

## Article

# Perfuming and Divine Scents in the Soteriology of Medieval Buddhism and Daoism

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**Abstract:** The olfactory sense and experience are considered a conduit between spirituality and the divine realm in Daoism. The ceremonial use of incense in Daoism (*shixiang* 侍香) has been explored from various theological perspectives and described by numerous liturgists. Despite its importance, several questions about the development and history of Daoist olfactory culture remain unresolved. This paper examines medieval religious dialogs concerning divine smells and smoke before and during the Tang dynasty, a period marked by the interaction and mutual influence of Daoism and Buddhism in China. I argue that medieval Daoism enhanced its soteriology by adopting the concept of *vāsanā* (*xun* 薰) from Buddhism, particularly Yogācāra. Xuan Zang's 玄奘 translation corpus of Vasubandhu, *Cheng Weishi Lun* 成唯識論, along with the treatises of two Tang Daoist liturgists Zhu Faman's 朱法滿 and Du Guangting's 杜光庭, reveal a shared belief that sacred smells transform the perfumed at a profound level, embedding the divine essence within them. The Yogācāra concept of *vāsanā*, elucidated by Xuan Zang, was readily incorporated into Tang Daoism due to their shared soteriological interests. Tang Daoism was in the process of codifying its rituals for self-purification and collective salvation, thereby enhancing the significance of incense through its dynamic absorption of *vāsanā*. The olfactory practices in medieval Daoism demonstrate that East Asian medieval soteriology promoted universalism through the ritual interactions between Buddhism and Daoism.

**Keywords:** medieval Daoism; Daoist soteriology; *vāsanā*; the olfactory; Daoist liturgy; Tang dynasty



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## 1. Introduction

Burning incense and immersing oneself in smoke are essential ritual practices in Daoist liturgy. Daoism has been instrumental in propagating a religious olfactory culture across various Asian regions, where the sense of smell is perceived as a bridge between spirituality and the higher realm (Schopen 2015; Harvey 2006). Despite its critical role, the theoretical understanding of the olfactory sense within Daoism has not been fully developed. What is the history of Daoism's engagement with fragrance, and how did it discover its effects? Among the various avenues for salvation, how did burning incense become established in Daoist cosmology, ritual, and soteriology? This article explores these questions by analyzing medieval discussions on divine scents and smoke before and during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), a transformative period of introspection and interfaith connections in Daoism.

Olfaction played a crucial role in ancient Chinese state and religious ceremonies. The Zhou dynasty's liturgical literature, among the world's oldest documents, demonstrates that ancient liturgists believed in the significance of fire, burning, and smoking during

their religious events. Xunzi, an ancient Confucian philosopher, contemplated olfaction and recognized it as a universal human ability. Despite their differences, all people can differentiate between “sweet scents and floral perfumes, that which smells bloody and that which smells rank” (Milburn 2016, p. 456). Xunzi identified seven different smells with the Chinese characters *xiang* 香, *chou* 臭, *fen* 芬, *yu* 鬱, *xing* 腥, *sao* 臊, and *lou you* 漏膻. His classification stands as a unique and pioneering contribution to the study of olfactory experience, while many of his contemporaries showed little interest in the subject. At that time, the biological mechanism underlying olfaction was still enigmatic and mysterious.

In recent years, the Daoist ceremonial use of incense (*shixiang* 侍香) and its history have attracted significant academic interest, resulting in several notable discoveries (Wang 2015, p. 36). Milburn traced the trajectory of Chinese olfactory discourse back to ancient times. Romaskiewicz explored the dynamic evolution of smell by examining Buddhism’s influence on Chinese olfactory culture (Milburn 2016; Romaskiewicz 2022). In Daoist studies, the interest in smells and smoke traces back to earlier works by Joseph Needham, who explored the alchemic tradition and the potential use of psychoactive substances. Needham identified the use of “hallucinogenic smokes” in the *Wushang biyao* 無上秘要 (*Supreme Secret Essentials*) (Needham 1974, p. 150). Feng suggested that the arrival of new spices from India and Southeast Asia during the Tang dynasty broadened the sensory horizons of humans (Feng 2024).

This article contributes to the recent literature on Daoist sense and sensibility by offering a new perspective. Rather than tracing a singular origin, I aim to map the extensive interactions focused on the concept of perfuming (Bokenkamp 2007; Yamada 2004; Xiong 1996; Zürcher 1980). The research highlights the works of Buddhist monk and translator Xuan Zang 玄奘 (602–664 CE) and Daoist liturgists Zhu Faman 朱法滿 (?–720 CE) and Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933 CE). Xuan Zang’s translation corpus of Vasubandhu’s *Cheng Weishi Lun* 成唯識論 (*Demonstration of Consciousness Only*) introduced novel concepts of perfuming (Chinese *xun* 薰, Sanskrit *vāsanā*) (in Buddhist epistemology, Brewer 2023; Sharf 2018). As Ronald L. Grimes notes in ritual studies, participants engage in a performance across multiple layers of ritual experience, rendering the moment “biological, psychological, and social” (Grimes 2014, pp. 64–65). Both Daoists shared a strong belief in the redemptive power of holy perfumes when modifying Daoist rituals. One can critically interpret the Daoists’ modification of *vāsanā* in their rituals as indicative of their prolonged interest in soteriology, whereby mass salvation could be achieved through self-purification and divine intervention.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I argue that sense experience became a significant factor in the reformation of Tang’s spiritual cosmos and soteriology.

