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Scent and synaesthesia: The medical use of spice bags in early China



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ABSTRACT

Ethnopharmacological relevance: The history of Chinese spices has received increasing attention in recent years, but little research has been carried out on where they fit on the food-medicine continuum for early China, during the formation of the classical medical system. This paper describes how the synaesthetic qualities of spices attracted a particular analysis in that emerging system which serves to mark them as different to other medical materials and foodstuffs. We aim to clarify the special role created for spices to accommodate their boundary-crossing synaesthetic action on the body.

Material and methods: This paper analyses the contents of several spice bags excavated in 1972 from a tomb that was closed in the second century BCE. It uses archaeological reports of material culture together with the early Chinese textual record, extant in both manuscripts and received texts, to bring out the role of spices in ritual, food and medicine.

Results: Noting that the flavours and aromas of early China were assigned physiological potency in the first centuries BCE, we argue that by medieval times the unique synaesthetic role that spices played in mediating the senses was systematically medicalised. While being deployed for the purpose of curing disease in medicine, they also remained within the realm of everyday healthcare, and religious practice, deployed both as aromatics to perfume the environment, attracting benign spirits, but also to ward off the agents of disease, as well as for enhancing health through their use in cookery.

Conclusion: While foodstuffs entered the digestive system spices were all considered 'pungent' in the emerging classical medical system. They acted on the body through the nose and lungs, making them neither food nor drug. This implicit categorisation medicalised spices which, like music, could affect the passions and lighten the spirit, codifying observations about the impact on the body of the ritual environment.

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1. Introduction

When there are aromas so fragrant, glorious will be our state.

When pungent like pepper the scent, our ancestors will be at rest.

Zaishan 載芟 (Clearing the Grass), *Shijing* 诗经 (Classic of Poetry), translation Sterckx (2011).

Only some herbs count as spices, but throughout history almost all spices have been considered herbs in their meaning of medicinal materials. And, in most cases, the medical applications of spices overlap with people's daily demand for perfumes and the long-standing habit of using culinary spices as aromatics to enhance the social environment. In addressing the themes of this Special Issue of the Journal of Ethnopharmacology, this article analyses border crossing in pre-modern China: the position of aromatics between food and medicine, and the mediating effect of our different senses in the pursuit of preventing illness, the maintenance of good

hygiene, and the enhancing of health through scenting the worlds that surround us. Using historical texts and manuscripts excavated from second century BCE tomb sites located along the course and hinterland of the Yangzi valley we ask how were spice bags used in early China? And how were they thought to act on the body?

As we can see from the above poem in *Maoshi* 毛詩 (*The Book of Odes*, c. 6th century BCE), the aroma of *jiao* 椒 (*Zanthoxylum armatum* DC.), commonly known to us as Sichuan pepper, calmed the ancestors and mediated between the state, the human and spirit worlds (Mao et al., 1999). According to *Chunqiu zuozhuan* 春秋左傳 (*Master Zuo's Spring and Autumn Annals*), sacrifices and wars were considered the most important affairs of state in the Zhou period (c. 1045–256 BCE) (Zuoqiu et al., 1999). People of the preceding Shang period (17th century–c. 1045 BCE) had apparently favoured musical ritual while the people of the Zhou dynasty favoured fragrance to flavour when offering sacrifices (Zheng and Kong, 1999). In a world of kings who were also spirit mediums aroma mediated between the bodily experience of the ruler, and the ancestors who were active in determining outcomes in the world. The *Liji* 禮記 (*Record of Rites*, contents dating to pre-imperial times

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although compiled in its extant form ca 100CE [?]) mentions two kinds of spices applied in the process of sacrifice: *yu* 鬱 (i.e. *yujin* 鬱金, *Curcuma aromatica* Salisb.) and *xiao* 薰 (i.e. *xianghao* 香蒿, *Artemisia annua* L.), which were used to flavour the wine and were burnt, respectively, *xiao* for its demonofugic effect (Zheng and Kong, 1999). As Roel Sterckx, in his seminal *Food, Sacrifice and Sagehood in Early China* points out:

The efficacy ... was thought to depend largely on the degree to which the ritualist was able to tap into the right sensory channels through fragrance, sound, colour, flavour, and orchestrated music and dance. Although firmly anchored in the physical world, the powers generated by sensory stimuli through sacrifice were transgressive in that they both provided ephemeral contact with the spirit world and transformed the body and sensory engagement of the human participant (Sterckx, 2011).

The role of music, spices and aromatics in ancient China was part of political ritual and in mediating human and spirit worlds also had consequences for medicine. Music could arouse dangerous passions in the body, and might also become part of the insignia of politically sectarian movements. Both music and fragrance were thought to have a physiological effect on the human body and to stir communities to action well before a formal physiology of inner body *qi* was conceived (Lo and Schroer, 2005).

It was therefore a responsibility of governance to choose the right music and spices to maintain social and political harmony in the kingdom. Fragrance bridged worlds, and over time its ability to potentise ritual social and body space became part of formal medical knowledge about the nature of the physiological connection with the environment. While spices and aromatics have largely lost their central role in state ritual, music might still be able to arouse patriotic feeling. In China music might still be able to arouse patriotic feeling. In Chinese culture there also remains the link between incense and the ancestors and spirit worlds, and therefore the health and well-being of individual and community.

