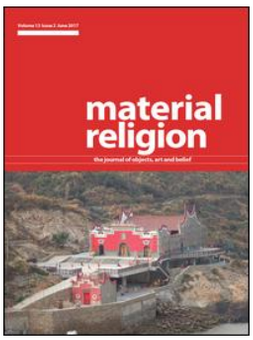

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Material Religion
The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief

ISSN: 1743-2200 (Print) 1751-8342 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfmr20

Scents, Community, and Incense in Traditional Chinese Religion

Scott Habkirk & Hsun Chang

To cite this article: Scott Habkirk & Hsun Chang (2017) Scents, Community, and Incense in Traditional Chinese Religion, Material Religion, 13:2, 156-174, DOI: 10.1080/17432200.2017.1289306

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2017.1289306

scents, community, and incense in traditional chinese religion

scott habkirk[a] and hsun chang[b]

[a]university of alberta, edmonton, canada; [b]canada academia sinica, taipei, taiwan

ABSTRACT

In a religious context incense is used for a variety of reasons in various cultures, usually for the purposes of healing or purification. In traditional Chinese religion, incense and incense objects are essential for making a connection with spiritual beings as well as establishing and maintaining religious communities. For Chinese religious practitioners, burning incense opens up communication with deities, and incense ash is required to found new temples. Through pilgrimage, incense is used to demarcate the territory of a deity and maintain relationships between temple communities. Chinese communities have also had a long history of forming voluntary associations, religious and otherwise, that have been organized around the use of incense objects. This article examines the use of incense in traditional Chinese religion, how incense objects are used to build and maintain communities, and how incense acts as a tangible bridge between the spiritual and material.

Keywords: anthropology, incense, smell, religion, Daoism, Buddhism, Taiwan, Chinese.

Scott Habkirk is a Canadian PhD candidate at the University of Alberta in the Department of Anthropology in Edmonton, Canada. He lived in Tainan, Taiwan for two and a half years (2005–2008), returned there to do the fieldwork for his master's degree (2010), and returned again to produce a documentary film project based on his research (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfnABUhR5-k). His MA focused on the persistence of traditional Chinese religious practice and belief in Taiwan, and his PhD research explores the connections between traditional Chinese martial arts, medicine, and religion.
shabkirk@ualberta.ca

Hsun Chang is Taiwanese and has been doing research on religious pilgrimage there since 1996. She received her PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of California in Berkeley and is currently a Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan. Her teaching and research interests include folk medicine and folk religion in Taiwan, religious revival in China, and intangible cultural heritage in Taiwan and China.

Material Religion volume 13, issue 2, pp. 156–174
DOI: 10.1080/17432200.2017.1289306

Volume 13
Issue 2

Material Religion
Article

The use of incense in ceremonies is one of the most widely practiced religious customs. In this article we argue that, for traditional Chinese religious practitioners, incense, incense ash, and incense burners are crucial for interaction with spiritual beings as well as for building and maintaining religious communities. By traditional Chinese religion we are referring to the unique blending of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism in Chinese culture,[1] particularly among the Chinese diaspora in places like Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, or even as far away from China as San Francisco. This article is based on Hsun Chang's long-term fieldwork with Mazu pilgrimages at the Dajia (大甲鎮瀾宮) and Xingang (新港奉天宮) temples in Taiwan (1996–2006, 2012 to present), and Scott Habkirk's work on religious festivities at various temples in southern Taiwan (2006–2008, 2010, 2012). Both of us have used the classical anthropological methodologies of participant observation and interviews in our fieldwork. Our common interest in religious processions in Taiwan has brought us together and we have both recognized that the significance of incense in traditional Chinese religion was not given close attention by previous researchers in this field. We examine the use of incense objects in traditional Chinese culture, and aim to further claims about the important role that material mediums play in making the intangible world of deities tangible to their worshippers.

Birgit Meyer (2011, 60) called for a rematerialization of our understanding of religion. She asserts that religious studies have thus far focused on the ephemeral aspects of religion (e.g. belief, cosmology) while neglecting its more tangible characteristics. This Protestant-like rejection of the forms through which religious belief and experience are mediated ignores how the media shape what is being transmitted. Rather than seeing media as representing a religious concept or divinity, Meyer emphasizes that they embody the belief by engaging the senses of the beholder and making the intangible tangible.

Through this article we demonstrate how incense can play a large role in forming and maintaining a sense of religious identity. Uri Almagor (1990, 253) has explored the connection between smell, memory, and emotion. He notes that smells can often trigger changes in mood, behavior, and thought. In a study of olfactory-induced panic attacks among Khmer refugees in the USA, Devon Hinton and his colleagues (2004, 72–73) found that exposure to certain smells associated with the traumatic events his patients experienced during the Khmer Rouge's brutal rule of Cambodia could trigger extreme anxiety attacks. A large population of the refugees who fled Cambodia during this time ended up in the USA, where they were haunted by memories of their experiences which would be involuntarily recalled by smells such as cigarette smoke and car exhaust. This study attests to the potential for emotional and memory recall that smells can have.

