Wafting incense and heavenly foods: the importance of smell in Chinese religion

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Abstract

The most notable impressions of religious sites and festivals in China often relate to how smells of burning incense and cooking foods help to create their special atmospheres. This may be because the Chinese word for 'worship' includes the order to light incense to the gods. By examining the importance of smells to a Chinese religious experience, this article analyses how scents heighten and shape people's memories and emotions, as well as helping to foster the 'hot and lively' social aspects of China's temples and religious festivals.

Keywords: smell, China, temples, incense, devotion

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When first visiting Paris’ Notre Dame or New York’s St John’s Cathedral, our vision immediately beholds the grandeur of the architecture and the aesthetics of the space. However, when visiting religious sites around China, our sense of vision may not dominate in the same way. Yes, the gate is beautiful, as are the grounds and buildings, but the most immediately noticeable impression does not relate to sight, but to a different sense: smell.

When approaching a typical Chinese temple, one can see that the entrance gate building is not imposing, but it has interesting decorations and its name in large gold characters on a black background directly above the main door. It likely has upturned corners on its roof, because designers think this helps to improve the energies of the place. Paying a small admission fee, and entering the temple complex, it is very likely that a visitor will not get a chance to look around before their nose is greeted with the heavy fragrance of sandalwood incense in the air. By this, I mean everywhere in the air. In fact, in nearly every temple that I have visited, I have had much the same experience. Sometimes the incense smoke is enough to billow in the wind, while sometimes there is only a faint hint of fragrance having soaked into the temple walls, but I find the unmistakable aroma of burning incense to be a major attribute that creates a temple’s atmosphere and sets it apart from other spaces. More to the point, many of the Chinese people with whom I have spoken also find the smell of incense to be the first thing that they notice upon entering a Daoist or Buddhist or folk religion temple – whether urban or rural.

While observing activities in temple settings, I quickly learned that lay people visiting a religious site – be it a temple, shrine or altar – generally perform one central activity as they approach a deity, a Buddha, a divinised cultural hero or their ancestor tablet: they light incense and bow or prostrate themselves (Figure 1). Then, people are expected to put a little bit of money in the donation box. Jesuit missionaries called this ‘worship’, but the Chinese name for this practice is shāoxiāng bàishén 烧香拜神, literally meaning ‘to light incense and prostrate oneself in front of the divine’ (or shāoxiāng bāifó 烧香拜佛 if in a Buddhist place, since fó is the Chinese name for the Buddha). Common Western assumptions about ‘worship’ do not seem to capture the meaning of the Chinese practice, and they could add some misunderstandings as well. I argue that using the actual meaning of the term is more appropriate and accurate.

In the West, common concepts of ‘worship’ include some emotional commitment along with devotion to or adoration of the deity. However, in China, ritual actions do not necessitate strong emotional states. The Chinese concept refers only to the physical actions of the person; however,
many laypeople have told me that it is important to be respectful while doing this. Respect is a core Chinese virtue, emphasised by Confucius, and still prominent in contemporary China.

After lighting incense, the next act is to bow or prostrate oneself. Prostrating refers to kneeling onto a prayer cushion, bowing the head, and placing the forehead, resting on one’s hands, on the cushion or the ground in front of it. Westerners call this ‘kowtow’ from the Chinese ‘kòutóu 吭头’ meaning ‘to knock one’s head’ (on the ground). However, in some parts of the country, such as central China, they do not use the word bàishén, ‘to prostrate’, but instead they say jìngshén 敬神, literally meaning ‘to respect the divine’ (Chau 2006:64). This also happens to be the technical term for ritual actions towards one’s ancestors: jìngzǔ 敬祖, ‘to respect or venerate the ancestors’, not to ‘worship’ them.

Here, I focus on the first part of these practices: the burning of incense. The most recognisable aspect of burning incense relates to one of our senses to which it seems few people pay much attention: our sense of smell. Our other senses of sight, hearing, touch and taste also are important to the full experience of a Chinese temple, but I focus here on the sense of smell because it is central to understanding a temple or shrine’s particular

Figure 1: The typical Chinese practice of ‘lighting incense and prostrating’. Photograph: Shawn Arthur, 2013.
kind of atmosphere. When discussing this issue, many laypeople explain that incense smell is crucial for people to experience the temple as prosperous and effective for answering prayers and needs: because this smell means that people use the temple, and not just as tourists.

When Graham Harvey asked that I write an article on smell in Chinese religions, I knew this would be a very interesting project. Some of my research indicates that touch is a prominent sense for Chinese lay practitioners, as they like to touch and rub temple statuary for health and good luck, for example. However, after critical reflection on my ethnographic research in China, I conclude that smell is even more fundamental to a typical religious experience.

