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## Succor in Smoke: A Historical and Comparative Analysis of Incense and Moxibustion as Similar Agents of Edification and Self-Cultivation

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## *Introduction*

Medicine in traditional China was a dynamic, widespread, and all-encompassing aspect of society that drew from other facets of civilization to gain information, define etiology, diagnose illness, and offer treatment options to the sick. In the earlier periods of Chinese history, disease was explained and treated through the concepts of dissatisfied ancestors and malicious demonic possession. Expressed in the oracle bones of the Shang and Early Zhou Dynasties, mortal ailments were attributed to and thought to be controlled by volatile external forces. The Chinese medical tradition would shift from these approaches in subsequent dynasties, however, largely due to the introduction of China's three major religions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Foundational medical texts, such as *Huangdi Neijing*, were also composed during this time. These schools of thought emphasized, in some way, the cultivation of self—whether mentally, physically, or in interpersonal relations. This shifted the root cause of illness to internal rather than external factors—a revolutionary paradigm shift that gave an individual more complete control over his or her own health. Physicians responded to this, introducing and perfecting practices that focused on healing the body both internally and externally.

Moxibustion, a heat and smoking practice often associated with acupuncture, became a critical part of defining the art of healing. Simultaneously, ritual practices associated with the three major religions were becoming more geared toward the individual's level of connectedness with nature, the body, and the mind. Common in antiquity and still prevalent today, the ritual burning of incense has been a pillar of self-cultivation in China. In this paper, moxibustion and incense burning are examined in dynasties following the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) and parallels are drawn between the two practices. Historical context and relevant religious practices are described first. A discussion of common ingredients, methods of application, and intended effects on the human body are described for both practices. This section lays the foundation for the

subsequent comparative analysis. Although there is infrequent direct evidence linking the burning of incense to medical practice, this paper argues that it could still be considered— like moxibustion— as an agent of positive change and self-cultivation of the body and mind.

### *Historical Context and the Introduction of Chinese Religious Practices*

Sometime between the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) and the Early Han Period (206BCE-220CE), the work *Huangdi Neijing* 黃帝內經 (the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic) made an appearance, laying down a theoretical framework for Chinese medicine to follow through the discourses of Huangdi and his Six Legendary Ministers.<sup>1</sup> *Huangdi Neijing* is a text of particular significance because it represented a paradigm shift in Chinese thought regarding the etiology of disease and overall poor health— specifically attributing malaise to internal rather than to external entities. This work, although consistently subjected to revision and criticism, would become the basis for traditional Chinese medicine and remain so for the next 2,000 years.<sup>2</sup> Despite the continued reference to *Huangdi Neijing* and other similar ancient texts, Chinese medicine was certainly not a static, passive body. The discipline would come to encompass an ever-widening spectrum of abnormal human conditions, each with its own detailed practices and remedies.

During the period when *Huangdi Neijing* was likely composed, diverse religious and ideological frameworks were introduced to China as well. Confucianism was the first main philosophical school to be formed in China as a direct result of the constant disorder of the Warring States Period. Relating a great deal to the harshness of legalism, the practice of Confucianism dealt mainly with the self-growth acquired through interpersonal relations. During this time, the literati

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<sup>1</sup> Yamada, Keiji. "The Origins of Acupuncture and Moxibustion." In *The Origins of Acupuncture, Moxibustion, and Decoction* by Keiji Yamada. (Kyoto, Japan: Nichibunken Monograph Series, no. 1, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 1998), 32; see also Mou, Zhongjian. *Religious Studies in Contemporary China Collection*, Volume 2: Taoism. Leiden, NLD: Brill, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Yamada, "Origins", 18.

official Mencius 孟子 (372-289BCE) attempted to integrate Confucian ideals, such as *junzi* 君子 (the quality of a gentleman or superior person) and the Five Cardinal Relationships 五倫, into the Chinese bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> Although his first attempts were unsuccessful, Confucianism was eventually integrated into the identity and future development of China.