## 2. A New Theory of Perfuming in Xuan Zang’s Translation of Vasubandhu

Until the Tang dynasty, the word *xun* 薰 lacked moral or spiritual connotations, as illustrated by the term *xuntao* 薰陶, which meant to influence or nurture. Originally, it referred to scenting or stimulating the nose with an aroma. This sensory stimulation through the olfactory sense, however, carried a negative connotation. A person who detects a scent might become distracted and lose focus on their thoughts. The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 explicitly references this detrimental effect in the Outer Chapters (*wai pian* 外篇):

Now there are five things which produce (in men) the loss of their (proper) nature (且夫失性有五). ... The third is (their fondness for) the five odors which penetrate the nostrils and generate a feeling of distress throughout the forehead (三曰五臭薰鼻, 困憊中顙) (*Zhuangzi* 莊子, p. 71).<sup>2</sup>

*Zhuangzi* illustrates a profound understanding that scents cause individuals to lose their inherent nature since they overstimulate (*xun*) nostrils and engender a disordered

mood. According to *Zhuangzi*, scents or perfumes are deleterious and disturbing and should be avoided.<sup>3</sup> In the writings of *Zhuangzi*, there is no endorsement for the practice of burning incense or bathing in smoke.

Conversely, it was in two Confucian texts that the olfactory sense was acknowledged as a natural part of human knowledge. Xunzi and Mencius argued that the ability to smell is a universal faculty among humans. Xunzi expounded on his theory that the human senses are divine gifts:

That being the case, then what does one follow and use to distinguish the same and the different? I say, one follows one's Heaven-given faculties. For all creatures belonging to the same category and having the same dispositions, their Heaven-given faculties cognize things in the same way. Thus, one compares similarities with another party and thereby has communication. Form, color, and pattern are differentiated by the eyes. Notes, tones, high, low, tunings, pipes, and other strange sounds are differentiated by the ear. Sweet, bitter, salty, bland, piquant, sour, and other strange flavors are differentiated by the nose. Pain, itch, cold, hot, slippery, sharp, light, and heavy are differentiated by the body. Persuasions, reasons, happiness, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate, and desire are differentiated by the heart (*Xunzi: The Complete Text*, p. 238).

然則何緣而以同異？曰，緣天官。凡同類同情者，其天官之意物也同。故比方之疑似而通，是所以共其約名以相期也。形體色理以目異，聲音清濁調竽奇聲以耳異，甘苦鹹淡辛酸奇味以口異，香臭芬鬱腥臊漏膻奇臭以鼻異，疾癢滄熱滑鉞輕重以形體異，說故喜怒哀樂愛惡欲以心異 (*Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, pp. 484–86).

The term *xun* is absent in Xunzi's olfactory classification, yet he considered the capability to discern scents as crucially important, more so than *Zhuangzi*. The olfactory capacity, combined with other sensory faculties, is essential for emotional intelligence, such as understanding happiness, anger, and love. Xunzi concluded that the human senses form a cohesive intellectual system working in concert with the mind: "judging awareness must also await the Heaven-given faculties to appropriately encounter their respective kinds (然而微知必將待天官之當簿其類)" (*Xunzi: The Complete Text*, p. 238; 1985, p. 486).

Mencius recognized the inevitable intervention of the four senses—taste, color, sound, and smell—in human cognitive processes. He suggested that sensory information is less reliable than moral knowledge, reflecting some of *Zhuangzi's* views. However, Mencian epistemology acknowledges that sensory organs can provide accurate information to human cognition (Chiu 2018, p. 1076). In this context, sensory information was considered closest to reality within Confucian epistemology. In "*Jin Xin* 盡心 II", Mencius states the following:

For the mouth to desire sweet tastes, the eyes to desire beautiful colours, the ear to desire pleasant sounds, the nose to desire fragrant odours, and the four limbs to desire ease and rest, these things are natural.

口之於味也，目之於色也，耳之於聲也，鼻之於臭也，四肢之於安佚也，性也 (*Mencius* 孟子, p. 489).

Mencius proposed a hierarchical structure in which moral knowledge was considered independent and superior to sensory faculties. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, as metaphysical qualities, are conferred by divine mandate *ming* 命. Therefore, nature and divine mandate are distinct. Mencius argued that the physical and metaphysical realms were separate and that only the latter could endow humans with a profound level of knowledge.

Of equal importance to the ancient discourse on the olfactory is the *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*), which categorized scents as yin or yang. "Jiao Te Sheng 郊特牲" in the *Liji* noted,

“the scent—which is yin—reaches down to the deep springs (臭, 陰達於淵泉). ... the scent—which is yang—reaches up to the walls and rafters (臭, 陽達於牆屋)” (*Liji ji shuo* 禮記集說, p. 150; Milburn 2016, p. 453). If Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Mencius primarily discussed the impacts of olfaction on human cognition, the *Liji* focused on the cryptic nature of smoke and scents. Fragrances travel independently through the air by the movement of aerosol, a mixture of air particles and liquid droplets. Scents and smoke were enigmatic agents through which humans could interact with the transcendent realm. As Milburn discusses, the Zhou dynasty liturgists honed their understanding of fire, the aroma of burning materials, and smoke for their religious rites.<sup>4</sup> To ancient ritual actors, aroma and smoke could bridge the living and the realm of the dead.

