

The Positive Role of Chinese Incense Taoism in Modern Life

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ABSTRACT

In China, incense culture is actually a summary and refinement of the Chinese habit and the art of using incense. Incense is now entering the thousands of households, which is worthy of in-depth research. Through the brief introduction of the historical development of Chinese incense culture, this paper expounds the significance of Chinese incense culture in modern life as well as the positive effects of Chinese incense culture.

Keywords: *incense culture, incense therapy, incense nourishment, life aesthetics, life philosophy*

1. INTRODUCTION

The culture of incense is an important part of traditional Chinese culture, which has around 2000 years history.

Appreciating incense, tasting tea, flower arrangement, hanging paintings are known as "four leisurely activities", which shows the elegant and pleasant life of the ancients. China has a long history of using incense and appreciating incense, it can be said that the incense was born in the ancient times, sprouted in the pre-Qin dynasty, first developed in the Qin and Han dynasties, grew in the six dynasties, refined in the Sui and Tang dynasties, flourished in the Song and Yuan dynasties, and widespread in the Ming and Qing dynasties. For more than two thousand years, China's upper class, literati and monks have always taken incense as a companion and held it in high esteem. Incense was not only used for rituals, but also widely used in daily life. The ancient people smoked incense for their clothes and hats, and burned incense for their qin, chess, calligraphy and painting, as well as incense therapy, incense food, incense medicine and incense tea.

This paper tries to expound the significance of Chinese incense culture in both ancient and modern life and indicate the positive effects of Chinese incense culture. This paper is mainly divided into five parts. The first chapter is the introduction part, which briefly introduce the main contents and structure of this paper.

The second part indicate the emergence and development of Chinese incense culture. The third part elaborates the relevance of Chinese incense culture. The fourth part is the positive effects of Chinese incense culture. The last part is the conclusion part.

2. SUBLIMATION FROM HABITS TO "TAOISM" (THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE INCENSE CULTURE)

In China, incense culture is actually a summary and refinement of the Chinese habit and the art of using incense.

Described from the perspective of historical development, the use of incense in China has gone through a process from the altar of the gods to the imperial court, then to the rich merchants, the literati and the scholar, and then into the thousands of households.

1. The ancient period without written records: modern people believe that the concept of the ancient period should be defined by the historical community. The so-called "ancient times" refers to the period of the Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns, also known as the prehistoric era or the "mythical era" [1]. Since there is no concept of "dynasty" in people's mind at that time, it does not refer to the historical period of "Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin and Han". As the Tianxiang Zhuan in Song Dynasty states, "Incense can be traced back to ancient times, used to worship the gods..." The Ten Virtues of Incense,

written by Huang Tingjian in the Song Dynasty, also expressed that the function of incense was to “bring communication and the transcendent, purify mind and body...” It seems that in the ancient times, the function of the Chinese incense is to sacrifice to heaven and earth, pray for good fortune. People use drumming, singing and dancing and other ritualistic activity, as well as the rising smoking, to express the reverence for the world spirits, and with this blessing, hope that good wishes can be realized.

2. The Spring and Autumn, Han and Wei in initial formation of the system: from the beginning of the Han Dynasty, China’s “Silk Road” to West Asia and South Asia gradually formed and opened, diverse plants and spices produced in South Asia and the Middle East began to be exchanged and traded with the spices produced in mainland China, and once became one of the important commodities in international trade between China and various regions and countries in Europe, West Asia, Middle East and Far East. In the Han Dynasty, the ruling class in the court was very fond of incense, besides daily space incense, body spices, spices for the mouth to get rid of bad breath, even when going out to participate in activities, they had to boil water with spices in advance and incense the clothes[2]. Moreover, the court system of the Han Dynasty stipulated that all officials attending the court must wear spices. To the furnace in Han Dynasty unearthed in Boshan District as proof, the furnace body is made with gold and silver, and inlaid with luxurious turquoise, red agate and other precious materials. As far as the Wei, Jin, southern and Northern Dynasties were concerned, in addition to princes and nobles, only the rich merchants and magnates could afford to use spices. Moreover, the rate and amount of spices used by men far exceeded that of women. During this period, it can be seen that the use of spices has gone from altar sacrifice to princes, nobles and extremely wealthy people. It is precisely because of their “leading by example” that they not only reflect the preciousness of spices and their lofty status in life, but also give Chinese incense culture a certain level of coming into shape. Besides, the flourishing of Taoism and the introduction of Buddhism constitute an important and indispensable element of Chinese incense culture. No matter how times change, religious incense has continued to this day and has formed its special rituals and methods of use[3]. With the gradual understanding of spices and in-depth research, the use of a single spice had evolved into the use of a variety of spices mixed in different proportions in the form of “assistant and guide”, and even for different diseases of the human body, different “incense prescriptions” were used for symptomatic treatment. This has largely contributed to the forward development of Chinese incense culture.

