

The Continuation of Incense Worship: Exploring the Rituals of “Ancestral Belief” in the “Incense Worship” Culture from the Perspective of Chinese Transmission

Yuchen Li^{1,a,*}

¹Communication University of China, Beijing, China

a. 2021219283028@cuc.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: “Incense worship” refers to the incense or candlelight used for worshipping ancestors or deities, which is an indispensable part of traditional Chinese culture. With the succession of generations and the evolution of culture, the term “incense worship” has gradually developed more connotations, among which the evolution based on clan implications is particularly characterized by localization. This paper will deeply explore the connotations of “incense worship” from the perspective of Chinese transmission, tracing its evolution in the context of ancestor worship and the localization of clan traditions. At the same time, from the perspective of communication studies, it analyzes its metaphor as a form of communication, glimpsing the rituals of “ancestral belief” in the “incense worship” culture through exploration of media, ceremonies, and space, and discussing its modern continuation and changes.

Keywords: Incense Worship, Ancestor Worship, Folk Belief, Clan, Rituals

1. Introduction

“Incense Worship” refers to the incense or candlelight used for worshipping ancestors or deities, which is an indispensable part of the traditional Chinese culture. From the “customs” of household shrines and community rituals to the “ceremonies” of temple offerings and prayers for a good harvest, incense worship holds significant importance both at the level of rituals and culture as a material symbol. In Bai Juyi’s poem “Wǔ yuè zhāi jiè xiān yǐ cháng jù chéng xiè” (五月斋戒先以长句呈谢), he states, “Sàn zhāi xiāng huǒ jīn zhāo sàn, kāi sù pán yán hòu rì kāi” (散斋香火今朝散, 开素盘筵后日开), which embodies the act of attending to the incense and offerings for the deities, echoing the sentiment expressed in Guan Xiu’s poem, one of the “Shǔ wáng dēng fú gǎn sì tǎ shī” (蜀王登福感寺塔诗): “Tiān zī zhōng xiào zuǒ jīn lún, xiāng huǒ kōng wáng yǒu sù yīn” (天资忠孝佐金轮, 香火空王有宿因). This implies devotion to Buddhism, establishing a connection through the offering of incense and maintaining the flame of faith.

With the succession of generations and the evolution of culture, the term “Incense Worship” has gradually developed multiple connotations, among which the evolution based on the connotation of lineage is particularly characterized by localization: looking back, it can be traced back to the worship of the ancestors of the Chinese nation; in interpretation, it manifests as a metaphor for the continuation

of offspring and clan lineage. In the second act of Ma Zhiyuan's "Yueyang Tower" from the Yuan Dynasty, the line "dàn dé yī nán bàn nǚ, yě jué bù liǎo Guō shì mén zhōng xiāng huǒ" (但得一男半女, 也绝不了郭氏门中香火) uses "香火" (Incense Worship) to refer to the descendants of the clan. Similarly, in the contemporary writer Mao Dun's novel "Shuāng yè hóng sì èr yuè huā" (霜叶红似二月花), the line "nǐ shì jiān tiāo le liǎng fáng de, Qián jiā de xiāng huǒ, jiù zhǐ zài nǐ yī rén shēnshang ne!" (你是兼挑了两房的, 钱家的香火, 就只在你一人身上呢!) also reflects the importance placed by Chinese folk on family continuity and bloodline inheritance.

Existing literature on "incense worship" is abundant, but most studies approach it from the perspectives of folklore, religious studies, or history, exploring how the symbol of incense worship is specifically manifested in the overall folk culture, mainly through interpretations, conceptual analyses, or ritual explorations. There is scarce construction and in-depth analysis from the perspective of communication studies on its implications of "clan" and "bloodline," as well as its communicative significance as a symbol. On the other hand, in studies of folk religion and clan genealogy, the element of "incense worship" is often overshadowed by customs of offerings and worship, with little in-depth exploration.

Therefore, based on existing literature, this paper will deeply explore the connotations and local evolution of "incense worship" from the perspective of Chinese transmission. Through analyzing its metaphor as a form of communication, it aims to glimpse into the rituals of "ancestral belief" in the "incense worship" culture.