As I went to work looking for good reference materials for this study, I quickly realised that this topic is woefully understudied among China Studies scholars. In fact, I found relatively few published pieces that mention smell or things related to smell in Chinese religions. Luckily, I have been asking people about the beautiful aroma of Chinese incense every time I visit China. In this article, I explore various smells and their meanings associated with Chinese religions – incense being the primary scent-maker, along with foods and firecrackers. I also examine how these aromas can heighten and shape people’s memories and emotions, as well as help to foster ‘hot and noisy’ social aspects of China’s temples and religious festivals.

**What is smell?**

Appealing to some biology and psychology, let us ask, ‘What is smell, anyway?’ and ‘Why might it be important to religionists?’ in order to frame our exploration. Smell works when airborne particles enter the nose and get caught on the skin at the back of the nasal passages where there are millions of sensory receptor sites. Humans have about 450 different types of olfactory receptor sites, whereas dogs have 838 by comparison, and it is the combination of signals from these receptors that create what we call smell. The human nose is much more sophisticated than we used to think. Rather than only being able to smell ten thousand different aromas, recent research shows that our noses can distinguish at least one trillion different odours (Henshaw 2014:28).

Odour particles chemically bind to the proteins in the receptor cells, which then send an electrical impulse along the neurons to the olfactory bulb, at the base of the front of the brain, which begins to process the information (Reinarz 2014:18). The olfactory bulb is part of the limbic system that deals with emotions and memories – including fight, flight or freeze
reactions. The limbic system is one of the evolutionarily oldest parts of the brain (Corbett 2006:227). The signal also travels to the trigeminal nerve, which can cause physical, facial reactions to smells, such as when our eyes water when slicing an onion (Henshaw 2013:24).

The limbic system then forwards the scent information to the frontal cortex, where the brain tries to understand and cognitively interpret the aroma signals, and to the thalamus, which sends the information to other neural networks in the brain for connecting to memories, taste and learning (Peace Rhind 2013:19). Due to the involvement of the limbic system, the major facial nerve and the frontal cortex, we can have strong and immediate emotional, physical and cognitive responses to any smell we experience.

Evidently, we begin to make strong associations between smells and emotional memory from before we are even born (Peace Rhind 2013:22). Meaning is created from an association of the smell to a particular event or series of similar events – as with the case of lighting incense. Chinese people light a particular type of sandalwood incense to the gods and to the ancestors, but it generally is not used in other areas of life. If people use incense for other reasons, such as to relax in the home, it tends to be of a different type and smell. Making these links between a new scent and one’s larger contextual experience can lead to conditioned responses that trigger emotions and memories.

For example, smelling the fragrance of incense each time they enter a religious site within which the person practises reverence, it becomes progressively easy for the person to enter the desired mindset just by getting a whiff of incense smoke. Similarly, having a good experience at a temple festival then becomes ingrained in the psyche through the mechanisms of memory development that are linked to smell. Then, it becomes progressively easy for the person to recall the good feelings, if not the memory itself, when they smell the same aromas or combination of aromas. In this way, smells, emotions, memories and meanings are quite closely linked (see McHugh 2011).

Apparently, even the mere suggestion of scent can affect people’s moods and experiences (Henshaw 2013:38). Following this logic, presenting unlit incense sticks to a deity in circumstances where they cannot be lit could still lead to feelings that the offering is complete and effective. Conditioned responses, perceptions of place, expectations as well as the smell of the unlit incense, all can combine to heighten and shape people’s memories and emotions, thus creating very real experiences for practitioners. Additionally, smell can heighten our other senses.
Smellscapes

Imagine, if you will, the scene associated with Adam Yuet Chau’s description of visiting a rural community festival.

The worshiper gets off the bus or tractor-truck, whichever is his means of transportation to get to the temple festival, follows the swarms of other worshipers up and along the valley, passing through noodle stands, watermelon stands, gambling circles, song-and-dance tents, buys a few bundles of incense and spirit money from the incense hawkers, climbs up the steps to the main temple hall, throws the spirit money into the bonfire, lights a string of firecrackers, kneels and prays, burns incense, puts some money in the donation bowl, shakes the divination cylinder and gets his divination slip number, ... goes to the divination slips room and has the divination poem interpreted, then squeezes his way through the crowd to catch a glimpse of the opera performance, and wanders through different parts of the festival ground, snacks or eats a bowl of noodles, chats with acquaintances and co-villagers or complete strangers, plays a few rounds of games, watches the fireworks at night, and always finds himself in the company of tens of thousands of other worshipers .... (2006:160–2)

Here we encounter many forms of stimuli: strong smells, loud sounds, colourful sights, many tasty foods and people jostling each other for position – all in an environment focused on venerating the main temple deity on its birthday.

It is this atmosphere that is of interest to a few scholars, particularly the aspects that relate to smells. Trying to explain how scent is associated with presence in a place and/or involvement with one’s immediate environment, leading scholars call this concept the ‘smellscapes’ (J. Douglas Porteous, cited in Rodaway 2002:64), the ‘aromascape’ (Rasmussen 1999:55), and the ‘olfactory geography’ (Rodaway 2002:62; see also Henshaw 2013:32; Reinarz 2014:25).