3. The Tang Dynasty where the system developed to maturity: Judging from the rapid development of incense-using appliances, Chinese incense culture had developed

to maturity and completeness in the Tang Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, people’s lives were filled with incense all the time, such as a heavy incense burner as weight, and lion- and duck-shaped incense burner on the desk. Even at night in bed, the tent and bedding will be scented with gold and silver cast incense ball, not to mention when traveling outside, box carriage will also be scented with incense sacs or incense ball, making the whole travel process full of spiritual fragrance and interest. There is also a game of “incense competition” in the court. For example, the noblemen who participated in the incense competition brought their own spices to be scented in turn, and when they finished, instead of arguing with each other, each of them wrote down their feelings about each spice in their own words on the incense paper at hand. Next, In the first round, the “incense leader” of the day was decided by the way of seeking a common ground. In the second round, participants were judged on whose words were the most beautiful and subtle. In the third round, it would determine who has the best handwriting. In this way, the incense has also become amusing; besides the advantages and disadvantages of the spices themselves, there are more humanistic interest and elegance therein[4]. After the middle of the Tang Dynasty, the Maritime Silk Road flourished. The proportion of international trade in the import and export of spices is increasing, and a large number of foreign spices from Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi landing into the The Great Tang Dynasty in the East; at this time it has produced merchants specializing in spices. Buddhism was extremely prosperous in the Tang Dynasty, and its high esteem for incense also directly promoted the development of Chinese incense culture, so that spices and the habit of using incense gradually entered into thousands of households.



Figure 1 Incense burner on the desk

4. Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties in the heyday and popularity: The Song dynasty was the heyday of Chinese incense culture. The ruling class still maintained an obsessive passion for incense, while the literati and scholars also became the main force in loving, tasting, playing and writing about incense. The literati used incense in their rooms, cars, horses, sedan chairs; also like to wear hair flowers and hide incense up his sleeve; and even the pages of the paper, writing ink, he would add spices in, so that every corner is filled with fragrance.

Many literati, both the world's best poets and lyricists, are also experts in playing with incense, such as Su Dongpo, Huang Tingjian, etc. They both love and use incense, and also match and write about incense. Many masterpieces describing incense and incense culture were born from literati in the Song Dynasty. It is because of the popularity of the literati with incense and research, so that the use of spices in China in the Song Dynasty has a qualitative leap; besides the concept of incense therapy began to be rooted in the hearts of ordinary people, the use of incense medicine and incense formula was popular. In 971 A.D., the imperial court set up the "ShiBo Department" in Guangzhou port, specializing in international trade, of which the proportion of import and export of incense and medicine accounted for the first of all import and export goods. If we say that before the Song Dynasty, the Chinese used incense in a way that most of them called "burning incense", During the Song dynasty, the daily life habit of burning spices directly by the predecessors was developed by the high-speed development of the culture, forming a very artistic form of expression, incense Taoism. The incense Taoism is both a spiritual life, which is very different from the aristocratic incense tasting and religious incense, and a simple art of incense tasting and cultivation of body and mind. In the activity of the incense ceremony, the beauty of nature and the spirit of humanity are completely integrated, creating a relatively independent aesthetic level and value, which has not only become an artistic form of using incense itself, but also inspired countless musicians, calligraphers and painters, as well as poets and lyricists to create works like gushing water, thus also leaving a lot of written materials about the history to future generations[5].