2. "Incense Worship" — Local Evolution Based on Clan Implications

2.1. Paying Homage to Buddhas, Incense Takes the Symbolic Lead

The original meaning of "incense" is recorded in Hong Chu's "Xiāng pǔ · xiāng zhī shì" (《香谱 · 香之事》) from the Song Dynasty as follows: "Shuō wén" yuē fāng yě. Zhuàn cóng shǔ, cóng gān. Lì shěng zuò xiāng. Chūnqiū zhuàn yuē shǔ jì xīn xiāng. Fán xiāng zhī shǔ jiē cóng xiāng. Xiāng zhī yuǎn wén yuē xīn. Xiāng zhī měi zhě yuē chàng, xiāng zhī qì yuē xīn. "Shàng shū" yuē zhì zhì xīn xiāng gǎn yú shén míng. "Máo shī" yǒu bì qí xiāng bāng jiā zhī guāng. "Máo shī" qí xiāng shǐ shēng shàng dì jū xīn. "Guó yǔ" qí dé zú yǐ zhāo qí xīn xiāng. "Zuǒ zhuàn" lán yǒu guó xiāng." (《说文》曰芳也。篆从黍, 从甘。隶省作香。春秋传曰黍稷馨香。凡香之属皆从香。香之远闻曰馨。香之美者曰鬯, 香之气曰馥。《尚书》曰至治馨香感于神明。《毛诗》有飴其香邦家之光。《毛诗》其香始升上帝居歆。《国语》其德足以昭其馨香。《左传》兰有国香) [1] It can be seen that "incense" (香) originally referred to the fragrance produced by the steaming of millet and sorghum, which later extended to virtues and glory, and was "felt by the gods" and "pleased the Lord of Heaven." At this time, "incense" was not yet associated with "fire," but its significance as a ritual offering facilitating communication between humans and gods was evident.

Tracing back to the act of "burning incense" as a way to worship heaven and honor ancestors, we can refer to the records in the Book of Songs during the Western Zhou Dynasty: "Shī · Zhōu sòng · Wéi qīng" yún: "Wéi qīng jī xī, wén wáng zhī diǎn, zhào yīn." (《诗 · 周颂 · 维清》云: "维清缉熙, 文王之典, 肇禋") "肇禋" (zhào yīn) refers to offering smoke to the heavens. From this, it can be seen that although there was no incense specifically used for worship in the true sense during the Western Zhou period, the act of conversing with the gods through the smoke produced by burning sacrifices, animals, and silk on firewood laid the groundwork for what is now known as "burning incense."

During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Buddhism was introduced to China, and the original "fragrance" derived from "millet and sorghum" was diluted by the burning of sandalwood [2]. The concept of

burning incense in Buddhist worship gradually integrated into the Chinese cultural system. At the same time, the implications of incense and the methods of making incense in Buddhism, to some extent, changed ancient customs while also being sinicized in practice in China. *Huáng Dì Nèi Jīng* (《黄帝内经》) states, “Wǔ qì gè yǒu suǒ zhǔ, wéi xiāng qì còu pí” (五气各有所主，唯香气凑脾). In the classification of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements in Chinese thought, the five directions, five natures, and five organs are interconnected and correspond to each other. Incense originates from the south, so it corresponds to the “Huǒyáng” (火阳) nature in the Five Elements, and its function of harmonizing the spleen demonstrates that the culture of incense worship has been absorbed into the ideological framework of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements, becoming a part of Chinese culture and life.

However, from the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty to the Three Kingdoms period, “burning incense” remained a luxury exclusive to the nobility, mostly used by the imperial and aristocratic families for worshipping heaven and ancestors. It wasn’t until the Sui and Tang Dynasties that burning incense began to popularize among the common people. The “Xiāngchéng” (香乘) states: “Dài Yáng dì chú yè, huǒ shān shāo chén jiǎ jiān bù jì qí shù, Hǎinán zhū xiāng bì zhì yǐ [3]” (迨炆帝除夜，火山烧沉甲煎不计其数，海南诸香毕至矣). Large quantities of incense from Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan flowed into the Central Plains, significantly reducing costs and providing material conditions for ordinary people to burn incense. At the same time, the rapid development of Taoism and Buddhism, with believers spread across the country, contributed to the flourishing of incense burning in Taoist temples and Buddhist temples, promoting the popularization of “incense worship.” By the time of the Song Dynasty, the right to perform sacrifices had essentially shifted from the nobility to the common people. Incense burning became widespread throughout the country, from households to temples, becoming a ubiquitous practice. Incense was extensively used in daily life, thus forming a carrier of diverse cultures and becoming a spiritual sustenance and ceremonial form of popular belief.