Victoria Henshaw argues, ‘Compared with memories gained through other senses, odour experiences can be more frequently recalled after many years, even several decades after they were last experienced’ (2013:31). Thus, the nostalgia produced through scent memories at temple festivals could be very strong indeed and this indicates ways that smell can function in and be influenced by both physiological and sociocultural forces. Kelvin Low advocates that scholars study more of these particular contexts to better understand how ‘smells are ordered by and shape cultures ... [as well as] affect and influence our everyday life experiences’ (Low 2009:9).

Yet there is more to this story. The associations that the brain makes are not the only way to influence one’s experience through smell. Examining a range of incense ingredients through various medical resources
and pharmacopoeia, I found that most of the major ingredients in popular temple incense can function as psychoactive agents, not merely fragrances. As incense is well known to support a meditative state of mind, this might help to explain why incense has positive effects for people, and why temples seem to be sacred and peaceful places.

From archaeological and textual evidence, we know that Daoists from the earliest period, nearly two thousand years ago, used cannabis, calamus (sweet flag) and Sichuan peppercorns in their incense, along with mineral ingredients like lead, cinnabar and arsenic sulphide. Each of these has psychoactive components, which when inhaled in their meditation chambers were likely to produce relaxation and hallucinations (Avadhani et al. 2013:601; Dannaway 2010:489–90, 495 n. 9). Similarly, mediums across China are known to inhale hallucinogenic incense smoke in order to facilitate entering a trance state (ter Haar 1999:7).

Transforming spaces from ordinary to special or even sacred places can happen through the use of popular temple incense in China because it contains ingredients such as sandalwood (tánxiāng 檀香), which can have a calming effect on the smeller and can act as an anti-aphrodisiac (to assist monks and nuns with maintaining celibacy), and agarwood (chénxiāng 沉香; also known as aloeswood), whose smoke has significant sedative qualities (Bazin 2013:34; Miyoshi et al. 2013:1474; see also Jung 2013). Other important incense materials include musk, ambergris, camphorwood, coarse sawdust, glutinous incense powder, fragrance powders, dye colours and perfume [or essential] oils (Chen 2013:127; Siripanich et al. 2014:138). Thin bamboo sticks are dipped in incense paste, or the paste is hand rolled onto the stick (Chan 1989). Similarly, popular incense in Tibet typically contains a paste of juniper leaves mixed with herbs, saffron, sandalwood, agarwood and musk. Much like sandalwood and agarwood, juniper also has sedative and mind-clearing properties (Bazin 2013:34), and researchers are finding that even frankincense (Boswellia sp.) produces psychoactive effects (Dannaway 2010:485).

Smell as a cultural phenomenon

Keeping in mind the biology and psychology of smell with the known characteristics of popular incense ingredients, we can now proceed to discuss how society and culture are integral to understanding the experiences of key Chinese religious smells. Let us start with a little bit of terminology. A common Chinese term for the verb ‘to smell’ is wén 闻, although in ancient China wén referred more to hearing or perceiving – since the character contains parts that show an ear pressed in a doorway. The other common
term is *xiù* 嗅, which means ‘to smell or to sniff’. Chinese has a much richer vocabulary for discussing scents and smells than English, and here are a couple of examples of the way Chinese terms are constructed. *Yòngbíxī* 用鼻吸 means ‘to use your nose to breathe,’ which can infer ‘smelling’; *qiwèi* 气味 means ‘scent,’ but the characters mean ‘to smell or taste the air’; *xiùjué* 嗅觉 uses the characters meaning ‘to smell’ and ‘to wake up’ in order to indicate ‘a sense of smell, an atmosphere, or general mood of a situation.’

One thing that creates a good atmosphere is burning incense in a religious site. The term ‘incense’ derives from the Latin term *incendere*, meaning ‘to burn.’ This word has a surprising connection to the word ‘perfume’ as this comes from the Latin *per fumum*, meaning ‘through smoke’, which seems to indicate a way of communicating with the divine in the Roman context (Moeran 2009:440; Rahim 2005:4418). On the other hand, the Chinese word for incense, *xiāng* 香, means ‘fragrance’, and it refers to perfumes and aromatic fragrances, especially those made by burning sticks, cones, coils or powders made from a wide range of materials, such as fat and aromatic woods, and using the smoke to attract deities and ancestors (ter Haar 1999:4–5). The significance of incense to Chinese religions is clear when we look at the large number of words that include the term; for instance, a ‘pilgrim’ is known as an ‘incense guest’ *xiāngke* 香客, ‘pilgrimage’ is called ‘offering incense’ *jìnxiāng* 进香, the ‘altar’ is called an ‘incense table’ *xiāng'ān* 香案, ‘clergy’ and ‘mediums’ are known as ‘incense heads’ *xiāngtou* 香头, ‘cigarettes’ are ‘incense smoke/tobacco’ *xiāngyān* 香烟, among many others (ter Haar 1999:5–6).