Soon after Confucianism was introduced into Chinese society, Buddhism and Taoism followed. Buddhism, a religious practice stemming from India based on the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, underwent numerous changes in order to mold itself into Chinese culture at the time. Followers of this religion were mindful of the goal of Enlightenment at the end of the Eight-Fold Path. This was achieved through high mental focus and a pure state of being, often through ritual and meditation. At its core, Buddhism lacks the need for highly ritualized and standardized religious ceremonies, so many of the rituals performed varied between different sects and geographic areas.<sup>4</sup> Although Han-Chinese Buddhism (*Hànchuán Fójiào*) 汉传佛教 was notably different than original Indian Buddhism, it still retained many of original characteristics of the religion.

Taoism, conversely, was founded by Chinese poet-philosopher Laozi 老子 who taught that one should live in accordance with the Way or *Dao* 道, with respect to nature, simplicity, moderation, and detachment from worldly desires.<sup>5</sup> Followers of this ideology also emphasized the pureness and harmony of self and the unity of all things. The *Tao Te Ching* describes this concept in chapter 42, saying: “the Tao gives birth to One. One gives birth to Two. Two gives birth to

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<sup>3</sup> Yijie Tang, *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese culture*. (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), 1-10.

<sup>4</sup> Tang, *Confucianism*, 101-144.

<sup>5</sup> Mou, *Religious Studies*.

Three. Three gives birth to everything.” The Taoist master of inner alchemy, Zhang Boduan, interpreted this sentence as follows: “activated by the Tao, Non-existence gives birth to the Unique Qi. The Unique Qi gives birth to Yin and Yang. The union of Yin and Yang, Yin, and Yang forms a trinity. This trinity gives birth to all things.”<sup>6</sup> These themes are central to Taoist ritual practices such as incense burning, which are detailed later.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism would all discover their niche in the Chinese religious realm. These religions all entered China during a relatively tumultuous period, therefore it was necessary to adapt and assimilate into the extant culture in order to ensure the survival of the belief system. Because of this, these three ideologies often shared similar rituals, deities, and paradigms, many individuals subscribed to more than one religion.<sup>7</sup> One religious practice that follows this overlapping pattern is the ritual burning of incense for timekeeping, purification, and veneration purposes.

### *Chinese Ritual Practice and the Role of Incense*

The use of incense has been observed in numerous cultures over time, but its high prevalence in China spans millennia. A wide variety of natural herbs, flowers, grasses, and spices have served as the basis of this fragrant practice. Resins of aromatic plants such as cassia, cinnamon, stryax, and sandalwood have been named as common ingredients of Chinese incense. It is generally difficult, however, to definitively determine the ancient ingredients of Chinese incense due to the destructive nature of the practice and the poor preservation of organic materials found in incense.<sup>8</sup> Often associated with ritual, its niche in Chinese society was usually within the religious realm. In Taoist practices, for example, incense accompanied the burning of talismans

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<sup>6</sup> Daozang. Shanghai shudian, vol. 2 (Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House: Cultural Relics Press, 1988), 944.

<sup>7</sup> Tang, *Confucianism*, 285-290.

<sup>8</sup> David Michael Stoddart. *The Scented Ape: The Biology and Culture of Human Odour*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 169.

and the chanting of incantations that were “revealed and endowed by divine power” to free a body of either internal or external illness.<sup>9</sup> One example of such a practice follows:

If the origin of the disease originates in Yang, use high-quality vinegar or spring water; use ginger juice, alcohol, or water if it originates in Yin. Disease caused by wind should be treated with ginger juice filtered through bamboo. In case of an external disease, mix the ash of the talisman and water or mix vinegar and ink and apply it on the lesion. In the case of a wound, apply it on its outer lip and sprinkle a little ink on it. If the juice is dried, moisten with pig’s bile. Before treatment, determine if the origin of the disease is Yin or Yang... Purify body, hand, and heart, burn incense, and calm the spirit before taking up the writing brush.<sup>10</sup>

Muo also describes three Taoist rituals: “The Anterior Heaven Ritual for Feeding, Saving and Sublimating Souls”, “The Taiji Numinous Treasure Ritual for Saving and Sublimating Souls”, and “The Anterior Heaven Golden Ritual of Doumu for Saving and Sublimating Souls”, noting that the second step of each of these rituals is to “greet with incense” with a “sincere heart”.<sup>11</sup> Burning incense is a critical requirement of greeting the Most High, along with kneeling and returning to Non-existence.<sup>12</sup> These rituals demonstrate the role of incense inherent in preparing and healing the soul while operating within a larger religious framework.