Synaesthesia has been studied extensively by psychologists and neurologists who have proved how, for example, odours or the application of temperature on regions of the tongue, can change the experience of taste, and exactly where the experience of flavours is mediated in the brain (Auvray and Spence, 2008; Harrison, 2001). In contrast, there has been very little historical research on synaesthesia in the ancient world. Medical treatises from the ancient worlds seem to lack a collective name for the senses (Jütte, 2005), and therefore clear boundaries between them, and so indicate that surviving material culture and textual records might offer fertile territory for searching for the nature of synaesthetic experience and practice. As we shall see unique therapeutic cultures of the Warring States and early empires of China have left behind rich records for this purpose.

The proper techniques of *Yangsheng* 养生 (lit. 'nourishing life'), cultivation of the body and its spirits, were a marker of social and political status in early China. This culture was also a key context within which spices were used and physiological ideas developed (Lo, 2001). *Yangsheng* is a vast and ever expanding complex of beliefs, texts and practices that interacts with other features of the Chinese medical worlds, philosophy, morality, ethical and socio-political systems. Historically, and in the lives of individuals, it was embodied in regimen of hygiene, exercise (martial arts, therapeutic massage), sexual health and dietetics—practices which all take as their target the *qi* of the body: that is the physiological essence that connects the sensual quality of the inner body, its pains, passions, and senses of well-being to the moods of the environment, the passing of the seasons, the climate and behaviour. It is this early Chinese language of the inner body as it relates to flavours, music, and aroma that reveals a synaesthetic

sensibility underlying the medical vectors through which spices and aromatics were understood to act therapeutically on the body.

In *Dangerous Tastes: Story of Spices*, Andrew Dalby reminds us that "in most cultures in earlier times no sharp boundary existed between foods and drugs." (Dalby, 2000a) For Edward H. Schafer there was also no clear distinction between spices, drugs, perfumes and incenses:

It is worth saying again that in the medieval world of the Far East there was little clear-cut distinction among drugs, spices, perfumes, and incenses—that is, among substances which nourish the body and those which nourish the spirit, those which attract a lover and those which attract a divinity (Schafer, 1985).

Schafer's opinion is important to the exploration and understanding of the knowledge of spices, whether research is into Asia or Europe, ancient, medieval or modern times. However, the difference is that ancient Chinese knowledge survives most vividly in the everyday life of people who claim Chinese heritage around the world. In contemporary China, some kinds of herbs and spices, such as ginger, *huangqi* 黄芪 (*Astragalus membranaceus* (Fisch.) Bunge), *jiao* 姜 (Zanthoxylum armatum), *gui* 桂 (*Cinnamomum japonicum* Siebold), *bajiao* 八角 (*Illicium verum* Hook. f.), *hongzao* 紅棗 (*Ziziphus jujube* Mill.) or *gouqi* 枸杞 (*Lycium barbarum* L.), can be easily found in Chinese supermarkets for use in the kitchen, as kitchen remedies as well as in traditional Chinese herbal pharmacies. As we see Chinese medicines increasingly being subject to European law it is more and more evident that the attempt to draw a line between food and drugs in the modern world is one as much, if not more, concerned with professional boundaries, as it is with any natural difference. In this paper we will discuss how flavour and aroma were used to connect the body to the ancestors and spirits, creating a protected ritual space, and to chart those ideas as they were transformed to fit a new medical world that was emerging at the turn of that first millennia.

2. Origin of the medical use of spice bags

Spices were used in ancient China for both culinary and ritual purposes, and we can see the concomitant use of them for protecting the body. The chapter "neize" 內則 (*Family Rules*) in the book *Liji* (*Record of Rites*), for example, mentions the custom that spice (s) should be tied to young children—no doubt as a protective measure (Zheng and Kong, 1999). Though the text doesn't point out whether the spice(s) were/was stuffed into bags, it is likely that they would have had to be contained in some way. While archaeologists and historians are well aware that a few spice bags and items which can be seen as derivatives of spice bags have been discovered in Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) tombs, the early medical use of the spice bag and spices themselves has not been thoroughly researched (Yan, 2006; Wang et al., 2011). In addition to larger spice bags which were part of furniture and decoration, there are textual records suggesting that small ones were also used to protect infants, in sleeping areas, and as love charms, although we only have textual records of these and archaeologists have yet to discover any samples.

During the Zhou period, the custom of using spices to prepare court food and sacrifices was widespread. In the state of Qin the encyclopaedic treatise on ritual and statecraft, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Mr Lü's Spring and Autumn, c. 239 BCE) compiled under the auspices of Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (290–235 BCE), minister to the King of Qin is a much quoted source for our understanding of the conduct of government through gastronomy. The King of Qin himself was destined to become first emperor of China in 221 BCE, and Lü Buwei was therefore at the centre of power in the run-up to that moment. The chapter known as 'benwei' 本味

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