Additionally, villagers in many traditional and contemporary Chinese communities focus their identities not on the local temple or its main deity, but on the incense burner (*xiānglú* 香炉) itself, and this is why in southern China, the head of a local social unit is called the ‘chief of the [incense-]burner’ (*lúzhǔ* 炉主). Among many communities, locals have stories about the incense-burner in their temple – what it originally looked like, how it was destroyed during the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s when almost all spare metal was melted to make steel, and how a couple of families or the volunteer community raised money to commission a new casting. The incense-burner is likely a focal point because the origin of modern incense-burners is in ancient Chinese bronze vessels that held sacrificial foods for the divine, and there are indications that incenses were used back into the Zhou dynasty (1025–256 BCE), long before the arrival of Buddhism in 68 CE (Milburn 2016:441).

We have discussed that the Chinese word for ‘worship’ (*shāoxiāng bāishén* 烧香拜神) includes the order to light incense to the gods; and I agree with ter Haar that the burning of incense is ‘truly the most fundamental
religious act in Chinese culture’ (1999:5). Yet the Chinese light incense for a wide variety of reasons that have multiple layers of meaning beyond merely respecting deities and spirits.

**Incense and smell use in Chinese religions**

We continue with an examination of a typical temple organisation. The main gate is in the south, and the largest buildings, which are shrine halls, are along the central axis towards the north – with each shrine hall getting larger towards the back. This is because many Chinese temples are built to symbolise a sacred mountain. The visitor starts at the bottom of the mountain and works their way up each peak and valley until they reach the summit, which houses the most important deity statues. These temples also have a variety of natural elements such as foliage, fragrant flowers and trees, which together bring in other mountain elements. Why mountains? Because their peaks are in the clouds (almost like clouds of incense), where immortals live and where one could be physically closer to the gods who live in the heavens (the stars).

Incense assists with the creation of the temple as sacred mountain, and thus the temple as sacred space (Figure 2). As soon as visitors cross through the gatehouse, they usually can begin to smell burning incense or the lingering aroma of years of incense smoke that seeped into the walls. Since it is not noticeable on the sidewalk next to the temple, it is as if the temple walls themselves want to keep the aroma inside.

The clergy who work and/or live in the temple regularly light incense in front of each shrine hall, and visitors who wish to respect the gods will follow suit. In this way, the use of incense – the scent, people’s experience of it and its symbolic meaning – helps to demarcate and create the special atmospheres that temples have. Combining all of these layers in their awareness, on a typical day Chinese visitors and pilgrims are able to walk through the entrance gate as if it is a gate leading away from the normal world into a sacred time where stress disappears, traffic and crowd noises are gone, and one is reminded to adopt an attitude of respect, reverence and morality.

Along with the physical setting, temples have explicit and implicit rules for behaviour. In this way, the temple becomes ‘sacred’ in the Durkheimian sense of ‘being set apart and forbidden’. However, on a festival day, the atmosphere changes dramatically to one of noisy and boisterous celebration, and the thick plumes of sandalwood incense contribute positively to the ‘hot and noisy’ sociality of the event. I address this phenomenon in more detail shortly.
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Smell and communicating with gods, spirits and ancestors

Following from our theme of incense facilitating sacred space, incense smoke and other fragrant aromas often imply the presence of, or a connection with, the divine, a Buddha or an ancestor. In formal religious rituals, burning incense is the first act, and it is meant to invite the divine to be present during the ritual. Blake and Clements explain one metaphor behind this action in that an aroma is not solid, it is a disembodied phenomenon – much like spirit beings that someone wishes to attract. Ritualists then take for granted that the divine heeds the invitation, and they assume the divine is present (Blake 2011:91; Clements 2014:46). In a similar way, Moeran points out that ‘the words of the Buddha were said to be fragrant, [and] the smell of incense was thought to invoke the Buddha’s presence’ (2009:440). In fact, Christianity calls this idea the ‘odour of sanctity’, meaning that worshippers know the divine presence due to the noticeable pleasing fragrance (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994:52; Low 2009:21).

Jonathan Reinarz argues that incense smoke and fragrance were associated with religion from its earliest history because these could be tangibly sensed but not seen, heard or touched (Reinarz 2014:19). The scent and
smoke of the incense or fragrant paper rises to the heavens while people show reverence or pray for assistance. Thus, the burning incense becomes the most common and important medium for human–divine communication and interaction. Subsequently, the aroma marks this process (Rasmussen 1999:64; Reinarz 2014:32; see also Milburn 2016:442).

