



# The Use of Incense in the Secular and Buddhist World in Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties

Ao Li

School of Chinese Classics, Renmin University, Beijing, 100872, China

aolileo@ruc.edu.cn

**Abstract.** The custom of using incense in China has a long history. Since the Zhou people banned the meaning of fishy gas in the sacrifice, the worship of “*Xinxiang*” has entered the secular life and the Buddhist world. This paper explains the characteristics of the use of incense by scholar-bureaucrats and Buddhist rituals in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. It is not difficult to find that the secular use of incense in this period has not focused on sacrifice, but on fashion and luxury; buddhist incense, which aims to summon the gods and convey prayers, is endowed with the cultural significance of “transition”.

**Keywords:** incense; Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties; buddhsim

## 1 INTRODUCTION

There was a large number of imports of extraterritorial spices<sup>[1]</sup> during the period of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties in China. On the one hand, the eastward movement of Hu merchants brought spices from the Western Regions, on the other hand, the use of fragrance in the upper society, coupled with the promotion of Taoism and Buddhism, promoted the prosperity of fragrance culture in this period<sup>[2]</sup>.

The custom of burning incense comes from ancient sacrificial activities. There are Yu and Zhou ethnic groups, one with fishy, one with incense to carry out sacrifices. Yu's worship of fishy gas used fresh blood, raw meat and semi-cooked meat during sacrifice. The sacrifice of the Zhou people advocated aroma. At the beginning of the sacrifice, it was poured on the ground with Chang wine, so that its aroma called the gods to come. Then use the boiled tulip grass to mix the Chang wine, pour it on the ground, and let its aroma seep into the ground to reach the “*Yuanquan*, 淵泉”<sup>[3]</sup>.

Zhou people not only made full use of the aroma of tulip, but also extended the nature of “*qi*, 氣” to “things”. During the sacrifice, the jade “*Gui*, 圭” and “*Zhang*, 璋” was used to scoop wine and pour it on the ground, in order to utilize the “*qi*” of jade. After pouring the wine on the ground to drop the spirit, it is to first cause the “*qi*” in the “yin”, so that the aroma reaches the underground gods. After the sacrifice, the artemisia annua and broomcorn millet were burned to make the smoke diffuse between the walls, and then the wine was placed on the mat for the corpse, and the artemisia annua, broomcorn millet and the oil of the sacrifice were mixed. Burn together, this is

to let the “yang *qi*” rise and invite the gods to come. The people of Zhou believed that “soul belongs to heaven, and body belongs to earth”. Therefore, they first sought the “yin” of body from the underground, and then attracted the “yang” of soul from the sky.

It can be seen that the smells used by ancient people in sacrifices are quite rich, including the fishy smell emitted by animal flesh, the aroma of wine and plant soaking and fusion, and the aroma of vanilla burning. These smells are first of all spatially defined, not only to make it rise in the air, but also to reach the ground, or diffuse between the walls. Secondly, the scent has the function of communicating different worlds. The heaven, the earth and the house not only represent the objective physical space, but also the “yin” and “yang” world in which the gods reside, while the house in which people live is the starting point of different scent up and down.

Since the Zhou people banned the meaning of fishy gas in the sacrifice, the worship of “*Xinxiang*, 行香” has gradually separated from the sacrificial field and become a smell atmosphere lingering in the field of aristocratic life. It is also used in Buddhist rituals to achieve the ideal of “calling” and “crossing”.

Habkirk and Chang examines the use of incense in Chinese religion and explains the role of incense as a bridge between spirit and material.<sup>[4]</sup> However, it did not involve the use of incense in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. The traditional Chinese medicine moxibustion and religious incense in various dynasties after the Warring States period were investigated, and the similarities and differences between the two incense were discussed by Hannah E. Matulek.<sup>[5]</sup> There is also no incense about the secular society and religious groups in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. Han briefly introduces the incense custom in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, but mainly focuses on the investigation of bronze incense stoves.<sup>[6]</sup>

What was the situation of scholar-officials in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties in terms of incense use, and what were the special places in Buddhist practices? So far, there has been no detailed report.