5. Modern incense culture: Since the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, war and chaos were frequent; both the royalty and the literati and scholars were no longer in a position to maintain incense activities as a daily routine. Incense activities gradually waned, and temporarily withdrew from the stage of history. It was only in the mid-1990s that the incense Taoism reemerged and was revived in the process of cultural revival. At present, Chinese incense culture is facing the contradiction between natural and chemical incense, cultural heritage and innovation, as well as the opportunity of wider and more technological use of spices brought about by the continuous development of technology. Throughout history, it has to be said that incense culture needs a stable and prosperous social environment, and also needs people to create a good atmosphere in terms of economy and culture. Under such prerequisites, incense culture can be carried forward and spread, and used by people in modern life, entering thousands of households and serving the people.

3. THE RELEVANCE OF CHINESE INCENSE CULTURE

Incense culture has re-emerged and continues to adapt to modern life in the inheritance. The practical significance is mainly reflected in the following points.

The first is that it helps people identify the authenticity of incense materials, distinguish between natural spices and chemical synthetic spices, to ensure the health use of incense. From the late nineteenth century, with the development of industry, European countries have produced synthetic fragrances. These synthetic fragrances, which are inexpensive but can imitate the majority of fragrances, are prevalent in the market and are greatly damaging human health. Only through a systematic study of the culture of incense can one discern the authenticity of fragrant materials and avoid receiving harm from chemical fragrances.

The second is to guide the users of incense to understand the history of Chinese incense culture and to face up to the good effects of natural fragrances for human beings. After three thousand years of Chinese people using incense to serve their lives, there are still people who, for various reasons, do not face up to the benefits that natural incense brings to mankind. It seems that the use of incense would be detrimental to one's image of simplicity. In fact, how many substances in modern life, between the hands and feet, do not use spices? Only by facing up to fragrances and their role can we better improve the quality of life.

The third is to correctly distinguish the difference between everyday use of incense and feudal superstitious activities. When words like incense burning are mentioned, many people immediately associate it with scenes of worshipping Buddha, which is a sequel to the discontinuity of incense culture. People who understand and have studied the history and culture of incense use in China can correctly distinguish the difference between daily incense use, religious incense use and feudal superstitious activities. Having learned the distinction, they will naturally be able to look at things objectively and deal with problems.

The fourth is to promote the auction transaction of cultural relics and artworks related to incense culture and elegant culture. In recent years, with the incense culture is widely spread, cultural relics and works of art in a variety of materials, incense burners of various years, incense apparatus become a new favorite in the collection world, with prices being in rising trend in the auction market. There are even many folk collectors who have spontaneously organized associations to study the incense culture and the incense utensil culture. Every year, they hold cultural exchange and collection trading activities such as "incense club" and "incense utensil seminar". This has undoubtedly stimulated the market, enhancing the flow and creating a new cultural and

economic value.



Figure 2 Incense apparatus on auction

The fifth is to promote the modern arts and crafts industry in gold, wood, earth, stone, cloth and other major sections, and the integration of fragrant culture, facilitating the technology in the inheritance of the basis for innovation and development. Chinese arts and crafts originated earlier, in metal crafts, wood arts, ceramic and clay crafts, stone carving crafts, cloth arts and other five major categories. Because of China's vast territory, wide distribution, and many ethnic groups, so the craft technology and expression is colorful and eclectic. However, no matter which category, which craft, where it is distributed, which school it belongs to or ethnic characteristics, there will be artifacts and works related to spices and incense culture in particular. Arts and crafts workers, non-genetic inheritors group learn incense culture, help this group to improve aesthetics and glow infinite creativity. Not only can we use the technology and materials that we are good at, but we can also open our minds and cooperate across different categories. And take this as the precedent, we strengthen the cultural fusion, enhance output value, and create the new opportunity for the profession development.

