

The Homology of Medicine and Incense, the Symbiosis of Incense and Custom: The Knowledge System, Ecological Wisdom, and Modern Transformation of Ethnic Aromatic Therapy in Yunnan: An Interdisciplinary Investigation From Ethnobotany to Traditional Medicine

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Yunnan is the region in China with the greatest ethnic diversity, the richest aromatic plant resources, and the most intact preservation of traditional ecological wisdom. It has nurtured a pluralistic yet integrated system of aromatic therapy and incense culture among ethnic groups such as the Dai, Naxi, Bai, Yi, and Pumi. Based on local flora and traditional medical knowledge, these ethnic groups have fused aromatic therapy practices, ritual beliefs, daily customs, and ecological ethics, forming a cultural paradigm characterized by the “homology of medicine and incense, the symbiosis of incense and custom, and the shared fragrance connecting humans and deities”. Employing theoretical frameworks from ethnobotany, cultural anthropology, and traditional ethnic medicine, this paper proposes for the first time an “Ecology-Culture-Health” tripartite symbiotic analytical model. It systematically examines the aromatic therapy techniques, application mechanisms, aromatic plant resources, and folkloric contexts of representative ethnic groups in Yunnan. The study elucidates the multiple functions of incense culture in disease prevention and treatment, spiritual beliefs, social order, and ecological conservation. It analyzes the crises of inheritance faced in the process of modernization and innovatively proposes a trinity development pathway of “scientific preservation, living inheritance, and industrial transformation”. The research indicates that the ethnic minority aromatic therapy system in Yunnan is a living heritage deeply integrating traditional wellness wisdom with regional culture. This study not only enriches the pedigree of Chinese incense culture but also provides novel

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theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for the modernization of traditional medicine and the development of the ecological wellness industry.

Keywords: Yunnan ethnic minorities, aromatic therapy, incense culture, ethnic customs, traditional medicine, aromatic plants

Introduction

Yunnan is renowned as the “Kingdom of Plants”, “Home of Spices”, and “Treasure Trove of Medicinal Herbs”. It is home to over 400 species of wild aromatic plants, accounting for more than 70% of China’s total. The unique three-dimensional climate and biodiversity provide a natural material foundation for the incense-using customs of various ethnic groups.

Throughout long-term livelihood practices and disease management, the utilization of aromatic plants by Yunnan’s ethnic minorities has evolved from simple purification, insect repellence, and flavoring into a comprehensive cultural system integrating medical healing, ritual communication, social etiquette, and spatial cleansing. This has formed a distinctive ethnic incense culture pedigree in Southwest China, markedly different from the incense culture of the Central Plains.

Existing research often focuses on single ethnic medical systems, phytochemical analysis, or descriptions of folk phenomena, lacking a holistic, structural, and symbiotic examination of Yunnan’s multi-ethnic aromatic therapy system. Using the Dai, Naxi, Bai, Yi, and Pumi peoples as core case studies, this paper traverses disciplinary boundaries of ethnic medicine, cultural anthropology, ecology, and aromatherapy. It aims to reveal the intrinsic logic connecting aromatic therapy techniques with ethnic customs, belief systems, and ecological wisdom, thereby providing new theoretical support for the preservation, inheritance, and scientific utilization of Yunnan’s traditional incense culture.

Natural and Cultural Foundations of Yunnan’s Ethnic Incense Culture

Resource Base: A Treasure Trove of Aromatic Plants in a Three-Dimensional Climate

Yunnan’s complex topography, with its dramatic elevation changes spanning multiple climatic zones, fosters a complete spectrum of vegetation types from tropical rainforests to alpine meadows. Aromatic plants from families such as Lauraceae, Lamiaceae, and Zingiberaceae are widely distributed. Lemongrass, *Blumea balsamifera*, calamus, pine resin, etc., serve both as ethnic medicinal materials and core ingredients for incense-making. Adhering to the principle of “using local materials, gathering as needed, and employing plants for both medicine and incense”, each ethnic group has developed an incense-use system highly adapted to the local ecology.

Cultural Base: Animism and Polytheistic Belief Systems

Yunnan’s ethnic minorities generally believe in animism and worship ancestors and nature deities. Incense is regarded as a “medium for communicating with deities, an instrument for purification, and a good medicine for healing the body”. In various social activities such as sacrifices, festivals, weddings, funerals, and diagnoses, incense is a central vehicle. The act of using incense is not merely a physiological need but also a crucial means of ethnic identity formation, cultural transmission, and social order construction, ultimately forming a cultural pattern where “incense and custom are inseparable, and incense and ritual are integrated”.