As Almagor (1990, 256) notes, "The amount of information that odors provide is limited. Yet, in spite of all that, odors play a crucial role in internalizing one's culture as well as shaping one's identity." Regardless of their idiosyncratic nature, odors can come to characterize a community because of the collectively shared emotions and memories that are associated with a particular smell. Different people make may different associations with the smell of car exhaust and cigarette smoke, but a significant portion of Khmer refugees made the same associations because as a community they associated the same traumatic experiences with those particular smells. Through this paper we explore the associations traditional Chinese religious worshippers make with incense and incense objects. Be they lay adherents or ritual specialists, Chinese incense is not only associated with personal experiences of the divine, but also the presence of a community of worshippers and the frequent festivities that they participate in. We begin with a general review of uses of incense in religious ritual and an in-depth examination of the development of incense in China. We then explore how incense is used by Chinese temple communities and how Chinese worshippers use it for more individual purposes.

A Brief History of Incense in China

Researchers have speculated that incense was first burned with bodies on pyres to mask the smell of burning flesh at funeral rites (Classen 1994, 26; Hughes 2007, 11; Moeran 2009, 440). Romans also used it to mask the smell of burnt animal offerings to the gods, to cleanse a town or battlefield of the scent of blood, or to offer surrender. It then became associated with the afterlife, and fragrant incenses were burned at funerals because it was believed that the smoke would guide the dead into the realm of the gods, or that gods preferred certain aromas that would make the dead more likely to enter paradise (Hughes 2007, 58). Egyptians and Romans believed that gods favored certain scents and Christian saints were also said to emit a sweet odor, especially upon their death (Evans 2002, 193).

Sweetness, in particular, is associated with divinity and the afterlife in many cultures. During Roman times, worshippers believed that the gods favored sweet smells, and sweet scents were used to purify the air of illness and misfortune. During the plague in medieval Europe, incense was also used to purify the air of illness, and, in many First Nation traditions, incenses such as sage, cedar, and sweet grass are used during ceremonies for purification and are referred to as medicines. Though it may be used in different ways by different cultures, the burning of incense appeals to a wide variety of cultures, often for reasons related to religion and spirituality.

As Jean DeBernardi (2006, 91) notes in her research on Chinese religion in Penang, Malaysia, "no act of worship is more fundamental than the offering of incense." The oldest recorded

instance of incense burning for religious reasons in China dates back to the late Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) and early Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE) (Needham 1974, 132). Before 200 CE, the Chinese burned various grains, vegetables, fragrant flowers, and animal oils together to create a smell to attract deities and ancestors. Food offerings were contained in a cooking pot or a stemmed cup. According to Chinese philology, the character for incense, *xiang* (香), is written with two semantic elements. The upper element is grain (*he,* 禾), and the lower element is sweet (*gan,* 甘). Its original meaning translated to the sweet smell of grains. This character was borrowed to name the incense made of sandalwood when Indian Buddhists imported it around 200 CE (Chang 2006, 23). Religious incense burning was improved upon and intensified with the introduction of Buddhism[2] to China from India through Turkestan during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Foreign aromatic herbs have been imported from Southeast Asia and India to China since then.

According to Silvio Bedini (1994, 26), it was not until the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (157–87 BCE) that the Chinese had a specific vessel for burning incense. The first incense burner was known as the "hill censer" (*bo shan lu*, 博山爐)[3]. It was of a goblet that narrowed at the bottom into short feet supported on a tray or basin. Its lid was conical and molded into a shape that resembles a hill. Incense burners were modeled on the various types of vessels used for ancestor worship from the Shang (1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046 – 206 BCE) Dynasties. A common form was the ancient *ding* (鼎), which was originally used for containing meat offerings in ancient rituals. The shape of incense burners was deliberately made to look like a cooking pot, *lu* (爐), and the name of an incense pot in Mandarin is *xiang lu* (香爐, fragrant pot).

The symbolic relationship between incense and food is an outcome of a historical transformation in Chinese religious offerings and cosmology (Chang 2006, 23). In traditional Chinese religion the afterlife is much like the life of living people, and ancestor spirits need nourishment to sustain themselves. To petitioners and priests at traditional Chinese temples, many Daoist and Buddhist deities are powerful ancestors. Deities, ancestors, and hungry ghosts are flexible categorizations of spirits that identify different states of being in the afterlife (Habkirk 2011, 44–46; Wolf 1974, 146). If people have descendants who make offerings to them, they become ancestors. If ancestors are powerful enough and perform miracles after death, they may become deities to be worshipped by a community, though some deities were never ancestors to the people who worship them or were never ancestors and have more mythological origins. If ancestors have no one to make offerings to them, they may become hungry ghosts (hungry like a destitute person in the living world would be). These distinctions are more contextual than categorical, particularly regarding ancestors and

hungry ghosts. An ancestor may act like a hungry ghost if it is offended or stops receiving offerings. A hungry ghost may eventually become a god if it follows the teachings of Buddhism and Daoism in the afterlife.

Though most hungry ghosts do not have shrines or temples dedicated to them, through the influence of Buddhism the Chinese have adopted the seventh month of the lunar calendar as the hungry ghost month (Teiser 1988, 20–21). During this month families, markets, streets, communities, and temples make ritual offerings to hungry ghosts (*pu du,* 普度). People offer canned food, raw rice, bottled drinks, raw noodles, cigarettes, for example. Each of these offerings will be stuck with an incense stick to show that the offerings are for supernatural beings instead of living humans. Religious adherents believe that if they eat a food offering with an incense stick in it that they will offend the spirit it is being offered to and can incur their wrath. This is why it is considered taboo to stick your chop sticks in your food in most East Asian countries. People fear that it will attract hungry ghosts.