2.2. From Ancestor Worship to the Continuation of Incense Worship

As rituals transitioned from exclusive imperial rights to widespread practices among the populace, “incense worship” also shifted from the lofty heights of temples to the far reaches of society, integrating into the everyday ritual system of folk life. “Fú lǐ, tiān zhī jīng yě, dì zhī yì yě, mín zhī xíng yě [4]” (夫礼，天之经也，地之义也，民之行也). In traditional Chinese culture, rituals not only signify reverence for the principles of Heaven, Earth, and natural law but are also intimately related to human natural emotions and basic ethical relationships. Rituals are practical and are “based on human natural relationships and emotions, with sacrifices as a reference, combined with the spread and development of social customs and habits among the society and the population at that time [5].” Therefore, exploring the rituals of incense worship in folk culture requires starting from “民之行也” (the behavior of the people), understanding the underlying ethical and emotional logic.

“In Chinese view, human beings are not seen as fixed entities; they must maintain a dynamic balance with other individuals within their network of relationships [6].” The family is such an important network of relationships for Chinese people. It not only has blood ties and organizational structures but also provides values that transcend mere kinship. Thus, although China is commonly perceived as a nation without religious beliefs, “ancestor worship” in Chinese civilization almost holds equivalent significance to religion.

The tradition of ancestor worship in China can be traced back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties. The merchants of the Shang dynasty believed that the souls of ancestors coexisted with God and other natural spirits in the same space [7]. They worshipped ancestors because they believed they could bring blessings and prevent disasters, possessing divine abilities similar to those of the emperor (“既

能致福，又能降祸”“具有帝之神能”)。Therefore, they worshipped ancestors through ritual sacrifices to pray for good harvests, rain, and blessings. During the Zhou dynasty, ancestor worship continued to thrive, as the Zhou people also believed that their connection to heaven was mediated through their ancestors, who served as intermediaries between heaven and earthly kings. Since the Han dynasty, Confucianism has established a Confucian sacrificial system represented by the suburban sacrifices and the imperial ancestral temple. While the emperor worshipped the Supreme Emperor of the Sky, ordinary people worshipped their own ancestors [8], further promoting the prevalence of ancestor worship and ancestor sacrifices among the populace.

This is specifically reflected in the customs of “incense worship,” where folk customs based on ancestor worship have elaborated on the unique connotations of “incense” within the existing Buddhist incense-burning rituals. For example, in terms of “edibility,” “ordinary people eat grains, while gods and immortals consume incense.” (凡人以五谷为食，神仙才以香为食) Since the deities worshipped in folk rituals generally possess ancestral characteristics, ancestral gods, who were once human, still require sustenance. Therefore, “the significance of incense as food for ancient gods, such as cattle, sheep, millet, and sorghum, remains at the core of incense burning in folk beliefs [9].” “Incense” adds a food-based imagination on top of its original meaning, serving as an offering to ancestral gods.

Influenced by the concept of ancestor worship, Chinese people are accustomed to placing themselves within the flow of life of their family lineage, originating from ancestors, flowing through themselves, and continuing to future generations. The death of the body does not mean the extinction of the soul; the soul of a person transforms into an ancestor, continuing to exist in the family lineage and revered by future generations. In this context, incense worship rituals become crucial in this “ancestral belief,” and the continuity of these rituals depends on the transmission of offspring and the continuation of bloodlines. Thus, the significance of “incense worship” expands in the rituals of ancestral transmission, forming a concept of incense worship that ensures the continuation of bloodlines through the birth of descendants.