During the Han dynasty, the term *xiang* 香 achieved the supreme rank in the ancient olfactory hierarchy. The *Bai Hu Tong* 白虎通 (*Discussions from the White Tiger Hall*) elaborated on the yin–yang theory of scents. Scents were systematically categorized under five types: *wu xiang* 五香, aligned with the Five Phases theory. Among these, the central scent corresponds to the Earth, the highest in the hierarchy. The *Bai Hu Tong* established a structured order of scents based on the Five Phases. The central fragrance *xiang*—symbolizing the Earth and at the core—is seen as preeminent over the other four (Kang 2019, p. 13; S. An 2023, p. 142):<sup>5</sup> “the center is the Earth in charge of nurturing [things], therefore its scent is pleasing (中央土也, 主養, 故其臭香也)” (*Bai Hu Tong* 白虎通, p. 85). Consequently, the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) ritual literature preferred the divine term *xiang* over *xun*.

The olfactory taxonomy and theories continued to evolve with the introduction of Mahāyāna Buddhism in China. Yoshioka Yoshitoyo 吉岡義豊 initiated the study of the mutual influences between Buddhism and Daoism. His three-volume series, *Dōkyō to Bukkyō* 道教と佛教 (*Daoism and Buddhism*), provides deep insights into the interaction of these two religions during the medieval period. As Yoshioka noted, their interaction was often contentious. The persecution of Buddhism reached its height during the reign of Emperor Wu (543–578 CE) of the Northern Zhou dynasty dates. Buddhist resistance continued for the next hundred years until the early Tang period. Once the Northern Zhou (557–581 CE) and Tang dynasties adopted Daoism as their state religion, Daoist and Buddhist theologians frequently participated in intense debates (Yoshioka 1971, p. 309).

Within the context of their theological disagreements and rivalry, selective absorptions of ideas and rituals occurred between the two, particularly from Buddhism to Daoism. Erik Zürcher documented this phenomenon, revealing the remarkable adaptability of Daoism:

It may be concluded that the cosmological complex borrowed from Buddhism effected an important change in the concept of ritual space; that in the field of ethics Taoism was deeply influenced by Mahāyāna universalism, and that the Buddhist complex of *karma*, retribution and rebirth brought about very important changes in the Taoist views on sin and its consequence beyond the grave, notably by stressing the individual nature of guilt. In most cases it could be assumed that there were pre-existing Taoist notions that were reinforced and stimulated by the impact of Buddhist ideas. When dealing with “weak” borrowings of the formal and conceptual types we observed that they were completely integrated into their new context to such an extent that much of their original value was lost; in such cases Buddhism mainly served to enrich the Taoist idiom without effecting important doctrinal changes (Zürcher 1980, p. 142).

As Zürcher indicates, Mahāyāna universalism significantly shaped the Daoist worldview and its soteriology. A pertinent question involves the extent of this influence. To what degree did Daoist doctrines need to adapt to the new Indian theories? Zürcher proposed a new direction for research with profound insights, yet many questions remain

open. In his examination of the Lingbao 靈寶 scriptures, Bokenkamp presents an alternative perspective: the Daoist texts were not merely passive recipients of Buddhist influence but show evidence of engagement, contradiction, and appropriation from the Daoist perspective (Bokenkamp 2007, p. 11).

A medieval Daoist scripture, the *Benji jing* 本際經 (*Scripture on the Original Beginning*), exemplifies the Daoist borrowing of Mādhyamika. Assandri's analysis in her article concluded that the *Benji jing* adopted the soteriological teachings of Buddhism. From this perspective, Daoism taught that one could attain the ultimate salvation through suffering to gain truth. Rather than relying on esoteric techniques for eternal life, a true understanding could liberate all from ignorance (Assandri 2008, p. 3). Choi Soobeen also concluded that, during the Tang dynasty, Daoists developed a novel spiritual method of self-salvation and purification by integrating Mahāyāna doctrines. This emphasis on moralistic training facilitated the emergence of new sects, such as Quanzhen 全真 (Choi 2009, pp. 304–5). Simultaneously, it is critical to recognize that the Chinese assimilation of Indian doctrines and rituals occurred against the backdrop of their own complex and contested history. As Sharf points out, this issue should be examined thoroughly within their “correlative cosmology” (Sharf 2001, p. 78).

Further evidence of Daoism's “correlative thinking” is evident in the Lingbao School (Numinous Treasure). This school originated with a compilation of forty texts known as the ancient Lingbao corpus. Led by Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–477 CE), the school also adopted Mahāyāna universalism. Yamada Toshiaki 山田利明 found that the Lingbao shared numerous Buddhist traits, enabled by the translations of Kumāraṅga 鳩摩羅什 (344–413 CE) and his disciples (Yamada 2004, pp. 225–26; Yamada 1999, pp. 214–15). With regard to the Buddhist “influence”, however, Bokenkamp proposes a fresh perspective on the pluralistic structure of the Lingbao School. He asserts that the Lingbao scriptures actively ‘appropriated’ general Buddhist concepts rather than merely receiving them passively (Bokenkamp 2007, p. 172). Bokenkamp's analysis of the pluralistic structure provides a deeper insight into its complex engagements with Buddhism.

