous other writings.

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## Conventions

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The Wade-Giles Romanization has been used for names of Chinese persons, places, things, institutions, etc., except in instances of direct quotation or traditional spelling of common place names.

Dimensions of artifacts and other dimensions are specified in metric measurements; when Chinese feet (*ch'ih*) and inches (*ts'un*) appear in translations, conversion to the equivalent metric measurement is provided.

In translated passages, question marks used after a word or phrase are editorial, and indicate that the meaning is uncertain. The same is true for question marks following dates, both in the text and within quotations.

For the reader's convenience the dynasties and reigns and their dates are listed in Appendix A, a select glossary in Appendix E, and a Romanization conversion table is found in Appendix F.