**Incense as sacrifice and offering**

Of what does this communication consist? Typically, people use candles and incense as offerings – along with some money in the *gongde*功德, the so-called ‘virtuous action’ box – as they ask for assistance or say thanks to the deity for helping them in the past. This process is the key to Chinese religions: maintaining one’s relationship with the divine (on behalf of oneself and/or one’s family) through respect and reciprocation. Originating in ancient China and becoming essential under Confucian sociopolitical structures, respectful and reciprocal relationships are still the ideal socio-culturally determined behaviour among humans and between humans and the divine (Jackson 2011:613).

Practising this ideal model for interacting with the divine begins with burning incense, giving a donation and making a vow (*xǔ yuàn* 许愿) based on what a layperson needs and what they can give. Then, when one’s prayers are answered, one is obligated to return to fulfil the vow (*huán yuàn* 还愿) (see Administrator 2009). Whether addressing their prayers to the folk God of Wealth, the Daoist God of Medicine, Confucius the Ancestor of Education or Guanyin the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy – or all of the above – people use the same model.

Basically, what happens is that the person is setting up a barter contract by giving an offering with the prayer. The person then expects an obligatory reciprocal response from the other-than-human being. In the Chinese worldview, deities are alive, present, and have agency – not as a statue, but as a metaphysical ‘person,’ and one of their jobs is to assist humans with their needs. Therefore, this barter system is not disrespectful at all, it is seen as quite respectful because the person is essentially paying for part of the assistance up front.

Regarding offering incense, not all incense is the same. Incense commonly comes in cones, coils and sticks; but the sticks can be thin and small or huge (Figure 3). I mention this because there is one aspect of offering incense that is somewhat controversial among Chinese religionists: using large sticks of incense. The term *shāogāoxiāng* 烧高香 means ‘to burn tall incense,’ and it has the implication of ‘thanking profusely.’ In many cases, people, especially men, buy and burn a large incense stick in order
to demonstrate their seriousness and the importance of their problem or issue. However, as the middle class in China is growing rapidly, and they have extra money, a growing number of younger men seem to be purchasing and burning the largest incense sticks in the temple to show off their new wealth and social stature – and what seems to many older adults to be an inflated sense of self-worth. In other words, a serious means of asking for help is being co-opted as a status symbol, which many people think is unethical and crass. Of course, without asking the person why they lit a massive stick of incense, no one would know the answer with certainty – it could be to show off or to respectfully pray for family and friends in crisis.

**Forming relationships through scents**

Beyond respect, the most crucial aspects of human-to-deity relationships are mutual trust (xiāngxin 相信) and reciprocity (gānyìng 感应). To mutually trust means to trust that the other ‘person’ will uphold their obligations in a mutually reciprocal and beneficial relationship. Also, the Chinese
understanding of ‘reciprocity’ is strongly linked to concerns about acting appropriately (lǐ 礼), cultivating morals and harmonising one’s interpersonal relationships (guānxì 关系) (Feng 2011:29, 120–1; Yao and Zhao 2010:10, 197).

Much as with ‘worship,’ Westerners often misinterpret what is happening here by translating ‘mutual trust’ as ‘belief,’ but the Chinese language does not have a term for the noun ‘belief’ – as in ‘I have a belief’ – and they do not think in terms of ‘believing in’ something. Rather, mutual trust refers to ‘believing’ that the other party will uphold their end of the bargain.

Here, we can link to similar ideas and practices across the globe. We can use Graham Harvey’s concept of ‘animism’ to think about Chinese perceived relationships with the divine. Harvey defines ‘animism’ as ‘the attempt to live respectfully and reciprocally as members of a diverse, multi-species community of living persons (only some of whom are human) – and all of which deserve respect’ (Harvey 2012; 2013:126). For Harvey, ‘persons’ – even other-than-human beings – are known to be ‘persons’ when they interact and communicate with other ‘persons’ including deities, ancestors and other spirit beings in certain ways – such as respectfully, reciprocally and at least somewhat willingly (Harvey 2013:124). Similarly, for many Chinese, their practices with incense emphasise ‘animistic’ reciprocal communication, cooperation and mutual respect – which they experience when venerating their ancestors and the divine (see Yao and Zhao 2010:40); and people strive to avoid offending any deity or ancestor (see Zavidovskaya 2012:183).