Previous scholarship has largely underestimated another significant Buddhist translation endeavor by Xuan Zang (Cho 2019, p. 14).<sup>6</sup> Among his extensive collection of Mahāyāna translations, *Cheng Weishi Lun* introduced the central Yogācāra doctrines. When he translated the *Cheng Weishi Lun*, the source materials were the verse treatise by Vasubandhu and the ten commentaries. Xuan Zang acquired these texts during his travel to India, and the *Cheng Weishi Lun* became a foundational Yogācāra text in East Asia (*Three Texts on Consciousness Only*, p. 3).<sup>7</sup>

In the *Cheng Weishi Lun*, Xuan Zang proposed a novel theory about divine scents, focusing on how the sacred fragrance salvages the human mind. To translate perfuming (*vāsanā*), Xuan Zang redefined the ancient term *xun* through the concept of conditioned dharma. He argued that perfuming (*vāsanā*) only occurs when there is both an olfactory stimulus and a recipient, denoted as a seed (*bīja*). Consequently, perfuming cannot occur if the recipient is incapable of receiving it. *Vāsanā* is reciprocal in nature, signifying the unity between the perfume and the perfumed, thus elevating human cognition to a more advanced level. The *Cheng Weishi Lun* asserts that intrinsic sensibility and the seed (*bīja*) are essential for salvation. This soteriological approach is based on the pivotal concept of sensibility. The *Cheng Weishi Lun* elaborates this through the Yogācāra notion of store consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*). According to Xuan Zang's translation of Vasubandhu's theory on perfuming, the following holds true:

On the basis of what characteristics can we speak of “perfuming”? We speak of “perfuming” on the basis of four characteristics of that which is perfumed and that which perfumes that cause seeds to be born and grow. What are the

four meanings of “perfumable”? First, with regard to that which is perfumable, it is enduring. ... Second, the dharma that is perfumable is indeterminate. ... Third, it is perfumable by nature. It is perfumable if it is independent and not resistant and dense. ... Fourth, it is close union with the perfumer. ... As for the requirements of the perfumer, first, it is born and then perishes. ... Second, it has a superior functioning. ... Third, it increases and decreases. ... Fourth, it is united with that which it perfumes and evolves along with it (*Three Texts on Consciousness Only*, pp. 52–53).

依何等義立熏習名? 所熏, 能熏各具四義, 令種生長, 故名熏習. 何等名為所熏四義? 一, 堅住性, 若法始終一類相續. ... 二, 無記性, 若法平等. ... 三, 可熏性, 若法自在, 性非堅密, 能受習氣 ... 四, 與能熏共和合性. ... 何等名為能熏四義? 一, 有生滅. ... 二, 有勝用. ... 三, 有增減. ... 四, 與所熏和合而轉 (*Cheng wei shi lun 成唯識論*, pp. 127–28).<sup>8</sup>

Based on Vasubandhu’s theory, Xuan Zang defined the nature of the perfumable in terms of four distinct qualities of store consciousness: the perishable, the superior, the variable, and the unifiable. The latter is especially relevant. Through the acquisition of olfactory knowledge, store consciousness is elevated to the level of divine scent. As *Pramāṇavāda* developed “pre-reflective consciousness” (Sharf 2018, p. 828), perfuming also emerged as a new epistemological theory on human cognition.

Xuan Zang interpreted perfuming (*vāsanā*) as spiritual transformation and salvational imprinting by a higher power. As a result, the *Cheng Weishi Lun* transformed the traditional understanding of olfaction both linguistically and theologically. The sensory experience evolved into a microcosm of spiritual awakening, divine imprinting, and self-improvement. Xuan Zang’s selection of the Chinese characters *xi* 習 and *qi* 氣 to explain *vāsanā* clearly reflects his intention. *Xi qi* suggests that *vāsanā* symbolizes transformation, indicating that the perfumed is elevated to a higher level, specifically through personal initiative. Consequently, *vāsanā* generates new seeds. The *Cheng Weishi Lun* explains that old seeds generate new seeds (*zhong zi sheng zhong zi* 種子生種子) through the imprinting of divine scents (Ko 2002, p. 96).<sup>9</sup>

The *vāsanā* theory greatly impacted Mahāyāna soteriology. The Mahāyāna scripture, the *Dasheng Qixin Lun* 大乘起信論 (*The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*), embraced the same concept of perfuming. In Mahāyāna, it is believed that the all-seed is subject to conditioning by karma. This conditioning process takes place at the all-seed, or the mind. Perfuming imprints various aromas into the mind. Thus, the seeds of “conditioned dharmas” persist in the “All-seed” (Gao 2023, p. 13)<sup>10</sup> The *Dasheng Qixin Lun* illustrates that perfuming occurs irreversibly at all karmic levels. Pure dharma perfumes entities, facilitating a significant advancement toward Nirvana. Consequently, all entities can attain Buddhahood by harnessing the divine fragrance of pure dharma (Ko 2002, p. 97). Moreover, according to the *Dasheng Qixin Lun*, perfuming can also lead to degradation and contamination, thus expanding opportunities to develop *vāsanā* theories in Mahāyāna (H. An 2022, p. 1870).<sup>11</sup>

Xuan’s translation of Vasubandhu’s treatises shifted the focus of olfactory discussions. Scents and smells were not merely communication tools between the living and the dead. Divine scents and their perfuming supported the belief that salvation is universal and accessible to those who seek it. Scents have the potent effect of immersing their recipients in the process of entering into a sacred union. If the recipients are susceptible to perfuming, their exposure to divine scents initiates a process of merging themselves with the divine.