3. “Incense Worship” — Metaphor as a Communication Form in Clan Culture

Dào yóu xīn shēng, xīn jiǎ xiāng chuán. (道由心生，心假香传)

Xiāng rù yù lú, xīn cún dì qián. (香薰玉炉，心存帝前)

Zhēn líng xià pàn, xiān pèi lín xuān. (真灵下盼，仙旆临轩)

Lìng chén guān gào, jiàng dá jiǔ tiān [10]. (令臣关告，迳达九天)

The “Líng yīng běn tǐ zhēn jīng” (灵应本体真经) contains the recitation of the “Zhù xiāng zhòu” (祝香咒) used in folk incense offerings to invite deities. Phrases like “心假香传,” “真灵下盼,” and “迳达九天” all demonstrate that folk use incense burning to express their sincere hearts to the heavens, hoping their wishes can reach the highest realms and the presence of immortals. It can be seen that for the folk, the most important aspect of “香薰玉炉” is to communicate with the heavens through incense. As mentioned earlier, the clan perspective of “ancestor worship” is an important component of folk beliefs, resembling a quasi-religious belief. It “has its theological, sacrificial, and human operation systems, but whether in terms of spiritual core or formal ritual organization, it is organically integrated with secular institutions and social order; at the same time, it also operates as a supporting force for social order within secular life [11].” Therefore, through a deep exploration of the imagery of incense and smoke in communication forms, we can gain a deeper understanding of folk “ancestral belief” rituals.

3.1. Incense as a Medium of Communication

Incense serves as a medium of communication with deities, as “its fragrance rises straight to the heavens, reaching the gods [9]” (袅袅直上升天，可以通达神明). Burning incense signifies “sending an invitation” or “offering incense or a cup of tea,” representing the highest form of etiquette. Incense separates humans from gods, and burning incense is “a form of free communication achieved through formal respect. To put it in simple terms, it is like a host treating guests, and upwards, it is like subjects treating the emperor [12].” At the same time, incense also represents the devotee’s dedication. The process of burning incense is considered to transform oneself through fire, releasing “smoke” and “qi” as an offering to the deities to express one’s sincerity. People believe that the will of the gods can be revealed through the imagery of “incense,” and the smoke guides them to come to deal with earthly matters.

Regarding the communicative function of “incense,” Wang Sifu described it as “a representation of the opening of communication [12],” meaning that the petitioner externalizes their desires, seeking fulfillment through communication with the gods, while ensuring the fulfillment of this process through the ritual itself, and burning incense is the way to ensure a response. As mentioned earlier, “incense” serves as a medium of communication between humans and gods in folk beliefs, and communication is a two-way process. The petitioner regards ancestral spirits as the imaginary respondents, and “incense smoke” is the communication signal sent from humans to gods. The burning process of incense is the process of this communication: the fire and smoke ignited during the burning process, the slowly burning incense, and its fragrance provide “both representation and response, both identification and recording”. The burning process is continuous communication; the flickering of flames may indicate whether desires may or may not be fulfilled. After burning, incense transforms from its original form into “ash,” representing the result of communication. The “incense ash” left behind is seen as the feedback from the gods to humans, a visualization of divine power. This is why “incense ash” holds sacred significance in folk ritual practices and is even used for healing purposes. “Incense ash” as a sacred existence after burning represents the result of communication between humans and gods and, to some extent, represents the gods, making it a crucial sacred object in folk beliefs.

3.2. Incense as Ritual

“Offering incense” as an activity to honor the deities is undoubtedly the most common and sacred among various ceremonial rituals. It is more accurate to say that incense itself is embedded as a ritual in people’s daily lives rather than being just an offering within the entire ceremony and space. Ceremonial rituals typically commence with the lighting of incense. Amidst the swirling smoke of incense, an imagined sacred space is constructed, evoking enduring and universal emotions and perceptions in specific contexts. It is widely believed that offering incense is a way to communicate with the souls of ancestors in the beyond and to daily pay homage to the deceased. “This way of communicating with the deceased, along with visible symbols such as ancestral tablets and devout worship, all indicate that the deceased still play a role in the world of the living [11].”

Émile Durkheim wrote in “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,” “Rituals are modes of behavior generated within the collective group, which must necessarily stimulate, maintain, or reshape certain psychological states within the group [10].” Rituals and the group engage in a two-way interactive process. Therefore, the incense offering ritual not only reinforces the relationship between believers and their “ancestors” but also strengthens the relationship between individuals and families. According to Yang Qingkun, “In times of crisis or major events such as births, marriages, or traditional festivals, people set up altars to worship various gods at home and hold various ceremonies. At such times, a sacred and reverent atmosphere pervades every corner of family life.”