Although primarily utilized for purposes such as greeting and revering deities and ancestors (and not a medical practice in and of itself), the use of incense in Chinese ritual ceremonies could be explained to purify the atmosphere, body, and mind of negative entities.<sup>13</sup> Some have described the religious effects of incense as the ‘pure’ smoke rising to the heavens while the ‘impure’ ashes fall to the ground.<sup>14</sup> This concept can be analogous to the purification that monks and nuns must

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<sup>9</sup> Mou, *Religious Studies*, 297-298, 306.

<sup>10</sup> Zhuyou yixue shisanke, see Zangwai daoshu, vol. 26, 345–46.

<sup>11</sup> Mou, *Religious Studies*, 312, 324.

<sup>12</sup> Mou, *Religious Studies*, 329.

<sup>13</sup> Mou, *Religious Studies*, 330.

<sup>14</sup> Mou, *Religious Studies*, 315.

exhibit in order to achieve a heightened sense of being, which both Buddhism and Taoism expected of their followers. Their bodies and minds, personified in the rising smoke, must be rid of polluted worldly thoughts and desires, which are personified in the falling ashes. Thus, it could be argued that the burning of incense during Buddhist and Taoist rituals could signify the cultivation, purification, cleansing, and overall healing of the body, although it is not directly intended as such.

### *Moxibustion*

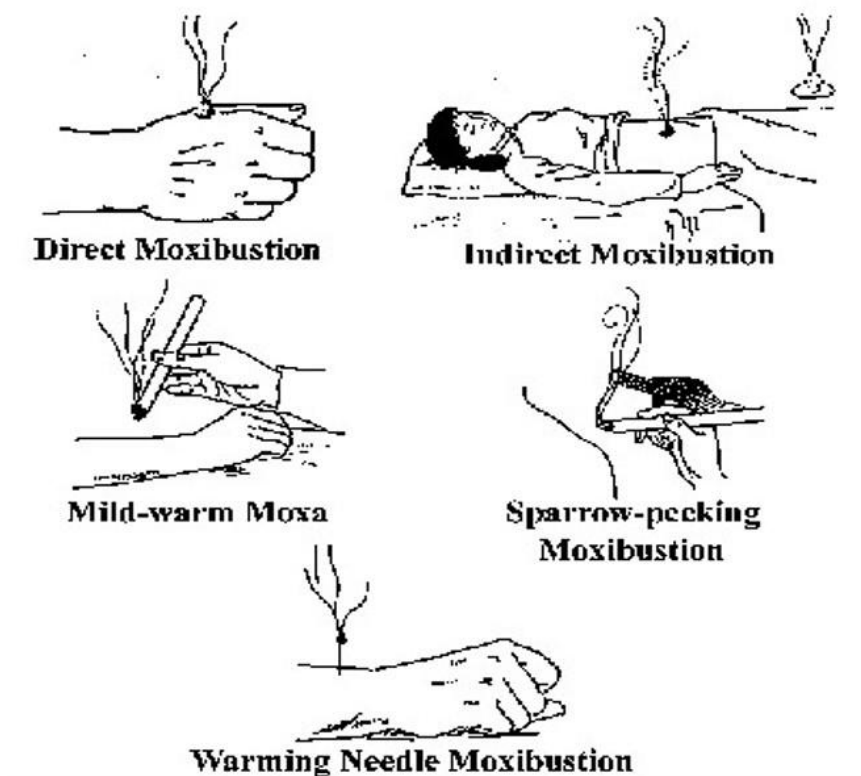
Moxibustion, or *jiǔ* 灸, conversely, was a known healing practice since at least the Warring States period. This practice involves placing a lump of smoldering herbs (often mugwort) either directly or indirectly onto the skin to stimulate circulation and unblock *qi*, although desired effects varied depending on the illness being treated. Moxibustion often accompanied acupuncture but could also be performed alone. One author argues that moxibustion preceded acupuncture and that it “derived from magical treatments that tried to drive out evil spirits causing sickness, by burning incense produced from fragrant herbs”, basing his conclusions on information from the *Ma-wang-tui* medical manuscripts.<sup>15</sup> Although made with numerous base plant material, the most common ingredient of moxibustion or *moxa* was Chinese mugwort, *àicǎo* 艾草, or its Latinized form, *Artemisia argyi*. Within the *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* 神农本草经, a classic Chinese medical source that details attributes of medicinal plants, its description reads:

*Bai Hao (Folium Artemisiae Argyi)* is sweet and balanced. It mainly treats evil qi in the five viscera and wind cold damp impediment. It supplements the center, boosts the qi, promotes the growth of hair, is able to turn the hair black, and cures heart suspension which is [a syndrome

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<sup>15</sup> Keiji Yamada. "Formation of Prototype for Chinese Medicine." *Japan Review*, no. 2 (1991): 205.

including] reduced eating and constant hungering. Protracted taking may make the body light, sharpen the eyes and ears, and prevent senility. It grows in rivers and swamps.<sup>16</sup>



Various techniques are associated with the application of moxa. Moxa or *ai* 艾草, is generally prepared in three different ways: loose, tower (small stacks wrapped in adhesive), and stick form. The form of the moxa determines the type of application that can be employed

Figure 1. Types of moxa/moxibustion treatment. Note that mild-warm moxa is sometimes called stick moxa and that warming needle moxibustion is the type that usually accompanies acupuncture.

(Figure 1). Types of moxa application include direct, indirect, needle, mild-warm, and sparrow-pecking. Loose moxa is shaped and placed on a designated acupuncture point (acu-point) on the body. It is lit and not removed from the skin, causing blistering and later scarring. This is referred to as the direct-scarring method of moxibustion. In the direct non-scarring method, loose moxa is placed on an acu-point and lit, but is removed before blistering and scarring occur. Indirect moxa involves putting the loose moxa on a medium between it and the skin, so as to prevent burns and scarring altogether. Warm-needle

<sup>16</sup> Yang, Shouzhong, ed. 1998. *The Divine Farmer's Materia Medica: A Translation of the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing*. 1st e d. (Boulder, CO: Blue Poppy Press).



moxibustion involves burning the tower moxa on the end of the acupuncture needle (*zhēn* 針) suspended from the body. Stick moxa is used in sparrow-pecking, mild-warm, and waving (not pictured) moxibustion, with the main difference between them being the area coverage and direction of application. The moxa stick (often slowburning and smoky) is lit and the burning end is applied near the surface of the skin and moved between acu-points in mild-warm application and flecked around the acu-points in the sparrow-pecking application. All of these methods, regardless of their application, produced heat that was said to stimulate movement of the *qi* and stagnant blood (*xue*) 血, warm the meridian tracts, treat cold ailments, and generally improve or enhance the health of an individual.<sup>17</sup> Medical treatments utilizing moxibustion has historically been a significant aspect of traditional Chinese medicine and is still popular today.

### *Comparison and Synthesis*

The goal of this paper was to examine possible connections between incense and moxibustion in order to argue that both represent forms of healing, despite incense not being directly associated with the field of traditional Chinese medicine. Although this research was unable to locate historical evidence showing the utilization of the exact same ingredients for both practices, one contemporary ethnobotanical study revealed that two species of *Artemisia* were used by the Bai people of Shaxi Township, (Jianchuan County, Dali Prefecture, Yunnan Province) as incense for ritual and personal well-being.<sup>18</sup> The study did not reveal if either of the species was *A. argyi*. Apart from this, similarities were noted in respect to the broader category of use of aromatic herbs in both incense and moxibustion practices. Incense, despite its foundation in ritual

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<sup>17</sup> Yamada, "Formation", 206.

<sup>18</sup> Peter O. Staub, Matthias S. Geck, and Caroline S. Weckerle. 2011. "Incense and Ritual Plant Use in Southwest China: A Case Study among the Bai in Shaxi." *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 7 (1): 43. doi:10.1186/1746-4269-7-43.

activity, can be argued to represent a corporeal and ethereal purification of the human body through the understanding of the rising smoke (body and mind) and the falling ashes (worldly impurities). Moxibustion, through its heating qualities, healed the body from blocked *qi*, stagnant *xue*, and cold disorders. Incense and moxibustion rehabilitated the human body spiritually, mentally, and bodily, thereby demonstrating the shared characteristic of overall human healing.