Incense sticks were produced before the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), but during the Ming Dynasty they were improved upon by using bamboo sticks gummed with incense powder. Ming Dynasty incense sticks stand more firmly in burners than their predecessors and the burners are filled with clean sand for the sticks to stand upright. After religious practitioners in the Ming Dynasty improved incense sticks, they consequently developed a distinctive style of incense burner to hold the sticks. A Ming Dynasty incense burner is deeper than the Indian style incense burner so that the incense sticks can stand upright. Incense ash is not cleaned or thrown away. On the contrary, practitioners save all the ash in the incense burner to help hold the sticks upright and because it is believed to contain the power of a deity. The incense smoke, burner, and ash are powerful material objectifications of immaterial deities. During Hsun's fieldwork at the Dajia and Xingang Mazu Temples and Scott's fieldwork on religious festivals in Tainan, many worshippers mentioned that the smell of incense indicates to them that supernatural beings are present and interacting with people and things in the material world. They assume that spirits have sensory capabilities and believe they are attracted to the scent of incense.

Temple Networks and Collective Uses of Incense

Traditionally there was a wide gap between the imperial government and individuals, and voluntary associations founded on an incense burner served to mediate between the two (Gao and Qiang 2011, 195). In many Chinese communities voluntary associations of all kinds (e.g. religious, commercial, military) have been organized around an incense burner. This

Material Religion
Article
Volume 13
Issue 2

form of social organization is still found in Chinese communities throughout the world.

In Chinese imperial times religion was not distinct from political, commercial, or military matters (Feuchtwang 1991, 242–243). There was no word in Mandarin for religion until 1902 (Palmer 2007, 23), and before the creation of the word *zong-jiao,* 宗教, what we now refer to as religious practice was more integrated with other aspects of life and people referred it as a custom or tradition. Religious associations are called *shenming hui,* 神明會 (Yang 1970, 71–80). They are established for any deity and the goal of a *shenming hui* is to hold a festival for the deity's holidays (e.g. birthday, enlightenment day). Each of the members pays a fee every year. The *shenming hui* owns an incense burner (and/or a statue) and communal property. The religious objects and property will be passed on to each master of the incense burner (*lu zhu,* 爐主) every year. Commercial associations are called *jiao xing,* 郊行, and merchants also used to organize guilds that would set up an incense burner, a statue of the deity, and communal property. Military associations were called *banbinghuo guanmiao,* 班兵伙館廟, and members had to worship and burn incense at the association's shrine whenever they became stationed in a new area (Yu 1988, 53–78). The voluntary associations of sworn brotherhoods (also commonly called gangs) are called *bangpai*, 幫派 (Yang 1970, 61–64). Every famous gang with a long history in Taiwan has a shrine at its headquarters. New members have to worship, burn incense, and make a vow in front of the altar.

The temple, and more specifically the incense burner, was the center of a community and at this center many relationships could be mediated. Voluntary associations that were centered on an incense burner were often used to settle regional disputes in order to avoid involving the imperial government. As Schipper (1990, 414) notes, networks of incense burner associations were a more equitable playing field than that of imperial politics, and on the lists of donators carved into commemorative stela at temples there is no indication of the rank or status of the donor. During the rise of communism, these associations diminished, but their numbers have been on the rise since the "reform and opening" movement that was instituted by the Chinese communist government in 1978. Freedom to form voluntary association is considered a necessary part of a free and civil society, and the government allows for their development as long as they adhere to national principles of governance and do not ferment opposition to the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (Gao and Qiang 2011, 197–198).

The leader of an incense burner association is called the "master of the incense burner" (Feuchtwang 2001, 25; Schipper 1990, 397). During the production of a documentary film project in March 2012,[4] Scott Habkirk observed how the master of the incense burner is chosen annually through divination with kidney

shaped wooden blocks. The masters of the incense burners are required to fulfill a variety of responsibilities that include worshipping the deity at the temple every morning and evening with incense sticks, and being in charge of the budget for the ceremonies of the association. During public religious functions they must light the incense that signals the beginning of a festival, carry the incense burner at the front of processions, and lead in making offerings when the community visits other temples. Other members are called "the feet of the incense burner" (*lu jiao,* 爐腳) or "servants of the incense burner" (*lu xia,* 爐下), and the words used for pilgrimage, *jin xiang,* 進香, or *ge xiang,* 割香, figuratively translate to "incense quest" or "ritual of offering incense."

During processions, the master of the incense burner will visit houses and businesses within its religious territory. The territory of the deity is signified by the relationships that a particular temple has with other temples and shrines. The world of deities in traditional Chinese religion is much like the world of imperial China (Feuchtwang 2001, 19). Each deity has its realm of influence within the heavenly government structure, and a hierarchy exists between the deities. The territory of an older temple or a temple to a deity high up in the hierarchy may be vast, and can include a variety of lesser deities with their own domains within and not limited to the greater deities' territory.

When a procession stops at each particular place, another responsibility of the master of the incense burner is to give incense to the leader of the temple, household, or business at the threshold who will then put the incense they received into their own incense burner. This act serves to recognize and maintain the relationships between the temple and its community of worshippers, and the distribution and burning of incense is used to bridge the gap between the divinity's abode in the spirit world and the temples and household shrines of its worshippers' everyday lives.

The incense burner and ash at a traditional Chinese temple play a crucial role in spreading worship of its deity (DeBernardi 2006, 132; Feuchtwang 2001, 138; Sangren 1988, 681; 1991, 69; Schipper 1990, 397; Yang 2008, 340–341). Temples must be founded with the incense ash of another temple and the incense networks of a god are maintained through ritual pilgrimage. Barend J. Ter Haar (1990, 351) tracked the spread of a deity's worship through gazetteers that included temple founding dates. He realized that it followed an increase of regional prosperity and the development of trade. Once a community of worshippers was established, the worship of a particular deity grew in places where trade and migration patterns develop. Incense ash and burners were necessary in the founding of new temples along these trade and migration routes, and through them the kingdom of a deity was expanded.