The sixth is to generally improve the quality of all people, and promote social stability and prosperity. At present, many people have put down their cell phones and turned off their TV sets in their spare time and gone to the "classroom". These classes include piano, chess, calligraphy, painting, flower arrangement, incense, baking, coffee, embroidery, financial management, law, makeup and dressing, etc. When people are no longer satisfied with the fragmented information on their cell phones and the confusion of truth and falsehood, they will go to professional classes for systematic learning. In the process of learning, people gain new knowledge, skills and techniques, build cultural confidence, improve the quality of life, but also make new friends with similar interests.

The seventh is to help rural revitalization and develop spice industry to complete the industrial chain closed loop from planting, processing, production to sales. The more detailed people know about the application of spices to all aspects of life, the higher the recognition of

the value of natural spices, the greater the demand for them. The Chinese market itself has a huge demand for natural fragrances, and European perfumers are also more eager for high-quality fragrances grown in China. In addition to spice varieties native to China, there are many spice varieties in the world that can be separately introduced in the vast land of China, which will become a favorable project to revitalize the countryside, develop new agriculture, create a field complex, and form a closed industrial chain from planting to sales.

4. THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF CHINESE INCENSE CULTURE

According to our ancient incense recipes and various historical records, the Chinese people have made scientific divisions for the use of incense utensils, incense methods and various incense formulas over the ages. The subdivision of incense matters not only reflects the Chinese people's aesthetics of life in the use of incense, with a high degree of aesthetics, but also reflects the Chinese people's life philosophy of being positive, treating life kindly, and coexisting in harmony with nature.

1. Incense therapy and incense nourishment: At present, the pace of life is tense, and increasing pressure has become a common disease of modern life. How to learn to use incense tasting and incense activities to serve oneself, to please the mind, relax the body, and recuperate symptomatically, to the extent that oneself can always maintain physical and mental health, has become a practical topic of Chinese incense culture in modern life. Since the venue, time and method of using incense are basically unlimited, incense therapy and incense nourishment will become an significant development trend for self-healing and building a healthy environment. Learning how to recognize the division of incense products is the foundation of incense therapy and incense nourishment.

(1). According to the nature of the fragrances: natural fragrance products, chemical synthetic fragrance products

(2). According to the formula: synthetic incense, powder incense, etc.

(3). According to the appearance: the original incense, joss-stick, coil incense, stick incense, incense balls, incense dew, cone incense, incense powder, sachet, balm, fragrant pillow, fragrant bath, essential oil, incense cone, etc.



Figure 3 Incense dew

(4). According to the fragrance: plant spices, animal spices (such as musk, ambergris, etc.)

(5). According to the use: purification of air, cultivation of body and mind, yoga, meditation, symptomatic treatment, etc.

(6). According to the use of methods: natural emanation, fumigation, soaking, bathing, electrical smoking, etc.

(7). According to the smoke: smokeless incense, slightly smoky incense and poly-smoke type incense

(8). According to the number of varieties of spices: single incense and combined incense

2. Experience the Life Aesthetics

In the incense ceremony, the “incense seal” and “incense smoking”, which originated in the Song Dynasty, are incense burning activities done with incense tools such as “incense burner, incense box, and vial” and “incense spoon, incense shovel, ash pressure, side ash pressure, incense chopsticks, incense sweep, incense clip”. These two kinds of incense, can be operated by a single person, to achieve the purpose of inner dialogue with their own, but also in a gathering of three or five friends together, to achieve the harmony and beauty of joint fun. Besides, such incense is also very easy to regulate the mood of the practitioner, because in the process of operation, the incense user will quickly forget the surrounding, but only focus on the tool in hand, with “light as heavy” technique, relaxed mind and posture to complete the incense activity. This is the aesthetics of life in Chinese incense Taoism: to perceive the beauty of life, to communicate and dialogue with the body and the heart, and to greatly improve the quality of life.

3. To understand the unique Chinese philosophy of life.

In the light of the “Ten Virtues of Incense” written by Huang Tingjian, a famous writer of the Song Dynasty (later reputed as the “Sage of Incense”), and out contemporary life, we can perceive the philosophy of life summarized by the Chinese in the cultural activities of incense.