In Chinese family life, the most important religious content is ancestor worship. Incense and candles form the foundation of a family's ancestral worship rituals. Within the ritual constructed by the lingering smoke of incense, people consciously enter a kind of sacred atmosphere and emotion. This spontaneous emotion keeps them in awe of their ancestors, believing that "there are gods three feet above one's head." At this moment, all family members gather together to share the "spiritual essence" of the offerings in the sacred name of the ancestors. This process continually strengthens the loyalty and unity among family members. Therefore, funeral rituals "help to maintain the group's memory of clan traditions and history, uphold moral beliefs, and foster group cohesion." Through rituals, emotions of pride, loyalty, and solidarity are also reinforced within the family.

3.3. Incense as Spatial Element

The term "incense" derives from the belief in ancestral worship and the practice of "offering sacrifices to ancestors," constructing a sacred space where religion intersects with secularism through the concrete expression of rituals. Within this space, ancestral worship permeates various features of religion into domestic settings, with the presence of incense allowing households to serve as places for religious activities. Yang Qingkun suggests, "Many religious activities do not take place in public venues. In a sense, every traditional family is an altar of worship, preserving ancestral shrines, portraits, or idols of household gods [11]." In each household, the simplest shrine consists of only two permanent installations: an incense burner and a pair of divination blocks. Through the medium of the incense burner, people believe they can communicate with the souls of their ancestors and establish a connection. In this process, the souls of ancestors are believed to morally and materially influence descendants, who must reverently carry on the offering of incense to the ancestors. These rituals and beliefs constitute a part of the traditional "ancestral worship" and are embedded in the structure of families and society bound by kinship.

Ancestral worship rituals, funerals, and other religious activities revolve around the imagery of "incense," forming an indispensable part of family structure. In the context of ancestral worship, a family's patriarch is responsible for managing the affairs of ancestral worship, and each member of the clan must participate in the rituals in an orderly manner based on their age and gender status within the family. Ancestral worship rituals repeat and consolidate the original family organization and system. According to the basic concept of Chinese tradition, although "rituals" are expressed in certain forms, their significance lies more in the meaning they symbolize, closely linked to the individual emotions of the participants [10]. From this perspective, when entering the sacred space centered around the imagery of "incense," the process of ancestral worship rituals is a continuous reinforcement of sacredness, stabilizing individual emotions during the ceremony. Through the use of "incense," the "ancestral worship" based on family structure permeates into the space of the family and its associated secular social system in a dispersed form, unfolding around secular institutions while also gaining support from the traditional social structure.

4. Inheritance: Continuity and Transformation of Incense Belief

4.1. Incense Inheritance Based on Humanistic Interaction Concepts

The overall tone of Chinese philosophy tends towards humanism, and the dissemination of ideas follows suit. Unlike the emphasis in the West on constructing a speculative and logical system, Chinese philosophy "emphasizes a deep understanding of the universe, society, human life, and its value norms" [13]. The traditional Chinese philosophical value system revolves around the relationship and positioning of the "heaven, earth, and human": Laozi emphasizes "following the Dao," stating "people follow the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Dao" (人法地,

地法天，天法道); Zhang Zai seeks to provide a metaphysical basis for ethics and morality; the Cheng-Zhu school endows “li” with absolute significance, elevating it above heaven and earth; Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Shouren believe that moral principles such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are inherent concepts in the human mind, advocating “the mind is the li” (心即理) [14]. From this, the rationalized norms of interaction, embodied in the concept of the “heaven, earth, and human” triad, further integrate “humans” into the arena of communication studies, jointly weaving the Confucian ethical network that dominates traditional Chinese interaction concepts. Originating from customs, the core of Chinese “incense culture” stems from the tradition of ancestral worship, supported by the metaphorical and ritualistic significance of “incense” in human-divine communication, evolving and elucidating the concept of incense within the structure of kinship and clan.