Taking incense ash from a mother temple to a newly established or daughter temple is called "dividing the incense fire" (*fen xiang huo,* 分香火). Taiwanese religious adherents only

Material Religion
Article
Volume 13
Issue 2

perform the ritual of dividing the incense fire for deities (Li 1967, 292). A petitioner must throw divining blocks (described in the next section) in order to receive permission from the deity to take the incense ash. If they obtain permission then they can use the ash to found a shrine or temple. There is no dividing of the incense for hungry ghosts since no one wants to spread their polluting influence. When the next generation of a family wants to leave home to build their own house, stove fire and incense ash from the parent's house will be taken to the new houses. This ritual is not called dividing the incense, but is called "dividing family" (*fen jia,* 分家). On the family altar there is an incense burner for the family's ancestors and an incense burner for the family's deity (or deities). If the family inherited two surnames, then there will be two ancestral tablets and two incense burners. Ancestors of two separate surnames need their own incense burners. In addition to two separate incense burners, there usually is a short wooden wall between two incense burners so that ancestors of the two surnames will not disturb each other. The family incense ash and burner represent a fundamental social unit in Chinese society.

The division of incense fire and the network of incense division is considered to be the territory of the deity. This territory is permeated with the smell of incense and maintained through its distribution. Though various temples recognize and trace their ancestry, the first temples or the temples where they received their founding incense ash exert little centralized power over their incense descendants (Schipper 1990, 413). The division of the incense fire network is also not limited to one particular god because the more social connections a community makes the more secure and prosperous they will become. There are often many deities in one temple. Each deity has its own incense burner. If there are eighteen deities in one temple a worshipper has to burn eighteen incense sticks so that every deity and every incense burner gets one incense stick, though some of the more important gods may get three. Under the same logic, when there are six deities and one ancestor tablet in one household, a person has to burn seven incense sticks each time he or she worships. Be it gods, ancestors, or hungry ghosts, each spirit has its own incense burner, though ancestors and hungry ghosts are often treated as one spirit. As mentioned above, the incense burner is the food pot of a supernatural being or beings. If a supernatural being has no incense burner and has no incense offering it can get hungry and can cause trouble for the living (e.g. sickness, bad luck).

During her fieldwork on Mazu pilgrimages at the Dajia Temple, Hsun Chang observed how many temples attempt to trace their incense ash ancestry in an effort to support their claims of authenticity and attract worshippers. Worshippers assume that the closer in the incense genealogy a temple is to the first temple dedicated to a deity, the more authentic it is. The tracing

of incense ash ancestry is often accompanied by a pilgrimage back to what worshippers believe to be the first temple dedicated to their god or goddess, though even if a temple receives ash and an incense burner from what they recognize to be the first temple, it will still house an incense burner from its own temple of origin. Devotees can start worshipping a deity with a bag of incense ash (*xiang huo dai*, 香火袋) brought with them from their hometown. Later they may buy an incense burner and even later they might buy a statue of the deity. Incense ash and burners are more essential to founding a shrine or temple than a statue. For example, Mazu (媽祖) is the most popular deity in Taiwan. She was a living person named Lin Moniang who was granted the status of a deity after death for the miracles she performed. Lin Moniang was born in 960 BCE in Xianlianggang (a fishing town in Putian county), Fujian province. She died unmarried in 987 and ascended to heaven from Meizhou Island (湄洲島). During life and after her death she performed miracles to save sailors in distress and is considered the goddess of the sea. Worshippers at the Dajia Mazu Temple (大甲鎮瀾宮) organize various voluntary associations in order to worship the Dajia Mazu, such as the "Bicycle Association of Dajia Mazu," the "Trumpet Association of Dajia Mazu," or the "Fifth Mazu Association of Dajia Mazu." All the members of each association meet monthly to worship, and each of these associations has its own incense burner. When an association is old and wealthy enough it can establish a statue of Mazu. If an association is much older and richer, it may establish a branch temple of the Dajia Temple.

As Ter Haar (1990, 354) points out, incense ash in an incense burner can also be brought to a new town to establish a new branch temple by migrants. For example, Chinese folklore states that Mazu ascended to heaven on Meizhou Island in Fujian Province in 987 CE. A thousand years ago migrants from Fujian started their journeys with incense ash of Mazu. Once they safely landed in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, or other parts of Southeast Asia, they built a shrine or temple to Mazu out of appreciation for a safe journey. During the Cultural Revolution (1968–1975), which saw the destruction of many temples in China, Mazu temples in Taiwan kept dividing their incense ash and took their worship of Mazu to the USA and Japan. In this way the cult of Mazu has been spreading to overseas Chinese communities all over the world[5] and these networks are maintained through pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage back to the temple of origin is considered necessary because worshippers believe that the *ling* (靈) of their deities needs to be renewed on a regular basis (Sangren 1988, 681–684). Sangren (1991, 69) equates *ling* with the efficacy or potency of a god. Worshippers indicate the *ling* of a god by referring to the miracles that it has performed, the number of worshippers it has, and the overall prosperity of the temple or shrine that houses the incense burner. Renewal of the *ling* of a temple's figure of the deity is accomplished by passing the temple's deity figure over