### 3. Fragrance and Purification in the Texts of Zhu Faman and Du Guangting

Burning incense was a preparatory ritual in Maoshan 茅山 Daoism prior to the Tang dynasty. Smoke and aroma were utilized to purify the meditation chamber. Isabelle Robinet has emphasized the significance of incense in the liturgical world in her book, *Taoist Meditation*. One of her textual references is “*Dong zhen tai shang zi du yan guang shen yuan bian jing* 洞真太上紫度炎光神元變經” (Robinet 1993, p. 39). Earlier attention to Daoist incense burners appeared in Joseph Needham’s works. Needham argued that Daoist alchemy ritualized fire and the incense burner *xiang lu* 香爐. Given the ancient origin of burning and smoking practices, it is no surprise that Daoists revered the mystical power of fire and smoke before the Yogācāra theory was known in China. Needham interpreted the mystical use of perfumes as part of “the earliest shamanic” Daoism (Dannaway 2010, p. 489).

Still puzzling, however, is how Maoshan Daoists interpreted the soteriological effects of the liturgical acts of burning and smoking. It remains unknown how and why Maoshan Daoism believed that fragrance could purify the perfumed. Needham attempted to answer this question with his theory of the earliest shamanic influence, reporting the intriguing discovery that Daoists knew and used psychoactive weeds, including cannabis: “What concerns us here ... is the possibility that the ancient Daoists generated hallucinogenic smokes in their incense burners” (ibid., p. 490). His textual source is a Daoist canon, the *Wushang biyao* (Assandri 2008, p. 3).<sup>12</sup> The *Wushang biyao* indeed reveals liturgical details as an encyclopedia from the late sixth century. Charles D. Benn has noted that the *Wushang biyao* documented the formation of *zhai* 齋 (purification or retreat) rituals. This sixth-century Daoist encyclopedia codified Daoist rituals; undoubtedly, the olfactory experience played a crucial role in pre-Tang religious life (Benn 2004, p. 311).<sup>13</sup>

It is equally important to note that pre-Tang Daoist liturgy was developing in the correlative cosmology with Buddhism. According to recent research by Zhang and Luo, the codification of Daoism in the Tang dynasty was heavily influenced by the Lingbao Retreat Method. They argue that the Lingbao initiated the liturgical standardization of Daoism (Zhang and Luo 2023, p. 2; Yamada 2004). Romaskiewicz suggests that Buddhist *puja* rituals significantly contributed to the ceremonial use of scents and smoking in Daoism (Romaskiewicz 2022, p. 316). In Du Guangting’s *Tai shang huang lu zhai yi* 太上黃籙齋儀 (*Liturgical Manual for the Grand High Yellow Register Retreat*), incense received status equal to that of the four other offerings: flowers, lamps, water, and fruit. Incense smoke “transmit[s] the mind and conveys messages, ascending to affect the Perfected and numina” (ibid., p. 310). The ancient belief in spiritual communication is revealed by words like delivering *chuan* 傳, reaching *da* 達, and feeling *gan* 感 (ibid., pp. 308–9).

A specific origin for the religious use of sacred scents and smoke may not be necessary to determine. Medieval liturgy often demonstrated remarkable flexibility and openness to innovative ideas and practices. According to Zürcher, cosmological borrowing enabled Daoist liturgists to discover the purifying powers of sacred perfumes before the Tang dynasty. The purpose of burning and smelling sacred substances shifted from communal feasts to individual repentance. As Zhou Congjun observes, the communal atmosphere of ancient burning rituals featured the cremation of hundreds of animals, including bulls and swine, at a single event (Zhou 2002, p. 5). Visual effects were vital, and the fuels for the fire included a broad range of materials from jade and silk to animals (ibid., p. 15). In this context, I concur with Bokenkamp regarding the view that ritual renovations in olfactory experiences evolved through Daoists’ reinterpretation of Buddhist concepts such as *vāsanā* (Bokenkamp 2007, p. 11).

However, the purpose of fire rituals had transformed by the time of Tao Hongjing 陶弘景(456–536 CE). In his text, the *Deng zhen yin jue* 登真隱訣 (*Esoteric Instructions for Ascent to Perfection*), Tao used the word *xiang* 香 to replace previous terms such as *liao* 燎, *yin* 裡, or *chai* 柴:

Fragrance is that which the [Celestial Perfected Ones] unif[y] all senses by using it, and that which the [Tectonic Deities] speak words by channeling it. It is in this manner that one can pray and wish, and one must burn it on his left and right. Only this smoke enables one to see the holy and speak to it.

香者, 天真用茲以通感, 地祇緣斯以達言。是以祈念, 存注, 必燒之於左右, 特以此煙能照玄達意 (Recited from Zhang 2021, p. 82).

Tao Hongjing upheld the prevalent belief that fire and odors could forge a connection between the living and the dead, simultaneously emphasizing *xiang*—or fragrance—as the divine attribute of the Celestial Perfected and the Tectonic Deities.