## 2 THE INCENSE OF SCHOLAR-BUREAUCRATS

In the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the use of incense was not limited to sacrificial activities, and the literati and officialdom began to appreciate incense. It is said that Xun Yu also loves incense, “*Xiangyang Qijiuji*, 襄陽耆舊記” recorded: “Xun Lingjun went to other people's homes, where he sat, and the aroma did not disappear for three days.”<sup>[7]</sup> Retaining the aroma for several days, you can imagine how strong it will be in people. Cao Pi once frightened the horse because of his strong aroma.<sup>[8]</sup> Although the circulation of products is more active, spices are still extremely valuable luxury goods. During the Eastern Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, incense was popular, and all the children of the aristocracy fumigate clothing with aromatic smoke and coat powder on the face, and the appearance was like a god. With the increasing variety of perfume categories, *Hexiang* ( a perfume made of a variety of perfumes ) is widely used, and several books of incense prescriptions such as Fan Ye's “*He Xiang Fang*, 和香方” have appeared.

For the family of dignitaries, the use of incense is just a common thing, it is just for the real show by wasting the rare spices. In the Western Jin Dynasty, Shi Chong, a wealthy man, arranged sachets, incense powder and perfume in the toilet of his home. When Liu Shi, who had always been poor, went to the toilet in Shi Chong's home, he saw the dark red curtain hanging in it, and laid gorgeous carpets, there were two maidservants with sachets standing aside, at that moment he thought that he had mistakenly entered the bedroom. Although Shi Chong made a timely explanation, Liu Shi still dared not use this extremely expensive toilet, but “change to another toilet”.<sup>[9]</sup>

Shi Chong decorated his toilet too luxuriously, which made it a challenging thing to go to the toilet in his home. Shi Chong's toilet, prepared a variety of powder, balm for the guests to wash their hands, wipe their faces, toilet “paper” with a sachet by loading. There are more than ten maids standing at the door, all dressed in gorgeous, lined up to wait for the guests to go to the toilet. When the guests went out the toilet, these maidservants asked the guests to take off their original clothes and help them change into new clothes and then let them out. Most of the guests are embarrassed to undress, and thus it is enough to show the celebrity style if someone can finish the entire toilet process without any shy expression. Wang Dun already has a bold personality, not to stick at trifles. After the torment of Shi Chong's toilet process, he was “not ashamed”, showing that he did not care about his master's “embarrassment”<sup>[10]</sup>, and was judged by Shi Chong's well-informed maids that “this guest must be a thief”.

In the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the enjoyment of smell was not positive in most of the time, and often became the object of criticism. The related figures such as Jia, Shi Chong, Wang Dun, etc., are also mostly negative evaluations in history. The prejudice against incense extended to the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and did not change :

Xie Xuan liked to wear “violet sachet” when he was young. Xie An suffered from this, because of the inconvenience of face, he took the opportunity of a game to use the sachet as a bet and obtained it from Xie Xuan, then burn it. It may be that he understood the meaning of his father, or perhaps the sachet was still a valuable luxury at that time, Xie Xuan has not used similar utensils since then.

If the use of incense is in line with the provisions of “etiquette”, it is not unacceptable in the eyes of the aristocracy.

On the day of “*Xiuxi*, 修禊” (rally), in addition to “*Fuchu*, 祓除” (lustrum), there is also a “*Xin bath*, 衅浴” (bath from evil), that is, bathing with aromatherapy herbs. It is said that this custom originated in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, when people used orchids and other herbs to remove evils.

By the time of Liu Song, the scholars' views on incense had changed. They no longer considered incense as a symbol of luxurious desire, but were willing to use incense as a rhetoric of character.

During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, “incense” no longer had the sacrificial function stipulated in the ' Book of Rites ' in the world of intellectuals. It was more often used as a personal or residential odor atmosphere, with a strong secular color. The original “cross-border” meaning of incense is only seen in the custom of *Xiuxi*.