Material Religion
Article
Volume 13
Issue 2

the incense smoke of the temple of origin's main burner three times. Pilgrimage is typically performed by a younger temple to an older temple, a new temple to an old temple, or by a daughter temple to a mother temple. When it is performed by a daughter temple to a mother temple, the ritual is called paying homage to the ancestor temple (*ye zu,*謁祖). *Ye zu* (offering incense to a mother temple) and *fen xiang huo* (taking incense ash to found or maintain a daughter temple) form a two way interaction and recognition. In the *ye zu* ritual, pilgrims from the daughter temple can take incense ash from the incense burner of the mother temple. These ashes will then be carried carefully back to the daughter temple and put into each incense burner to recharge its *ling*. For example, there are about ten Mazu temples in Taiwan that are hundreds of years old. Among them, Beigang Temple (北港朝天宮) is the oldest. Worshippers at Beigang Temple are proud of getting their incense ash directly from Meizhou Island during the early Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 CE), and claim that Beigang Temple is the mother temple of most of the Mazu temples in Taiwan. The Dajia Mazu Temple worshippers went back to Beigang Temple to perform a *yezu* pilgrimage until 1988 when they started going directly to the temple on Meizhou Island instead (Chang 2012, 300).

Another example of incense division and the relationships it develops that Hsun Chang observed at the Dajia temple is between the Mazu temples in Miaoli (苗栗拱天宮), Dajia, and Beigang. The Miaoli Temple is also a daughter temple of the Beigang Temple. The Miaoli Temple worshippers pay homage to the Beigang Temple and take incense ash from the Beigang Temple every year to recharge its *ling*. Worshippers describe the relationship between the Dajia and Miaoli temples in terms of sisterhood. While the Beigang Temple is a daughter temple to the Meizhou Temple, the Dajia and Miaoli temples are grand-daughter temples to the Meizhou Temple. Through the medium of incense ash a network of genealogy of Mazu temples is created. The top or the root of the genealogy is the Meizhou Temple. This is the beginning of the cult, which is why all the Mazu temples around the world were invited back to Meizhou temple in 1987 to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of its founding.

When sister temples visit each other it is called *jin xiang* and does not involve the taking of incenses ash. When worshippers from two temples in the same level of the genealogical hierarchy visit each other, their two incense burners will be put together in front of their two statues. When the incense smoke of the two incense burners intertwine in the air, worshippers say that it symbolizes that the two sister Mazus are visiting each other. The ritual of *jin xiang* is then accomplished and the visiting temple's worshippers can start their return journey.

During these pilgrimages a pilgrim will burn incense sticks continuously. The smell of incense must remain constant. The incense sticks are lit at the temple when the pilgrimage journey starts, and pilgrims must light a new incense stick before the

old incense stick is extinguished to continue burning incense the whole way. Normally one incense stick is 30 cm long and burns for one hour. Pilgrims can buy extra length and larger incense sticks in order to last longer. Some can last up to 24 hours. The incense represents the spirit (or *ling*) of the Dajia Mazu and will be carried to Beigang. When pilgrims arrive at the Beigang Temple the incense sticks will be put in the incense burner of the Beigang Mazu to finish the journey. During the return journey from Beigang to Dajia incense sticks will be lit again and burned all the way back to the Dajia Temple. By mingling the incense from the daughter and mother temples and engaging with the *ling* of the deity at the mother temple, the incense stick represents the recharged Dajia Mazu and has to be carried all the way back to the Dajia Temple. When the pilgrim arrives at the Dajia Temple the incense stick will then be put in the incense burner of the Dajia Mazu and the pilgrimage journey will be complete.

In Taiwan, if a person is unable to participate in a pilgrimage he or she may still maintain their connection to a deity (Chang 2006, 64). When the Dajia Mazu Temple's pilgrimage passes through local towns to Beigang, worshippers whose houses are located along the pilgrimage route but who are not able to join the pilgrimage can exchange incense sticks (*huan xiang*, 換香) with pilgrims in order to receive the *ling* of the Beigang Mazu. These worshippers set up tables with fruit and an incense burner in front of the main entrance to their house. They then burn incense sticks and wait for the procession. When pilgrims pass by, these worshippers exchange their own incense sticks with one of the pilgrims' incense sticks and through this exchange the worshipper's incense will be carried to Beigang.

One of the characteristic features of Chinese pilgrimage is that Chinese pilgrims always go in groups and there is a strong social obligation to participate. For example, when the Dajia Mazu Temple worshippers went a pilgrimage to Beigang, every worshipper (in the past it also meant every inhabitant) inside the religious territory of the Dajia Mazu was obliged to escort the goddess. The pilgrims (*xiang ke,* 香客, or *xiang den giau,* 香燈腳) take a few days off to accompany the goddess on the journey. The social pressure to join the pilgrimage is strong and misfortune is often attributed to lack of participation. According to Li Xian-zhang (1967, 293), "inhabitants most often only go on a pilgrimage to the temples where their communal temple goes." In other words, pilgrimage is a deeply communal experience and worshippers do not randomly choose which temple to go to. Most often a communal temple goes on a pilgrimage to the mother temple that it received its incense ash from.