Aromatic Therapy Techniques and Incense-Custom Culture of Representative Ethnic Minorities in Yunnan

The Dai: The Fumigation and Aromatherapy System Under the “Four Pagodas and Five Aggregates” Theory

The Dai aromatic therapy system is mature and systematic. Centered on the Dai medical theory of “Four Pagodas (Wind, Fire, Water, Earth) and Five Aggregates”, it views the balance of the four elements as the foundation of health. Fragrance regulates the organism through respiration and skin penetration, achieving harmony of body and mind.

Their techniques are comprehensive, including smoke fumigation, aromatic bath therapy, and sachet wearing. The aromatic water bathing during the Water-Splashing Festival and the daily use of lemongrass boiled water for dispelling dampness exemplify the deep integration of incense culture into life customs. Dai aromatic therapy shows significant effects in improving respiratory diseases, rheumatic pain, and anxiety, representing a model of traditional public health wisdom.

The Naxi: The Dongba Culture and Five-Elements Incense Ritual Healing System

Naxi incense culture is deeply rooted in Dongba culture, with the “Five-Elements Cosmology” as the basis for incense formulation. Incense is a messenger for human-deity communication, a remedy for calming the spirit, opening orifices, and purifying space. Dongba incense formulas are often secretly transmitted, using raw materials like cypress, pine branches, and perilla, processed through seven steps into incense sticks, powder, or sachets.

Incense is indispensable in rituals such as heaven worship, prayer, and healing. Naxi aromatic therapy emphasizes “purifying the mind first, healing the body second”, combining spiritual healing with physical regulation, representing an ethnic expression of “emotion-condition therapy”.

The Bai: Benzhu Worship and the Ritualistic Incense-Custom System

Bai incense culture centers on Benzhu (local patron deity) worship, deeply integrated with residential, festival, and funeral cultures. Their traditional incense-making techniques have been listed as intangible cultural heritage. Raw materials primarily include local plants like cypress and *Lindera nacusua*, producing an elegant and long-lasting fragrance.

Strict incense etiquette governs occasions like the March Fair, temple fairs, weddings, and funerals. Incense serves as a medium connecting ancestral spirits, Benzhu, and nature deities. Bai incense customs stress “purifying the body before worshipping deities, revering the heart before using incense”. Incense use is incorporated into moral and ritual norms, becoming a vital bond maintaining ethnic identity.

The Yi: Hearth Culture and the Fumigation Epidemic-Prevention System

Yi incense culture revolves around the hearth, with the Torch Festival as its core context. They commonly use mugwort, pine resin, cypress branches, etc., to fumigate houses, clothes, and the hearth, utilizing heat to promote the release of volatile oils for combined insect repellent, sterilizing, and epidemic-prevention effects.

Scattering pine incense and fumigating mugwort during the Torch Festival are significant rituals, serving both cultural symbolism and public health functions. This characteristic of “heat aiding fragrance dispersion, fragrance following fire” is particularly suited to the cold, damp highland environment, demonstrating the ethnic group’s ecological adaptation wisdom.

The Pumi and Northwestern Yunnan Ethnic Groups: High-Altitude Aromatherapy and Rue Grass Utilization System

Ethnic groups like the Pumi and Tibetan on the northwestern Yunnan plateau have developed a unique aromatherapy system based on the high-altitude ecology. Rue grass (*Ruta graveolens*) is their core aromatic, used for fumigation, wearing, tea-making, or topical application, possessing effects such as dispelling cold, clearing nasal passages, and calming nerves.

The aromatherapy of plateau ethnic groups features simple materials, convenient usage, and eco-friendliness, embodying the resource utilization wisdom of “taking less, using more, and utilizing sustainably”. It is a highly regional component of Yunnan’s incense culture.

The Multiple Functions and Cultural Logic of Yunnan’s Ethnic Aromatic Therapy

Medical Function: The Disease Prevention and Treatment System of Traditional Aromatic Therapy

Yunnan’s ethnic aromatic therapy is materially based on the volatile oils of aromatic plants. Absorption through the respiratory tract and skin can exert antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, sedative, and immune-regulating effects. Focusing on external treatment, epidemic prevention, and regulation, various ethnic groups have formed a complete wellness system covering daily healthcare, disease prevention, and chronic condition management, constituting an important branch of traditional ethnic medicine.

Religious Function: The Ritual Medium for Human-Deity Communication

Within animistic and polytheistic beliefs, incense is the core medium connecting the human world with deities, ancestors, and nature. Incense is essential in rituals like sacrifices and prayers; the rising smoke symbolizes conveying wishes to the heavens. Incense culture reinforces the stability of belief systems, becoming a significant symbol of ethnic cultural identity.