### 3 BUDDHIST INCENSE

If the olfactory experience in the secular world is mainly regarded as a kind of sensory desire, then the “fragrance” in religious practice is endowed with more profound and mysterious significance. Different religious traditions in the world generally stipulate the use of incense in practices. Sandalwood and agarwood are commonly used in Buddhism. Incense is used to worship Buddha images, meditate and perform specific rituals. The aroma is believed to purify the mind and help the practitioner concentrate. Taoism also uses a variety of spices before and during the ceremony, such as agarwood, *acronychia pedunculata*, etc.; burning incense symbolizes the arrival of immortals and is an intermediary for the communication between gods and humans. In Christianity, spices such as frankincense and myrrh are widely used in worship and major ceremonies, symbolizing prayer and worship. Islamic traditions use spices to purify the air and repel snakes, and burn spices in important celebrations and prayers, symbolizing holiness and purity. Judaism has strict rules on the use of spices. Spices are used on the altar to symbolize the appearance of God and the purity of prayer.

In addition, the meaning of aroma is also enhanced in the comparison of different olfactory experiences. In contrast to the scent of the divine realm, is the stench of filthy hell. And usually, the body odour of healthy people is pleasant, while the body odour of sick people is unpleasant. In addition, the place where infectious diseases are rampant will also emit a long-lasting stench. The drugs used for treatment are mostly “bitter” in taste, but the smell is “medicinal fragrance”. In religious literature, there are often immortals or practitioners who float out of different fragrances to prove that the cultivation of the Tao and the improvement of the realm will change the body from a stinky skin to a sachet.

The spread and prosperity of Buddhism in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties left a lot of records related to incense in religious classics, represented by the two works of *Buddhist temples in Luoyang*, 洛陽伽藍記 and *Eminent Monk Biography*, 高僧傳. Buddhism attaches no less importance to incense than Taoism. In addition to the “ever-burning lamps”, there are various kinds of aroma-emitting objects such as vanilla, fragrant flowers and fragrant wood, which can be regarded as devout support.

The world depicted by the Buddhist scriptures is full of unspeakable aromas. Classics introduced and translated earlier, such as “Bright Prajna Sutra”, have laid out various fragrances, such as “famous flowers, stamped incense, Zexiang, miscellaneous incense, colored silk, lids”. The “Lotus Sutra” says “sirisium myrtifolium fragrant wind makes everyone happy” and “fragrant flowers and Ji Yue are often used for support.” The various objects that support the tower and temple include “flowers, smearable fragrance, sandalwood powder, burnable incense” and other incense. When describing the first seven pagodas of the Buddha, it says “the four sides all generate the incense of Duomo Ba Zhan, filling the world.” In the “Lotus Sutra”, it is said that “wonderful fragrance and luxuriant”, and “the pores of the Buddha also emit fragrance flame clouds, and follow the hearts of all living beings all over the world”. There are also various kinds of fragrance flame, perfume, perfume river, perfume sea, perfume wheel, perfume lotus, perfume building, perfume tent, perfume hall and so on. In short, “In-

cense comes out in an infinite amount of incense, all the Buddhas congregation dojos, or the incense palace, such as the incense bar sill, the incense wall, the incense house. All natural things such as clouds, mountains, rivers, sea and even all things exude aroma, all over the ten sides of all Dharma Realm Dojo”.

In order to attract believers, temples in the real world often reproduce the grand scene of the blissful world according to the descriptions in the Buddhist scriptures. It is worth noting that many of the larger temples recorded in “*Buddhist temples in Luoyang*” have created a fragrance atmosphere by planting various types of herbs. The natural fragrance of flowers and trees is even more impressive than the smell of burning spices. Yongning Temple “the lush leaves of the cypress, pine and toon with eaves water, bamboo and vanilla spreading along the steps”<sup>[11]</sup>; Yaoguang Temple “precious wood and herbs, indescribable”<sup>[12]</sup>; Jinglin Temple “beautiful trees hugs the windows and the fragrance *Pyrus betulifolia* Bunge surrounds the step”<sup>[13]</sup>; Jingming Temple “bamboo, pine, fragrant thoroughwort and dahurian angelica arranges next to the steps, with the wind and dew, fragrant spitting <sup>[14]</sup>.” These unique odors of bamboo, pine, magnolia, precious wood and herbs are often distributed on both sides of the stone steps of the temple. Before the believers of the Buddha enter the internal space of the temple, the sense of smell first wraps them up.