Through pilgrimage a community can achieve a multi-level identity, built and maintained among its community of worshippers. This identity extends to the hometown, and furthermore to a pan-Taiwanese sense of identity. Since most Han Chinese in

Material Religion
Article
Volume 13
Issue 2

Taiwan migrated from Fujian, Mazu is historically associated with migration events and has become a symbol of Taiwanese identity in contrast to mainlanders. After the 1987 Mazu celebration on Meizhou Island there have been many cross-strait pilgrimages between Taiwan and mainland China. This interaction with mainland China has not diminished the Taiwanese distinctive sense of identity but paradoxically increases options and inclusiveness for temples in Taiwan. More and more temples go on pilgrimages to China in order to enhance their religious, economic, and political influence. The competition among Mazu temples in Taiwan has extended its influence to China and has pushed the Taiwanese government to open its policy concerning mainland China (Chang 2003, 201).

Individual Uses of Incense

Incense burning has many functions in traditional Chinese religion that are more individualistic in nature. It is used to communicate with a deity, to repel and avoid evil spirits, to expel plagues, to call back lost souls,[6] to purify spiritual pollution, and to enhance health. Worshippers most commonly burn incense to communicate with a deity or to avoid evil spirits. Visual and smell perception play a crucial role in worshippers' burning of incense. Incense smoke and the smell of incense are the media through which to communicate with a deity. Worshippers on many occasions mentioned to us that when they see the incense smoke as it curls up to the heavens where the deities live, they believe that their deities are attracted to its fragrant smell.

Incense is lit at the start of any ritual in order to open the lines of communication to a deity. For confirmation that the deity is indeed paying attention, a worshipper may contact them by throwing two crescent-shaped wooden blocks. These blocks must be passed through the incense smoke three times before they can be considered active or infused with the deity's *ling*. The ritual act of passing an object through incense smoke three times is used to infuse a variety of things with the essence of a god. The wooden blocks are rounded on one side and flat on the other, and with them worshippers can ask the deities yes or no questions. If they come up with one side flat and one side rounded then the answer is yes. If they end up with both rounded sides up, then the answer is no, and if both flat sides come up, the deity thinks you are asking the wrong question. A worshipper must get yes three times in a row to get a truly affirmative answer. If they want a more detailed response from a god, a petitioner can pull a divination slip (*qian shi,* 籤詩; the verb is *qiu qian,* 求籤). Next to the main altar there is a box of sticks with numbers on them. They must choose one stick and then use the divination blocks to see if it is the correct one. Once they chose the correct stick, a petitioner goes to another box near the altar that has a small drawer for each number. Each

drawer contains a paper slip that has proverbial advice on it, and nearby there is usually an attendant to help interpret how the advice pertains to the petitioner's question. For any of these acts to have significance they must begin with the lighting of incense. Without lighting incense, worshippers do not have a clear connection to their deity.

Incense and incense ash are also used for a variety of healing purposes. Some of the materials used to make incense are also used in traditional Chinese medicine. Herbal ingredients and other favored Chinese scents are added to gum and put on a bamboo stick to make incense. For example, menthol, borneol, and agastache are often used by Chinese doctors to cool patient's inner body heat and will also be added to some incense. Costus, agarwood, and sandalwood are incense materials that are also used in Chinese medicine. Sichuan lovage, angelica dahurica, and black atractylodes rhizome are herbal materials that are used to ease pain and reduce swelling as well as in making incense. Cinnamon, clove, and star anise among other materials are often used in cooking, medicine, and incense (Chang 2006). In ancient China, there was no clear distinction between spice, medicine, and incense (Wang 2007, 55).

Incense ash is called *lu dan,* 爐丹, by Daoists worshippers and is often used for healing purposes. The name *lu dan* refers to the crystallization of the incense and that it has a curative function. In ancient times Daoist alchemists smelted different metals or minerals to refine them into concoctions (*dan,* 丹) by heating them in a stove or pot (*lu,* 爐) for health purposes. Ancient Daoists had lineages of the cultivation of inner alchemy (*neidan,* 內丹) that are similar to modern-day Qigong practices, and outer alchemy (*waidan,* 外丹) such as the study of the effects and use of herbal, mineral and animal substances. Temples give out charms with incense ash in them to petitioners who are seeking protection, and the incense ash can be added to water and ingested if they are suffering from spiritual pollution or possession (Feuchtwang 2001, 138). For example, unmarried girls who die young will become hungry ghosts according to traditional Chinese religious belief. If a hungry ghost shows the power to harm people or to be helpful, people will establish an incense burner for her and by making offerings to her it will accumulate incense burner ash. If a person becomes ill because of her, this person will take some of the incense ash from the hungry ghost's incense burner to heal the illness.

Another common use of incense for the purposes of healing is in the ritual of returning lost souls (*shou jing*, 收驚). The Xingtian Temple (行天宮) in Taipei is famous for its ritual of returning lost souls. Souls are said to be lost or displaced when people are frightened by ghosts or captured by demons (De Groot [1901]1982, 102). During his two and a half years of living in Tainan, Scott was also told by many Taiwanese religious

Volume 13
Issue 2
Material Religion
Article

adherents that they also believed that people could lose or displace a soul through violently jarring accidents such as falls resulting in concussion, or car accidents. There are hundreds of worshippers every day who wait in line to receive the ritual of returning lost souls. Temple attendants hold incense sticks between their palms, chant Daoist verses, and circle the incense sticks around believers' bodies to call back their lost souls. After the ritual, worshippers are allowed to take some of the incense ash from the giant incense burner of the main deity Guan-Sheng Di-Jun (關聖帝君, also known as Guan Gong, Guandi, or Guanyu) to drink with water. People believe the incense ash in the incense burner of Guan-Sheng Di-Jun represents medicine prescribed by him. These ashes are held to heal illness and protect believers from evil spirits. Normally these ashes are ingested with water or carried in one's pocket in a charm. In some cases these ashes can be rubbed on the skin to heal skin illnesses, or put under one's pillow to prevent bad dreams when one is haunted by an evil spirit.