The essence of incense culture lies in the tradition of clan beliefs and ancestral worship, which, though perhaps labeled as feudal superstition in certain supernatural dimensions, still holds significant importance in dissemination studies and sociology due to its millennia-long existence in China. The core importance of the lineage family system in Chinese social organization endows ancestral worship with universal significance in China. In Chinese culture, intergenerational continuity often extends beyond two or three generations of blood relatives, and to string together the ties of kinship requires ancestral worship to fulfill its integrative function. In ancestral worship, “the social psychological effects of the deceased are not limited by time and space, they can transform biological connections into social connections, without confining actual kinship ties to a smaller, close-knit circle” [11]. Therefore, based on familial incense culture, numerous family members can be consolidated into an organized kinship structure. The innate blood relations among family members thus evolve into an effective social bond.

4.2. Decline of “Incense Inheritance”

The continuity of kinship relations relies on the transmission of “incense” through marriage and childbirth. Ancestral worship also plays a crucial role in this process. The “Book of Rites” elucidates the importance of conducting ancestral worship ceremonies during marriage and childbirth: “Chóng shì zōng miào shè jì, zé zǐ sūn shùn xiào. Jìn qí dào, duān qí yì, ér jiào shēng yān.” (崇事宗庙社稷，则子孙顺孝。尽其道，端其义，而教生焉) It can be seen that the concept and rituals of ancestral worship are closely related to the transmission of incense. However, in modern times, on the one hand, the popularization of higher education and the rapid development of the modern economy have placed increasing pressure on the younger generation. On the other hand, with the influx of Western ideas and the development of industrialization and informatization, the traditionally closed environment has been disrupted, and the sacred space centered around the “incense” imagery is gradually collapsing, both subjectively and objectively. Chinese notions of kinship and ethics are wavering, and the idea of procreation and succession is no longer deeply rooted. Consequently, family “discontinuation” has become the norm, and the willingness of young people to “inherit kinship” is decreasing.

In contrast to traditional Chinese families that adhere to ancestral worship, the kinship-based incense culture has been gradually waning in today’s Chinese households. The integrative and stabilizing effects of ancestral worship on blood relatives have shown a clear trend of interruption in modernized and Westernized Chinese families. Especially in large cities, such situations are becoming increasingly common as the pace of life accelerates. In the core families of modern society, close kinship relationships often exist only between three or two generations. Taking sibling relationships as an example: children have the responsibility of caring for their elderly parents, which to some extent ensures regular contact and mutual support to maintain the familial blood ties.

However, as they age, individuals will establish their own families and pursue different careers, which may gradually weaken their mutual connections. After the parents pass away, there is no longer a shared object of filial piety. Therefore, without a symbolic worship ceremony to help descendants remember their deceased parents and ancestors from earlier generations, and to strengthen the identification of living descendants with their family lineage, the generation that grows up and the descendants who marry and start families may become increasingly unfamiliar with each other, with almost nothing to bind them together as an organized family unit.

5. Conclusion

Max Weber once said, “Man is suspended in the web of meaning he has woven for himself. The analysis of culture will not be empirical science, but interpretive science” [15].

In the bidirectional interaction between humans and gods, incense carries the personal consciousness or psychological aspirations of the people, and through the incense itself, interaction with the gods is achieved. Almost all folk belief rituals involve the lighting of incense. Incense itself represents the people, who offer themselves to the gods through fire, and the gods also express their will through fire. Thus, humans and gods come from different worlds but find a space for interaction in the fire. The gods receive the people’s devotion through the fire, while the personal aspirations of humans transcend, reaching the original universal realm. Rituals are monuments of culture, condensed with culture and thought. The cultural significance of individuals is manifested through this means of condensation in rituals. In addition to “incense worship,” there are many similar symbols in folk beliefs. This paper aims to inspire a new perspective on the study of folk beliefs by using fire as a symbol in rituals and exploring the meaning of symbols to interpret cultural phenomena.

In the rapid development of modern society, although many traditional concepts and practices are gradually fading, the incense culture, as part of the Chinese nation, still has profound influence that cannot be ignored. The concept of incense inheritance is not only a religious belief or ancestral worship but also a deeply rooted cultural identity and values. It reflects a strong pursuit of life continuation, family prosperity, and bloodline inheritance, as well as deep contemplation of the past, present, and future.

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