Incense brings communication and the transcendent, as “incense is a substance that purely gathers the Yang in the world.” Since ancient times, incense has been associated with rituals and religions, and is said to be able to communicate with the essence of all things in the world through the interaction of *Yang*[6]. The use of incense, not only in the sense of the world spirits, but also in introspection, in the solitude with their own souls.

It purifies mind and body. The aroma lingers and clings to the body, which helps *Yang* energy to flourish, and also purifies the surrounding magnetic field by the act of using incense, so that the mind and body are at peace and naturally comfortable.

It removes uncleanliness. The ability to keep neatness and hygiene of environmental spaces is one of the greatest differences between humans and lower animals. Especially in the post-epidemic era of COVID-19, it is a new way of life to keep the air clean and avoid infection from respiratory diseases by using the proper incense products regularly.

It brings alertness. For alertness, incense can calm the mind to give you cozy sleep. Most modern people are in a sub-healthy state, due to sleep disorders caused by an unhealthy lifestyle, the fast pace of work and other factors that lead to imbalance of the body’s *Yin* and *Yang*. Before going to bed, you are suggested to burn incense or use fragrance, essential oils, to help you relax, calm the mind and sleep well. With long-term use, the length and depth of sleep will be well regulated.

It is a companion to solitude. Incense is a pleasant and tranquil item, both a pleaser and a good friend. More importantly, in the process of using incense, you can have a dialogue with your own mind, detaching yourself from the interconnected world

In the midst of activity, it brings a moment of peace. It is very important to take time out of the busy life, to allow your mind and body to enjoy a moment of peace and quiet.

When there is plenty, one never tires of it. Be it spices or others, keep a normal mind. Not pleased by external gains, and not saddened by personal losses. Be never tired of the plenty, but also always be satisfied.

When there is little, still one is satisfied. Live according to your abilities and be content. Greed is the first of the five poisons. Without “greed, anger, obsession, slowness and doubt”, life will be moving and happy at any time.

Age does not change its efficacy. One should be like a spice that will not decay even after a long time of storage. Especially like incense: after being damaged by external forces, in the process of continuous self-healing, it absorbs all the surrounding beneficial substances, including trace elements and minerals, brewing and accumulating for a long time, eventually recover from the

wound and become the world's treasures.

Used every day, it does no harm. Over thousands of years, the Chinese people's life with incense can be described as ubiquitous. Through serious study and in-depth research, people get experience that incense can be commonly used. If used properly, there will be a hundred benefits and no harm. This is the best interpretation of recognizing "limit" of everything in the use of incense.

5. CONCLUSION

The study of incense culture enables us to experience its profound cultural heritage and the elegant and refined life of the ancients. It enlightens the inspiration of the great and talented people, nourishes the bodies and minds of the benevolent and aspirants, builds a golden bridge between human and heavenly wisdom, and is an important catalyst and promoter of the nurturing of Chinese humanism and the formation of philosophical thought.

The use of incense by the Chinese has an early and long history. From communication with heaven and earth, to ancestor worship, to daily use of incense, a culture of incense has gradually formed for more than two thousand years.

The culture of incense, as a leap from the exploration of material civilization to the pursuit of spiritual civilization, is an important and indispensable part of the process of human civilization. Incense both nourishes one's body and mind, cultivates one's high moral character, and can integrate the high-level cultures of the ancient and modern worlds into the lives of modern people through breathing and learning.

In contemporary times, we can still experience and enjoy the elegant life of our ancestors anytime and anywhere: "burning incense", "tasting tea", "arranging flowers", and "hanging paintings". Let us live in a space that reflects the taste, but also let our quality of life can be further sublimated.

Loving yourself, loving life, appreciating incense, learning incense, incense practice, and incense culture application are extremely important and prominent in modern life.

When looking forward to the future, incense culture permeates many aspects of social life, so the study of incense culture should also start from many aspects, involving a series of topics, such as the history of incense culture; the production of spices, preparation and formulation; the development of incense products; the production and use of incense utensils (making utensils) and incense tools (burning tools); incense and religion; incense and various types of cultural and artistic works and so on.

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