Conclusion

In traditional Chinese culture incense plays an essential role in religion and connecting with the divine. It signifies the presence of not only a deity but also a religious community. Incense is used to demarcate a deity's territory during pilgrimages, as well as to recognize and maintain relationships between religious practitioners and communities. The act of offering incense arose out of offerings of food to the dead and developed into offerings of prayer and sustenance for spiritual beings of all kinds. Incense, incense ash, and an incense burner are central to the establishment of religious communities as well as many other kinds of voluntary associations. Temples trace their ancestry through the incense ash they were founded on and expand the territory of their deity by establishing new temples with their own incense ash. This incense genealogy is then maintained and strengthened through pilgrimage from daughter temples to mother temples, from mother temples to daughter temples, and among sister temples, all of which have specific ritual uses of incense to recognize the relationship between the two temples.

Incense is also used to open up communication with deities, expel evil spirits, imbue objects with the power of a deity, and to cure spiritual maladies. Interaction with the divine is only marginally possible without the use of incense. Incense and its associated significance is a vital component of the multisensory experience of traditional Chinese religious processions and pilgrimages. It activates all the memories and emotions associated with religious experiences and communities. Also, most Chinese deities are powerful ancestors who continue to be engaged in sensory experience after death. Worshippers believe that spirits of all kinds are attracted by the smell of the incense and it draws

their attention towards offerings and petitions. These material manifestations of religious devotion demonstrate the crucial role that incense plays in religious practice and experience. Incense acts as a bridge between the material world of worshippers and the spiritual world. It is a material manifestation of belief in spirits that makes the immaterial world of Chinese spirits tangible and accessible.

ORCID
Scott Habkirk http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1365-4981

notes and references

[1] Traditional Chinese religion refers to the fusion of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism that constitutes a distinctly Chinese body of religious mythology, cosmology, and practice. In the context of Chinese culture, particularly in the Chinese diaspora where many traditional religious practices survived the Cultural Revolution in China, treating these religions as separate and assuming the existence of a pure Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism ignores the centuries of intertwining that has occurred between their philosophies, mythologies, and practices among Chinese worshippers. For example, in one of the most widely known Chinese classics, *Journey to the West*, the King of Daoist heaven (the Jade Emperor), consults with Shakyamuni Buddha to control the Monkey King whose flagrant disregard for Confucian notions of social propriety have insulted and enraged all the gods in Daoist heaven. This story still captures the imagination of Chinese audiences. In the last four years three big budget movies have come out about it and two had opening days that are among the top 20 ever in China (http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/china/opening/).

[2] This connection between Buddhism and incense, though, runs counter to the common belief in modern Taiwan that burning incense is a distinguishing characteristic of Daoism, and that Buddhists do not burn incense (Habkirk 2011). In our experience the difference is more a matter of quantity. At Daoist temples, large quantities of incense are burned because it is essential to opening up communication with a god, whereas there was little incense burned at the Buddhist temples.

[3] For a complete list of all Mandarin terms used, their pinyin, characters, and meaning refer to Appendix A.

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfnABUhR5-k.

[5] Jonathan Lee has written on the process of how the American Mazu located in San Francisco goes back to Beigang Temple for a pilgrimage (Lee 2009), and Hsun Chang recorded when the Dajia Mazu established a new branch temple in Macau in 2001.

[6] The English translation of the Mandarin words for soul (*hún,* 魂, and *pò,* 魄), refer to vital or animating entities. According to Scott Habkirk's fieldwork from 2006 to 2008 and August to November 2010, traditional Chinese religion posits that people have multiple souls.

Almagor, Uri. 1990. "Odors and private language: Observations on the phenomenology of scent." *Human Studies* 13: 253–274.

Bedini, Silvio A. 1994. *The Trail of Time: Time Measurement with Incense in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Volume 13
Issue 2
Material Religion
Article

Chang, Hsun. 2012. "Between Religion and State: the Dajia Pilgrimage in Taiwan." *Social Compass* 59 (3): 298–310.

Chang, Hsun. 2006. "馨香禱祝 [Incense for the Gods: The Ritual Power of Aromatic Smell]." *The Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology, National Taiwan University* 65: 9–33.

Chang, Hsun. 2003. 文化媽祖. [Constructing Mazu: Selected Papers in Mazu Cult]. Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica.

Classen, Constance. 1994. *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. New York: Routledge.

DeBernardi, Jean. 2006. *The Way That Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

De Groot, Jan Jakob Maria. (1901) 1982. Vol. 4 of *The Religious System of China*. Taipei: Southern Materials Center.

Evans, Suzanne. 2002. "The Scent of a Martyr." *Numen* 49 (2): 193–211.

Feuchtwang, Stephan. 2001. *Popular Religion in China*. Richmond: Curzon Press.

Feuchtwang, Stephan. 1991. "A Chinese Religion Exists." In *An Old State in New Settings: Studies in the Social Anthropology of China in Memory of Maurice Freedman*, edited by Hugh D. R. Baker and Stephan Feuchtwang, 139–161. Oxford: Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford Occasional Papers.