**Smell and purification, health and the importance of cleanliness**

In addition to external communication, a number of my interlocutors explained that when one lights incense, it shows one’s internal character – whether one is doing it ‘appropriately’, or in other words, following religiously created and socially sanctioned norms for bowing properly, showing generosity, being respectful and serious, and the like. Staub and colleagues interviewed a Buddhist nun who said, ‘Burning incense … is a statement of not doing bad things any more. Through the burning of incense, you settle down [and] you get rid of hardness’ (Staub, Geck and Weckerle 2011:11). Additionally, once the incense is lit, the bows completed and the prayers all said, incense becomes a symbol of the laity ensuring the protection of their health and wellbeing. Thus, upon smelling incense, their expectations are renewed and reinforced. This brings people to their local temple on Chinese lunar New Year’s Day to ‘Burn the First Incense Stick’, which people believe will bring them great merit, good fortune and wellbeing.
While clergy and laypeople use incense to promote health, people also use its smoke to cleanse and purify themselves, places and things. Thinking of Mary Douglas’ influential theories about purity and pollution, there are a range of formal rituals across Chinese religions that use incense smoke – with its primary qualities of burning and emitting a sweet aroma – for purification purposes (see Rahim 2005:4418; Staub, Geck and Weckerle 2011:7–11). In fact, some of the earliest Chinese written sources indicate that people burned aromatic woods and plants to drive out malignant energies or spirits such as ghosts (ter Haar 1999:5) – and these types of practices continue today in both official and folk religious traditions. In Chinese temples, to burn incense and to be covered in incense smoke is simultaneously to be purified and ideally to reflect on one’s morality in these sacred places.

**Incense and ritual**

It is Chinese ritual tradition to burn incense before and during all formal religious rituals, and many informal ones as well. Different religions have special ways of holding and burning incense, but the goals and the expectations of the laity are quite similar across traditions – respect, communication, purification and such.

Many people burn incense without deity reverence, but in religious connotations, it is common to burn incense in front of an object of veneration, such as at ancestral and kitchen god altars and during meditation practice, but also as people read, or even recite, religious texts and scriptures (ter Haar 1999:3–5). By the sixth century CE, Chinese monks were even using varying lengths of incense to mark time during meditation and other practices (Rahim 2005:4419). In 1870, missionary Justus Doolittle wrote:

> The Chinese use an incredible amount of incense yearly. Some families use it daily, others only on set occasions, as on the 1st and 15th of each Chinese month, on birthdays, or when, for any special reason or occasion, they desire to worship the god of the kitchen, or their ancestral tablets, or their household gods generally. In temples, by the priests, large quantities of incense are burned. Before the principal idols incense is kept continually burning. The people, in their occasional or periodical visits to the temples for religious purposes, always burn incense. (1870:236)

Smell is also important to Daoist and folk religious formal rituals, where candles, incense, food, paper and firecrackers represent the cosmic Five Phases of water, metal, earth, wood and fire, respectively. Each ritual material is meant to heighten the senses, and incense and firecrackers hold
special significance as we have discussed (Blake 2011:83). According to Fred Blake,

the candles bring forth a flickering glow that makes the cosmos luminous; incense provides a smoldering fragrance that permeates the cosmos with desire for the ... presence of spirits; food provides flavorful sustenance, ... and sustains life; paper money shifts the active mode of [awareness] ... from the [taste] of food ... to the touch of paper ..., in making and circulating things of value. [...] And finally, popping firecrackers dispel the residues of solemnity with playfulness (rènào) (2011:86; also see Jochim 1990).

Scents of food and firecrackers

Let us move on to examine another significant smell: the aromas of food. We examine food because we know that aromas affect and can complement taste. I am referring not to home-cooked comfort food, but rather to restaurants, volunteers and food-cart vendors present in temples and at temple festivals.

The first smells of food up for discussion relate to temple restaurants. A number of larger temples have restaurants on-site to feed guests. Daoist and Buddhist restaurants are vegetarian because members of both groups have taken vows to avoid killing – and that includes being involved with the killing of animals. These cooks create some of the best-tasting foods on the planet. Using a wide range of vegetables, mushrooms and fungi, tofu (dòufu 豆腐) and different starches like root vegetables, they are able to create delicious vegetarian versions of normal meat-based dishes without harm to any sentient being. Sometimes visitors can smell the aromas of freshly cooked food coming from these restaurants, and this creates good connections with the temple – and perhaps the religion as well.

Second, many Buddhist temples sponsor associations of local regularly visiting laity, and once a month these volunteers prepare a vegetarian meal with noodles and soups for temple-goers that day. This is one way that the laity can generate good merit – by helping the community in need – with free food and free entrance to the temple. Members of these lay associations create a welcoming atmosphere, which includes good conversation, generosity and tasty, good-smelling foods.

Third, Chinese temples celebrate the birthdays of some of the popular deities whose statue representations are housed inside. These birthday ‘celebrations’ often involve special foods associated with the deity. For example, Mazu, the ‘matron ancestor’, who is a Goddess of the Sea, evidently likes vegetarian dumplings and longevity noodles. On her birthday, lay volunteers prepare and serve hundreds of small bowls of these fresh-smelling
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Foods to the large crowds in the temple. Receiving and eating these foods is considered to be very auspicious, as they are supposed to be blessed by the goddess. People even wait in line for these dishes and only eat one dumpling so they can bring the rest home for their families to share, and thus partake in the blessings as well.