In addition to the hidden fragrance of these precious flowers and trees on the edge of the steps, the lamps and candles for the Buddha stimulate the experience of monks and believers in a more intense and ritualistic way: the same is Jingming Temple, when the day of burning incense on April 7, the Buddha statues of Luoyang City are gathered here, which is the golden flower reflecting the sun, the floating clouds covering treasure, a large number gonfalon and fragrant smoke like fog. <sup>[15]</sup> The fragrance of various flowers and the scenery of clouds and fog have both the aesthetic sense of smell and vision. It also uses incense to worship scriptures. “*Buddhist temples in Luoyang*” records that Baima Temple burned incense to support “*Sutra of Forty-two Sections*”: “Temple scriptures still exist today. Often burn incense to support, the scriptures often luminesce and shine in the church”.<sup>[16]</sup>

In the vast Buddhist world, “incense” is closely related to the theme of “death”. After Sakyamuni Buddha Nirvana, his disciples burned his body with incense wood, so the incense in Buddhism was given a sacred meaning. “*Wei Shu · Shi Lao Zhi*, 魏書 · 釋老志” said: “Buddha is dead, incense wood burning corpse. The bone is broken, the size is like a grain. It is not bad to hit, also not coke when burn, or it is a bright and efficacious. The *Hu* people called it sarira. The disciples collected and supported, placed in a treasure bottle, and paid tribute with the fragrant flowers.”

Perhaps it is because of the Buddha 's “incense wood burning corpse” allusions before, after all kinds of Buddhist stories, aroma often appear in the scene of death :

Hou Qing, a native of Nanyang, had a bronze Buddha statue with a height of more than a foot. He wanted to gild the bronze statue with the proceeds of cattle trafficking, but he failed to do so due to dealing with emergencies. Two years later, his wife dreamed of this image and said, “Take your child Chouduo to pay for the gold color”. Until the morning, Hou Qing 's son was sick and died. On the same day, the image immediately became gold, illuminated the neighbors, and exuded the fragrance of one mile around, causing the young and old monks and common to watch.<sup>[17]</sup>

According to the “*Eminent Monk Biography*”, the eminent monk Gunavarman of the Jiankang Jihuan Temple in the Liu Song Dynasty also exudes a strong aroma after his death<sup>[18]</sup> : The aroma even emptied into a dragon-snake-shaped entity. At the time of burning the remains, a large number of “incense” were piled up in front of the altar and filled with “balsam”, and the five-color flame rose and shone through the sky. Similar records are not uncommon. During the Jin Dynasty, Zhu Sengfu in Jingzhou “at the end of life, wonderful fragrance full room”<sup>[19]</sup>. After the death of Huiyong of Lushan Mountain, “Both the monks and the laity in the mountains smell the peculiar fragrance, seven days to stop”<sup>[20]</sup>. Jingdu of Yuhang in Song Dynasty expound a lots of the texts of Buddhism before his death, “Xiao and drums and fragrance drop down from the air when the sermon ends and suddenly dies.”<sup>[21]</sup> Hui Jing of Nanhai Yunfeng Temple in Qi Dynasty, on the day of his death, “there was a strange fragrance in the room, which disappeared after a long time.”<sup>[22]</sup> “On the dying day of Shanyin Zhishun in the Liang Dynasty, the house smelled very fragrant”<sup>[23]</sup>..... All these kinds are innumerable.