Gao, Bingzhong and Ma Qiang. 2011. "From Grassroots Association to Civil Society Organization: A Case Study of Hubei Province Dragon Tablet Fair." In *Social Scientific Studies of Religion in China: Methodologies, Theories, and Findings*, edited by Fenggang Yang and Graeme Lang, 195–226. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV.

Habkirk, Scott. 2011. "Modernity and the Supernatural in Taiwan: Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors Revisited." Master's diss., University of Alberta.

Hinton, Devon E., Vuth Pich, Dara Chhean, and Mark H. Pollack. 2004. "Olfactory-Triggered Panic Attacks among Khmer Refugees: A Contextual Approach." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 41 (2): 155–199.

Hughes, Kerry. 2007. *The Incense Bible: Plant Scents That Transcend World Culture, Medicine, and Spirituality*. New York: Haworth Press.

Lee, Jonathan H.X. 2009. "Creating a Transnational Religious Community: The Empress of Heaven and Goddess of the Sea, Tianhou/Mazu, From Beigang to San Francisco." In *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities*, edited by Lois Ann Lorentzen, 166–183. Durham: Duke University Press.

Li, Xian-zhang. 1967. "北港聚落的成立及其媽祖祭祀的發展與信仰實態." [The Building and Development of Beigang Community and its Cult of Mazu.] *Journal of Dalu* 大陸 35 (9): 286–293.

Meyer, Birgit. 2011. "Medium." *Material Religion* 7 (1): 58–64.

Moeran, Brian. 2009. "Making Scents of Smell: Manufacturing and Consuming Incense in Japan." *Human Organization* 68 (4): 439–450.

Needham, Joseph. 1974. Vol. 5 of *Science and Civilization in China*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Palmer, David. 2007. *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sangren, Steven. 1991. "Dialectics of Alienation: Individuals and Collectivities in Chinese Religion." *Man, New Series* 26 (1): 67–86.

Sangren, Steven. 1988. "History and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy: The Ma Tsu Cult of Taiwan." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30 (4): 674–697.

Schipper, Kristofer. 1990. "The Cult of Pao-sheng ta-ti and Its Spread to Taiwan: A Case Study of *Fen-Hsiang*." In *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, edited by E. B. Vermeer, 397–416. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Teiser, Stephen F. 1988. *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ter Haar, Barend J. 1990. "The Genesis and Spread of Temple Cults in Fukien." In *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, edited by E. B. Vermeer, 349–396. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Wang, Li (王立). 2007. "香意象與中外交流中的敬香習俗 [Image of the Incense and the Custom of Incense Offering in the Communication of Chinese and Foreigners]." *Journal of Shanghai Normal University* 36 (2): 53–58.

Wolf, Arthur P. 1974. "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors." In *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, edited by Arthur P. Wolf, 131–182. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Yang, Ching Kun. 1970. *Religion in Chinese Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. 2008. "Goddess Across the Taiwan Strait: Matrifocal Ritual Space, Nation-State, and Satellite Television Footprints." In *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, edited by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 323–347. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Yu, Guanghong (余光弘). 1988. 媽宮的寺廟 [Mazu's Temple]. Taipei: Academia Sinica.

Appendix A. Mandarin words

Pinyin	*Character*	*English*
bānbīnghuǒ guǎnmiào	班兵伙館廟	military association
bāngpài	幫派	sworn brotherhood
Běigǎng Cháo Tiāngōng	北港朝天宮	Beigang Temple
bó shān lú	博山爐	hill censer
Dà jiǎ zhèn lán gōng	大甲鎮瀾宮	Dajia Temple
fēn jiā	分家	dividing family
fēn xiāng huǒ	分香火	dividing the incense fire
gān	甘	sweet
gē xiāng	割香	pilgrimage
Guān Shèngdì Jūn	關聖帝君	God of War
gǔqín	古琴	Chinese violin
hé	禾	grain
hé lú	合爐	joining individual ancestor ash to the collective
huàn xiāng	換香	exchange incense sticks
hún	魂	soul
jiāo xíng	郊行	commercial association
jìnxiāng	進香	pilgrimage
líng	靈	spiritual efficacy
lú	爐	stove
lú dān	爐丹	Incense ash
lú jiǎo	爐腳	the feet of the incense burner
lú xià	爐下	servants of the incense burner
lú zhǔ	爐主	master of the incense burner
Māzǔ	媽祖	Goddess of the Sea (lit. mother ancestor)
Méizhōu dǎo	湄洲島	Meizhou Island
Miáolì Gǒng Tiāngōng	苗栗拱天宮	Miaoli Temple
nèi dān	內丹	internal alchemy

(Continued)

Volume 13
Issue 2
Material Religion
Article

Appendix A. *(Continued)*

Pinyin	*Character*	*English*
pǔdù	普度	hungry ghost offering or Feast for the Universal Deliverance of Hungry Ghosts
pò	魄	soul
qiān shī	籤詩	divination poem
qiú qiān	求籤	divining
shénmíng huì	神明會	religious association
shōu jīng	收驚	ritual of returning lost souls
xiāng	香	incense
xiāng dēng jiǎo	香燈腳	pilgrims
xiānghuǒ dài	香火袋	incense ash bags
xiāngkè	香客	pilgrims
xiānglú	香爐	incense burner
Xíng Tiāngōng	行天宮	Xingtian Temple
Xīngǎng fèngtiān gōng	新港奉天宮	Xingang Temple
wài dān	外丹	external alchemy
wǔtōng	五通	Five Emperors
yèzǔ	謁祖	paying homage to the ancestor temple
zōngjiào	宗教	religion