During the Tang era, Daoist clergy elaborated on the olfactory impact of divine perfumes. Zhu Faman extended this concept to the salvific role of fragrance, through which impurity could purify itself. Grounded in the writings of Tao Hongjing, Zhu articulated in his book, *Yao xiu ke yi jie lu chao* 要修科儀戒律鈔 (*Excerpts from the Essential Liturgies and Observances*), that “Water cleanses the soiled and fragrance dispels impurity (夫水以洗塵, 香能破穢)” (*Yao xiu ke yi jie lu chao* 要修科儀戒律鈔, 8. 015a). He perceived the capabilities of water and *xiang* as intricately linked within Daoist cosmology. By harnessing the powers of perfumes, one could achieve perfect balance and faith in the Three Clarity Heavens (*san qing* 三清) (ibid.). Zhu’s deep understanding of Daoist purification rituals came from his expertise with the *zhai yi* 齋儀 ceremonies, designed to cleanse the mind and absolve sins. As highlighted by Yamada Toshiaki, the *zhai yi* ceremonies required individuals to confess their faults and amplify their purity before offering prayers. The practice of bathing (*mu yu* 沐浴) was vital for the self-cultivation and purification processes emphasized by the *zhai yi* (Yamada 1999, pp. 177–78). Accordingly, it is significant that Zhu Faman integrated these elements of water and fragrance into the Daoist conventions of the *zhai yi*.

There is an intriguing imprint of Buddhism in Zhu’s liturgical reformation. He observed that fragrance can similarly delight the human mind, much like the act of bathing in water. Consequently, the care taken with fragrances reached the same level of importance as the other rituals through which practitioners could attain spiritual elevation. Notably, he incorporated *vāsanā* in his Daoist liturgy manual and acknowledged the superiority of certain scents. The scent of flowers (*fang xin* 芳馨) was considered divinely supreme. Thus, the act of perfuming was described as scattering flower petals, *san hua* 散花. In this context, Zhu’s understanding of olfaction was significantly more profound than the ancient practices of animal sacrifice and smoking. Zhu Faman cited a Daoist scripture, the *Benji Jing*, to assert that perfuming can transform the recipient’s condition, stating that a beautiful aroma “entertains and pleases people’s minds.” He termed such impactful forces of pleasure and imprinting as the “Treasure Incense of Harmonizing All” (百和寶香). Zhu stated that “it perfumes all eight directions (薰於八方)” (*Yao xiu ke yi jie lu chao* 要修科儀戒律鈔, 8. 015b).

It is unsurprising that the *Benji Jing* illustrates Daoist adoption of Mahāyāna soteriology. Assandri indeed observed that the *Benji Jing* embraced the soteriological teachings of Mādhyamika, thereby imparting the ultimate liberation from suffering through the attainment of true understanding (Assandri 2008, p. 7). Despite Mādhyamika’s philosophy, *tetra lemma*, unveiling a profound Mahāyāna influence in the *Benji Jing*, it remains pertinent to explore why Daoists found appeal in these messages of universal and self-driven salvation. Maoshan Daoism potentially clarifies this, as it is constructed upon the theological tenets

of the *Benji Jing*. Additionally, Maoshan Daoism refined its meditation theories using the method of visualization meditation (*cun si* 存思). Visualization meditation relies on the premise that Complete Perfection naturally exists within one's body (Yamada 1989, p. 29). Whether in Mādhyamika or Maoshan, the highest state of existence is deemed accessible to humans (Kim 2023, p. 253).

Given their similar interest in soteriology, Daoism's adaptation of Mahāyāna occurred along complex and dynamic trajectories. Another Maoshan scripture, the *Huangting Jing* 黃庭經 (*Yellow Court Classic*), did not consider olfaction a path toward the Three Pure Ones. The text used the word *xun* without the meaning of *vāsanā* perfuming. In the chapter "Bathing", it intriguingly emphasized the removal of bodily odors of flesh (*fei* 肥) and vegetables (*xun* 薰). This bathing ritual in Maoshan sought to eliminate all odors of mortal life (the removal of *xun*). Here, *xun* specifically referred to the five flavors (*wu xin* 五辛) of cooked meals (*Huang ting jing gu zhu jin yi* 黃庭經古注今譯, p. 374). After the esoteric bath, one would be devoid of both aroma and odor. When one managed to circulate the mystic essence (*xuan ye* 玄液) within one's inner space, one's bodily smells would vanish (ibid., p. 350). As concerns the *Huangting Jing*, Maoshan scriptures emphasized the need to deodorize oneself more than to aromatize.

In contrast to Maoshan Daoism, Liu Xiuqing, a fifth-century liturgist, displayed a profound interest in the ritualization of sacred scents. Liu believed that repentance was central to *zhai yi* rituals. While *zhai yi* once prioritized physical endurance, pain-taking, and cleansing, he redefined it to mean true repentance through an ethical and mental reflection on oneself. In the *Lingbao Wugan Wen* 靈寶五感文, he prescribed the *Tutan zhai* 塗炭齋 in the Mind of Five Senses (五感之文) ritual. Otherwise, the ritual risked becoming a wasteful act involving fragrant incense and labor, leading to mere deception. In the worst cases, it could result in grave breaches of the masters' teachings and rules (Yamada 1989, p. 179). The burning of incense (*shao xiang* 燒香) achieved true effectiveness when accompanied by a sense of gratitude for one's life, growth, and prosperity. According to Yamada, Liu's *zhai yi* rituals focused entirely on ethical self-cultivation (ibid., p. 180).