The more mysterious story occurred in the Liu Song Dynasty, Jiankang monk Bei Du was considered capable of “*Xiang Dun*”:

Bei Du said he temporarily went out, but he did not come back when it was dark. Everyone looked for him everywhere, only the aroma was smelled all over the country. People followed the guidance of the aroma and found the body of the Bei Du under the north rock. There are lotus flowers on the front and back of the corpse, and the flowers exude the ultimate fresh aroma. The theme of death and aroma dominates the narrative of this account.<sup>[24]</sup>

There are another story about the relationship between the aroma and death. In this story, the aroma is no longer a symbol of death, or as a sign of death, but will play an important role in saving people from danger :

Fotucheng once sent his disciples to buy incense in the Western Regions. After the disciples set out, Fotucheng told the rest of the disciples that he saw in his palm that the disciples who bought incense were robbed and their lives were in danger. So Fotucheng burning incense and praying, remote rescue disciples. The disciple came back and said that he was robbed somewhere on a certain day of a certain month, and suddenly smelled the aroma when he was killed. The thieves thought that the rescue has arrived, so they abandoned it and fled. The function of “incense” to travel through different spaces to “other worlds” is concretized in this story.<sup>[25]</sup>

According to the study of David Howes 's “olfaction and transition”, olfaction plays an extremely important transitional role in death rituals.<sup>[26]</sup> Whether it is sacrifice in the secular world or incense burning in religious traditions, the transitional role of the fragrance allows believers to enter the sacred from the secular world. In particular, the continuity and divergence of the smell itself make it different from other senses and become a transitional medium in various ceremonies. As far as the transitional attribute of fragrance is concerned, most people in the world are familiar with the fragrance emitted by burning incense wood or providing incense flowers, so as to spread the content of blessings and prayers to others. However, it is often neglected that the body fragrance emitted by the human body can also reflect the transitional nature of the fragrance.

The saying of 'body exudes fragrance' is not strange in the Chinese text tradition, and the metaphor of vanilla beauty of Chu people can be regarded as a manifestation. If all kinds of vanilla writing in Taoist texts inherit the southern culture represented by "Chuci", it is not surprising that the image of "body fragrance" in Buddhist culture should be in the view of people in Wei and Jin Dynasties. Incense occupies a very important position in Indian culture. Different religions in India have formed a set of rhetoric about incense to varying degrees. Buddhist scriptures will be accompanied by various fragrances when depicting the birth, preach and pass away while sitting cross legged of Buddha, Bodhisattva and King of Heaven. Subsequently, various Buddhist stories have expanded the meaning of incense to describe the scent emitted by people with excellent morality and profound practice. This "special fragrance" tends to spread throughout the room when eminent monks disseminate dharma. This kind of rhetoric actually coincides with the tradition of vanilla beauty. Therefore, there are so many paragraphs in the *"Eminent Monk Biography"* that specifically describe the "different fragrance" when pass away while sitting cross legged in the Six Dynasties. In the human world and the Buddhist world, life and death, at the edge of these transformations and transitions, "aroma" has become an indispensable sensory medium.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Compared with the early scholar-bureaucrat class in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the "incense" was regarded as the desire to satisfy the senses, Buddhism held a positive attitude towards the concept and practice of incense. Perhaps it is precisely because of the influence of religion, the scholar-officials of the Southern Dynasties no longer stood in the original position to reject the enjoyment of smell, "Yan 's family precepts" so-called: "When the Liang Dynasty was in its heyday, the most of the children of aristocratic families without official positions are incompetent ... all of them fumigate clothing, shave face and coat powder with red pigments.<sup>[27]</sup>" From Yan Zhitui 's remark, the popularity of incense among the aristocratic intellectual class in the contemporary era can be seen. In the religious world, the continuity and divergence of aroma endow it with the cultural significance of "transition", which means "calling" and "crossing" in religious practice. Burning incense for blessing and incense flower support are not only part of the daily rituals of religion. The more important significance of aroma in the ceremony is to summon the gods and convey prayers, and create a specific and sensible overall mysterious atmosphere. The peculiar aroma of the monks who have won the Tao usually appears at the brink of life and death. In the moment of breathing end, the whole world passes through the body, and the aroma of the whole life is transformed into the aroma that lasts for many days, accompanied by the perfume and the balsam, the five-color flame is lifted into another world. The aroma replaces the stench and becomes the last trace of the dead life left on the earth.

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