Fourth, and last, we have foods associated with large holiday festivals and temple fairs, where delicious smells of food fill the air from a wide range of nearby restaurants and street vendors with their food-carts. Walking through the crowds at one of these events one could encounter nearly any food – from roasted nuts and candied fruit, to fried rice, soups and noodle dishes, to spicy dishes and stinky dòufu. The smells can be strong or subtle, but they are a welcome addition to the festivities. The foods are eaten by hand or in small bowls, more as a snack than as a full meal so people can eat a variety of foods to improve their overall experience of and excitement with walking around at a busy and crowded festival all day.

Adam Chau describes the cacophony of aromas at a large rural festival for the Black Dragon King:

The smells and tastes of all kinds of food: noodles made of wheat and potato flour, griddle cakes, goat intestine soup, stir-fried dishes, garlic and scallion, vinegar and red pepper, watermelons, small yellow melons, ideas, soft drinks, burning liquor, beer; the pungency of diesel exhaust fumes, firecrackers, freshly slaughtered pigs and goats, and their warm blood; the mixed fragrance and pungency of incense and burning spirit money; the faint smell of sweat from so many people squeezing through the main temple hall. (2006:160)

The constantly changing yet pungent range of smells here provides a sense of the richness of a rural temple fair atmosphere. Along with these fair foods, festival events ideally have a very celebratory atmosphere with many different activities going on all day and into the night, and this is accentuated by people periodically lighting a string of firecrackers to invite the gods and to scare away negativity.

People light firecrackers at holidays, temple festivals, marriages, funerals, the Chinese lunar New Year, the Qingming grave sweeping day, business openings and other occasions. They may be used to wake up the local Earth God, but they are generally used to rid the area of unwanted energies, ghosts and harmful earthly spirits. At these events, people just light a string of firecrackers, they do not need an elaborate show of fireworks – which would not have the same effect because shooting fireworks make their loud noises high up in the air rather than close to the ground where they are needed to disperse malignant energies. As a result, the aroma of
burnt gunpowder mingles with food and incense smells and contributes to the lively atmosphere.

**Social implications of incense use and social meanings of smell in China**

The term for the desired festive atmosphere is rènào 热闹, literally ‘hot and lively or noisy’, and it refers to a social atmosphere that is enjoyable, energetic and exciting. The ‘hot’ of ‘hot and noisy’ is made of multiple layers of experience: heat from strung up lights, food vendor stalls, burning candles and smouldering incense sticks. As large numbers of people light and place bundles of incense sticks in the incense-burners to smoke, the incense gives off a slight ambient warmth (especially if the sticks catch fire). The boisterous nature of these events is exactly what organisers and sponsors hope to achieve: a lively spectacle that everyone enjoys and which brings the community closer together for a short time. Whereas rènào is the hallmark of a successful festival or celebratory atmosphere, I argue that smell is a central feature in this concept. Without the smells of cooking foods, burning incense, firecracker smoke, cigarette smoke, sweaty people and such, a sense of rènào could not be achieved (see Chau 2008:490).

Of course, the sounds of fireworks also contribute to the ‘hot and lively’ atmosphere expected at special temple and community events. They are an exciting addition to all the other noises associated with a crowded area of celebrants, tour groups on pilgrimage, food and merchandise vendors trying to capture the attention of each passer-by, music and other local entertainment such as opera troops, formal ritual music with its cymbals, drums and chanting, and so on.

Some incense-burners require people to bend over under a metal canopy to place their incense sticks into the sand and ash. When there are enough people doing this, the bundles of sticks can spontaneously catch fire causing much excitement and crowds who want to add their bundles to the blazing fiery pile. To avoid too much smoke or spontaneous fires in the incense-burners, some temples will cover the incense-burner and have people just place their unlit incense on the cover or on the altar in front of the deity, since the incense seems mostly to be an offering in the first place, and lighting it is secondary (it is the customary means of presenting the offering). Due to associations of memory, of burning incense and its smell, unlit incense offerings can be equally effective for participants.

Smell is not only important to emotions and senses of place, but also socially, as with the people who take a moment to recognise all of the other people around them who have and are experiencing the same particular
circumstances in a temple or large festival setting. This can lead to a sense of collectivity and group cohesion – at least for a short time. To burn incense and prostrate oneself is also to show willingness to participate in socially responsible and ‘culturally-constituted behavior[s]’ (Jackson 2011:613) of respect. As Rasmussen argues, offering perfume and incense to others acts as a mark of social personhood and belonging (1999:63). Here I suggest that we recall Graham Harvey’s (2012) idea of animism, and we can see that offering incense to other-than-human spirits and divinities constitutes an attempt to live respectfully in a diverse world. Smell, then, functions as a social marker as well as an aesthetic one.

Why light incense?