Social Function: Ritual Order and Ethnic Cohesion

Rules of incense use permeate social activities such as weddings, funerals, festivals, and gatherings, forming strict folk norms. The occasion, quantity, and manner of incense use reflect status, seniority, and etiquette, serving as crucial tools for maintaining social order and enhancing ethnic cohesion.

Ecological Function: The Botanical Wisdom of Sustainable Utilization

Yunnan’s ethnic minorities follow principles like “using local materials, harvesting moderately, rotational gathering, and following seasons” when collecting aromatic plants, rarely engaging in over-harvesting. Some groups voluntarily protect the habitats of aromatic plants. This ecological ethic of harmonious coexistence with nature offers significant lessons for modern biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource use.

Inheritance Challenges and Contemporary Value of Yunnan’s Ethnic Incense Culture

Inheritance Challenges

Under the impacts of modernization, urbanization, and marketization, Yunnan’s ethnic incense culture faces multiple crises:

1. Broken inheritance chains: Aging inheritors and the difficulty of sustaining oral transmission models.
2. Market impact: Proliferation of chemical and industrial incense, impacting the natural incense market and traditional incense-making industry.

3. Knowledge loss: Extensive tacit knowledge, including formulas and techniques, lacks systematic documentation and is on the verge of disappearing.

4. Resource decline: Over-harvesting reduces wild aromatic plant resources, threatening the ecological foundation.

5. Weakening identity: Younger generations' cultural identity diminishes, and traditional incense-using customs gradually fade.

Contemporary Value

1. Academic value: An excellent case for studying the interaction between humans, plants, culture, and ecology, providing valuable samples for disciplines like ethnobotany and cultural anthropology.

2. Wellness value: Its concepts align with modern aromatherapy and emotion-condition therapy, offering natural solutions for sub-health management and chronic disease intervention.

3. Industrial value: Can drive the development of industries such as natural incense products, wellness experiences, and cultural tourism integration, aiding rural revitalization.

4. Ecological value: Emphasizes moderate use and ecological protection. Its inheritance can promote the conservation of wild plants and ecological cultivation, achieving dual protection of culture and ecology.

Pathways for the Preservation, Inheritance, and Development of Yunnan's Ethnic Incense Culture

Systematic Rescue and Digital Archiving

Conduct comprehensive surveys of the aromatic therapy techniques, formulas, and rituals of various ethnic groups. Establish a database integrating text, images, and specimens to achieve permanent preservation of endangered knowledge.

Scientific Interpretation and Standard System Construction

Employ modern pharmacological and phytochemical methods to scientifically verify the components and efficacy of aromatic therapy. Establish safe, standardized, and replicable operational standards to promote the modernization and standardization of traditional aromatic therapy.

Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance and Talent Cultivation

Promote the application of ethnic incense-making techniques for recognition at various levels of intangible cultural heritage. Establish inheritance bases and apprenticeship centers, encourage diversified inheritance through master-apprentice, school, and community channels, and cultivate a new generation of inheritors.

Resource Conservation and Ecological Cultivation

Establish in-situ conservation areas for aromatic plants. Promote under-forest cultivation and wild-simulated planting models to ensure the sustainable supply of aromatic resources, solidifying the ecological foundation of incense culture.

Cultural-Tourism Integration and Brand Development

Create the regional public brand "Yunnan Ethnic Aromatic Therapy". Promote the integration of incense culture experiences, wellness tourism, intangible cultural heritage handicrafts, and other formats, forming a virtuous cycle of cultural inheritance and industrial development.

Conclusion

The aromatic therapy techniques and incense culture of Yunnan's ethnic minorities are products of the long-term symbiosis among ecological resources, traditional medicine, belief systems, and life customs. They have formed a complete system characterized by "homology of medicine and incense, integration of incense and custom, shared fragrance connecting humans and deities, and ecological symbiosis". The practices of the Dai, Naxi, Bai, Yi, Pumi, and other ethnic groups possess both the practical value of disease prevention/treatment and the multiple cultural functions of spiritual belief, social order, and ecological protection, representing the most diverse and vibrant regional type within Chinese incense culture.

In the contemporary context of cultural confidence, the "Healthy China" initiative, and ecological civilization construction, systematically preserving, scientifically researching, and dynamically transforming Yunnan's ethnic incense culture is not only a safeguard for cultural heritage but also a significant pathway for modernizing traditional medicine, developing the ecological wellness industry, and aiding rural revitalization. The "Ecology-Culture-Health" tripartite model and the "Preservation-Inheritance-Transformation" trinity pathway proposed in this study provide a new analytical framework and practical approaches for related fields. Future efforts should strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration to deeply explore the underlying ecological wisdom and medical value, allowing this ancient wisdom to rejuvenate in the modern era.

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