During the Tang era, Zhu Faman and Du Guangting, two eminent Daoist liturgists, solidified earlier discourses and formally institutionalized Daoism. They scrupulously honored the teachings of the *Huangting Jing* and the Maoshan tradition. However, they found the existing scriptures inadequate. They acknowledged the soteriological benefits of ritual perfuming, reflecting a broader trend in Tang Daoism. In *Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity*, Stephen Eskildsen argues that, by the eighth century, the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism prompted Daoists to emphasize metaphysical salvation and the pivotal role of the mind in spiritual life and death, thereby shifting focus from striving for an immortal body (Eskildsen 2015, p. 154). As Eskildsen points out, Tang Daoists reconciled these views by aiming to save both the body and mind. This challenge was formidable, requiring them to adapt yet remain faithful to their ancient traditions. Eskildsen suggests that the Tang Daoists adopted a passive-reactive strategy to address these problems (ibid., p. 156).

Du Guangting, a Tang Daoist liturgist, showcased efforts to reform their practices while preserving their integrity. Before him, many Daoist priests, backed by dynastic support, engaged in ritualizing well-known ceremonies, thereby establishing Daoism as a state-sanctioned religion through visible scriptures and rituals. Du Guangting was among those priests who believed their faith could benefit a broader congregation, not just a narrow circle of esoteric practitioners (Zhang and Luo 2023, p. 4). In his *Tai shang huang lu zhai yi* 太上黃籙齋儀 (*Liturgical Manual for the Grand High Yellow Register Retreat*), a term describing a ritual officiant as someone who "takes care of fragrance [or incense]" *shi xiang* 侍香 appeared in nearly every significant ceremony. Here, Du Guangting uses the term

“fragrance” (*xiang* 香) positively, signaling human endeavors towards achieving Perfection. The ordained priests and ritual officiants held diverse titles, including officials of fragrance (*xiang guan* 香官), jade women of scattered flower petals (*san hua yu nu* 散花玉女), and spiritual masters of carrying incense (*shi xiang zhu ling guan* 侍香諸靈官) (*Taishang huanglu zhaiyi* 太上黃籙齋儀, 1.005b; 1.013b).

Du Guangting normalized the use of many sensory stimulants in Daoist self-cultivation rituals, or *zan dao* 讚導. Priests who exemplified moral virtues became masters of the Way. Similarly, those who illuminated and refined the Way ascended to become *dou jiang* 都講 preachers. The *dou jiang* preacher possessed authority to summon all priests and impart messages of salvation and guidance (*zan shuo* 讚說). In his manual, Du Guangting idealized local practices from the Wu 吳 region in southern China, where the preacher rang a standing bell (*qing* 磬). Du perceived the most significant threat as the potential for some priests to frivolously alter protocols. He maintained that the ancient system should serve as the universal standard for all Daoists.

*Fashi* masters are selected from among the most virtuous and morally superior priests. Those who are profoundly refined in the Way and its principles ascend to become the *dou jiang* preacher. The preacher and the *zhi ci* then speak, accompanied by the sound of drums. They guide their audience, maintain proper protocols, and collectively heed the good news. This process is termed *Zan chang dao yin* (shepherding the flock to the good news), a duty of the *dou jiang* preacher. 齋官之內，以道德尊高者，為法師。明練法度，為都講也。又都講職詞云，先鳴法鼓，次引朋眾。風則軌儀，敬憑讚說。此即讚唱導引，皆都講之務也 (*Taishang huanglu zhaiyi* 太上黃籙齋儀, 53.001a).

The *zan dao* (shepherding the flock to good news) ritual also aimed to provide participants an opportunity to repent their sins. Du strongly believed that the sensuous stimulant could affect the inner moral condition. The standing bell served as one example of new ceremonial tools introduced. Along with the sound (Feezell 2024), scents became a fundamental element of *zan dao*. Participants also passed around a scripture as they took their seats and maintained order. The ritual was conducted under the guidance of three individuals: the caretaker of scripture (*shi jing* 侍經), the caretaker of incense (*shi xiang* 侍香), and the caretaker of a lamp (*shi deng* 侍燈). Du noted that the caretaker of incense should be thoroughly familiar with the liturgical rules and ensure the continuous presence of smoke and smell throughout the ceremony. Similarly to the auditory effects, a constant fragrance was intended to encourage participants to confess their misdeeds (ibid.).

Du Guangting never doubted that the ritualized use of incense and its aroma were always traditional components of *zhai fa* 齋法 protocols. To him, burning incense was akin to moral cultivation under a virtuous master and repentance. All *zhai* protocols originated from Lingbao, according to his writings. The *zhai* rituals aimed to redeem sinners through the guidance and support of moral superiors, with incense playing a soteriological role. The question of whether the incense was derived from Mahāyāna Buddhism was no longer pertinent. Instead, this question of origin may appeal more to contemporary sectarians than to Du and other Tang liturgists. In Du’s time, the belief in the transformative power of sacred fragrance had become widely accepted and incorporated into Daoist practices. As Verellen points out, “the assimilation of the Mahayanist doctrine of universal salvation ... into Daoist redemptive thinking” marks the moment of ritual innovation. Du’s reform, at the same time, held a tone of native restoration compatible with the reformatory modification (Verellen, pp. 146–47).