Why do people go to temples and light incense? The incense packets themselves depict some intended desires that people want. Figure 4 shows a selection of incense boxes from different temples. The names of these products are: *Beckon Money*, twice on the left, *Pray for Good Fortune*, and then three different *Peace and Harmony* incenses on the right. Many of the more expensive and larger sticks of incense also have prayers written on the incense, such as a popular yellow stick that says, ‘incense for a wealthy and beautiful home and long life’. Most bundles of small, thinner incense have a band around them that says, ‘peace and harmony for the whole family’. During busy temple days, on holidays, and full and new moons, people will even go through the garbage and recycling bins at a site to collect these

![Figure 4: A selection of Chinese incense boxes. Photograph: Shawn Arthur, 2013.](image-url)
wrappers. Because they are associated with the temple, and they have the blessings written on them, some people see these wrappers as a form of paper that can be burnt as a prayer for their wellbeing.

Additionally, I have compiled the range of reasons why lay people visit religious sites to light incense and prostrate themselves (see Arthur 2018). People also touch auspicious statues and words in temples and purchase a wide range of charms and talismans to hang in their environment that are supposed to provide good luck and blessings for them.

The most common issue that surfaced during my research was that people are trying to control life's situations in order to achieve a general sense of wellbeing, prosperity, harmony and improvement in their lives. In trying to accomplish this goal, people work to attract the influence of other-than-human persons or powers (deities and/or ancestors), and they seek protection, economic security, figuring out their destinies, controlling fate and fortune, and solving personal and home life issues (see Arthur 2018; Arthur and Mair 2017). The wellbeing that these laity search for includes better ways to deal with and solve the problems that they face in life, looking for hope in bleak circumstances, and working to better understand themselves and why life is the way it is. Over and over people told me they came to a religious site seeking health, safety and peace for themselves and their families.

Health effects of incense

Our exploration of smell in Chinese religions has thus far focused on positive aspects; however, the fragrant smells of incense can come at a price. Although agarwood and sandalwood have a range of health benefits when ingested (Hashim et al. 2016; Mohagheghzadeh et al. 2006), burning agarwood- and sandalwood-based incenses indoors or everyday can have negative effects on the person inhaling the fragrant smoke. Research shows that incense contains a range of heavy metals and other carcinogens that have been proven to have negative health effects on factory workers who make incense and temple workers who inhale incense smoke throughout each day. As one might imagine, lung and upper respiratory cancers, asthma, leukemia and contact dermatitis are some of the common diseases stemming from the regular inhalation of incense smoke, especially the heavy smoke associated with temple festivals and holidays (Chiang and Liao 2006; Lap et al. 2011; Navasumrit et al. 2008; Seow and Lan 2016:155; Siripanich et al. 2014:138). Lin and co-workers argue that 'in order to prevent airway disease and other health problem, it is advisable that people should reduce the exposure time when they worship at the temple with heavy incense.
smokes, and ventilate their house when they burn incense at home’ (Lin, Krishnaswamy and Chi 2008:1).

Conclusion
Looking at the speed at which temples across China are being reconstructed and religious activities are resuming, one might get the impression that Chinese people are very religious. However, survey data and people’s responses when interviewed indicate that very few Chinese people admit to being religious. Part of the reason for this is Chinese connotations of the term zōngjiào 宗教, which originally meant ‘ancestral teachings.’ When the new meaning of the term as ‘religion’ came from Japan in the 1860s, it also came with the connotation of ‘the Christian way’ of being ‘religious’ – such as having strong beliefs and faith, being exclusive to one tradition, devotion to a single deity, being antagonistic to other traditions, etc. Given that few Chinese people focus on these things in their lives, it is no wonder that only around 10% of many survey participants agreed with the statement that they were ‘religious.’ Even when talking to people in temples just after watching them light incense and prostrate themselves, they would say they were not ‘religious’ (zōngjiào).

However, as researchers become more aware of the Chinese context and ask about venerating ancestors and lighting incense at a temple, the percentage of positive responses grows to over 80%. I found this as well in my visits to China. Many Chinese people use the technology of what we call religion – such as charms, talismans, incense, candles, bowing in front of a deity statue and touching auspicious statues – for safety, luck, health and the like. And I find that smell – especially of incense, temple foods and firecrackers when appropriate – plays a key role in people’s perceived successes.

The phenomenon of ‘religions’ in China does not rely on a personal psychological state or an emotional commitment, but the smells in religious spaces can and do elicit these states. As we have seen, the often taken-for-granted sense of smell in religious life also reflects larger social ideals and structures, such as its emphasis on respect, reciprocation and fulfilling mutual obligations. Since incense smoke has been one of the most important ways that people feel they can communicate and interact with the divine and with one’s ancestors, we must consider smell when we attempt to understand Chinese religions and culture. In fact, when asked why they light incense, many people told me, ‘It’s just part of being Chinese!’
About the author

Shawn Arthur is an assistant professor in the Department for the Study of Religions at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, USA. His first book, *Early Daoist Dietary Practices: Examining Ways to Health and Longevity* (Lexington Books, 2013), focuses on a fifth-century Daoist text that contains recipes for achieving immortality. His current research focuses on contemporary popular religion in China and how lay practices and ideas can contribute to our understandings of ‘religion’ from non-official perspectives.

References