### *Further Thoughts*

The discussion thus far has not considered the effects of aromas as a means of achieving positive effects on the body, a field now called aromatherapy. Aromatherapy has been defined as “the therapeutic use of essential oils—concentrated oils extracted from various parts of aromatic plants (e.g., flower, stem, leaf, root, bark)—with the intent to calm, balance, and rejuvenate mind, body, and spirit.”<sup>19</sup> True evidence of aromatherapeutic benefits of smoke from either incense or moxibustion in ancient Chinese documents has proved scant to nonexistent, making it a difficult position to argue in this paper. Today, individuals attest to the positive benefits of aromatherapy which, in some cases, is backed by scientific study.<sup>20 21 22</sup> The aromatherapeutic effects of incense on the body have been widely publicized, especially in the contemporary media, emphasizing slightly different aspects of these practices than seen in traditional Chinese religions.<sup>23 24</sup> In China and surrounding areas, incense is still widely used for ritual purposes, but worldwide, its smoke

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<sup>19</sup> Corio, C. J. (1993). *Enhance quality of life with aromatherapy* [pamphlet]. (Available from QLA, 800-688-8343).

<sup>20</sup> Rachel S. Herz, 2009. “Aromatherapy Facts and Fictions: A Scientific Analysis of Olfactory Effects on Mood, Physiology and Behavior.” *International Journal of Neuroscience* 119 (2): 263–90. doi:10.1080/00207450802333953.

<sup>21</sup> Hiroko Kuriyama et al, Immunological and Psychological Benefits of Aromatherapy Massage. (Evidence Based Complement Alternative Med. 2005 June): 2(2): 179–184. Published online 2005 Apr 27. doi:10.1093/ecam/neh087.

<sup>22</sup> Lee, Inn-Sook, and Gyung-Joo Lee. 2006. “[Effects of lavender aromatherapy on insomnia and depression in women college students].” *Taehan Kanho Hakhoe Chi* 36 (1): 136–43.

<sup>23</sup> Jo L. Wheeler Robins, “The Science and Art of Aromatherapy” *Journal of Holistic Nursing* 17 (March 1999): 511.

<sup>24</sup> Yin, Yin. “Scents and Sensibility” *ChinaDaily USA*. China Daily USA, 2012. Accessed 03 May 2015. [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2012-03/23/content\\_14899592.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2012-03/23/content_14899592.htm).

has taken on a new front as an agent of aromatherapy. Further study in the applications of aromatherapy in Chinese medicine are warranted and intriguing to consider.

### *Conclusion*

The present research has explained ritual incense burning as a healing and self-cultivating practice like moxibustion, when in historical context, it was not truly considered part of the medical world. Broadly, the significance of this research could be examined in the contemporary context surrounding traditional Chinese medicine. Highly contested and often dubbed ‘pseudoscience’ by Western scientists, Chinese medicine maintains a difficult position in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Numerous studies have empirically analyzed the topic from a Western, ‘scientific method’ perspective and results have been mixed—some suggest a true benefit from these medical practices, while others strongly refute it. Transforming the understanding of ritual incense burning into a mode of healing could be a viable contribution to this ongoing debate. More specifically, this study exemplifies the unwavering popularity and adaptive strategies of the discipline, as well as its contributions to the notion of the Chinese self.

Although extant in two separate realms of society, these practices have been known to share some of the same ingredients, methods, and goals. Both practices of burning ritual incense and applying moxibustion utilize similar approaches to attain a heightened sense of health and wellbeing while simultaneously removing unwanted and harmful entities or conditions from the body. Rather than healing a physical wound or unblocking *qi* as most medicine intended, incense served to heal the mind of worldly troubles. Individuals must have found these methods effective, due to their continued presence in the modern world. Although aged and presently contested, this discipline undeniably remains a dynamic and adaptive aspect of humanity, continually incorporating new ideas while still retaining its core identity as traditional Chinese medicine.

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### Photo Credits

Figure 1. <http://gillesobermayer.com/chinese-medicine/modalities.php> Bibliography

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