Thus, praying for self-purification and repentance through immersion in sacred fragrance aligned well with Daoist tradition and soteriological interests. Daoism’s adaptability and resilience enabled it to assimilate elements from Mahāyāna and Yogācāra.

## 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, there were extensive philosophical and theological debates on olfaction in ancient and medieval China. Figures such as Mencius, Xunzi, and the *Liji* suggest that olfactory experiences could generate philosophical and liturgical thoughts among both the living and the deceased. During the Han dynasty, a new concept of fragrance, *xiang*, emerged, considered superior to unpleasant odors.

As contemplation on the profound effects of fragrance continued within Daoist circles, some may have discovered the psychoactive properties of cannabis smoke and fumes. Needham's assertion might be accurate. However, more significant transformations were unfolding at the soteriological level as Buddhism introduced a new religious concept of the perfumable. The most influential text in revolutionizing olfactory discourse was the *Cheng Weishi Lun*, translated by Xuan Zang. Simultaneously, Mādhyamika and Mahāyāna texts began to incorporate Indian theories on sensuous stimulants. Xuan Zang's translation of Vasubandhu's treatises elucidated new conceptions of human sense and sensibility and further highlighted that the perfumable possessed distinct properties of being variable, unifiable, and sentient.

Moreover, the trajectory of *vāsanā*'s integration into Daoism was complex and multifarious, not merely linear. Maoshan scriptures retained the native tradition of utilizing smoke and aroma, while the Lingbao School selectively adopted Mahāyāna teachings. Their divergent attitudes toward Buddhism offer a clear insight. From the end of the Han dynasty to the start of the Tang dynasty, Daoism remained receptive to innovative concepts and practices. Its soteriological interest fueled the preservation and evolution of its *zhai yi* rituals. Over time, self-purification and repentance became central to Daoist practices, necessitating theological support for the variable nature of a ritual participant.

Zhu Faman and Du Guangting, two Tang Daoist liturgists, affirmed that perfuming and being perfumed should be official components of orthodox Daoist ceremonies. Zhu Faman proclaimed that nothing could halt the spread of holy scent. He advocated for universal salvation through a superior force, asserting that the teachings would please everyone like a pleasant aroma. Meanwhile, Du Guangting included incense burning and the presence of aroma in his official protocols. Much as all should heed the teachings of a morally virtuous master, ritual participants were encouraged to stay close to the incense. Under the influence of incense, after being perfumed, they would acknowledge their sins and repent. Ultimately, this moralistic emphasis, bolstered by olfactory training, led Tang Daoists to adapt to their own form of universalism. The olfactory practices and their soteriological utilization exemplify the dynamic and "correlative cosmology" of Buddhism and Daoism, as well as physics and metaphysics.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> *Zhuangzi* 莊子, "Heaven and Earth tian di 天地" (the English translation is by James Legge).

- <sup>3</sup> *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 defined *xun* as fragrant plants or aromatic herbs (*xiang cao* 香草) (Duan Yuchai *zhu Shuowen jiezi* 段玉裁注說文解字, 2015, p. 30).
- <sup>4</sup> For example, *yu jin* 鬱金, which the *Liji* identified as yin scent, can be either turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) or saffron crocus (*Crocus sativus*). Milburn suggests it may cover wide varieties of crocus. Artemisa (*xiao* 薰) and millet (*shu ji* 黍稷) are believed to have been used to make yang scents (Milburn 2016, pp. 455–56).
- <sup>5</sup> *Bai Hu Tong* articulated the Five Phases theory and claimed that the Earth and the Center hold the upmost importance in the cosmic movement.
- <sup>6</sup> Xuan Zang’s translation amounts to 1335 juan. Xuan Zang established a model of Buddhist translation with his meticulous cross-referencing methods. His goal was to minimize any arbitrary interventions of a translator.
- <sup>7</sup> Vashubandu clarified his epistemological theory that physical sense faculties, along with other faculties, are “the building blocks of sentient life” (Brewer 2023, p. 28).
- <sup>8</sup> In this text, a simplified character 熏 of the same sound *xun* is used, but *vāsanā* has been translated in the word *xun* 薰 in the Buddhism literature.
- <sup>9</sup> In the *Cheng Weishi Lun*, Vasubandhu and Xuan Zhang excluded divine beings from the perfumable. This was because pure dharma is not involved in perfuming.
- <sup>10</sup> As Gao notes, the word *vāsanā* is the feminine form of its root *vas* (to stay). It thus means perfuming, the act of forcing something to stay on something else (Gao 2023, p. 2).
- <sup>11</sup> Wǒn Hyo 元曉 developed his theology by classifying perfuming in more kinds of interactions between Tathātā zhen ru 眞如 and Avidyā wu ming 無明.
- <sup>12</sup> Assandri argues that *Wushang biyao* appeared in the sixth century and that Louguan 樓觀 Daoists participated in the compilation when they gathered at Tongdao guan 通道館.
- <sup>13</sup> *Wu shang mi yao* is assumed as a text of Maoshan Daoism, opening with the words of Mao Ying 茅盈, the “Chamberlain of the Eastern Summit, Commander of Fate 司命東卿君.”

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