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Psychoactive Substances in Daoist Practice: A Cultural and Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper systematically investigates psychoactive substances and their ritual consumption practices within the Daoist cultivation tradition. As a category of Daoist ingestive (*fushi* 服食) culture, these substances, derived either from specific botanicals or through artificial synthesis, are ceremonially administered to induce mystical experiences in practitioners, ultimately facilitating their mystical union with Dao. Based on research into relevant Daoist scriptures, this article classifies Daoist psychoactive substances and analyzes how these substances are integrated into Daoist cultivation practices. Research indicates that Daoism's utilization of psychoactive substances transcends mere physiological stimulation. Through a distinctive approach that integrates material practices with transcendental pursuits, it embodies the Daoist cultivation of achieving perfection in both body and spirit.

Keywords: Daoism; psychoactive substances; *fushi*; cultivation practices; mysterious experience

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of human religion, the use of entheogens has been a universal phenomenon across cultures and regions, with applications ranging from spirit-communing practices in sacred rituals to the exploration of consciousness in individual spiritual practice. Take, for instance, the Ayahuasca rituals of the Amazonian shamanic tradition in South America—this hallucinogenic brew, made from a mixture of *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the leaves of *Psychotria viridis*, to which other ingredients are usually added, enables the drinker to uncover the root causes of illness, locate lost objects, and communicate with the spirits of their ancestors (de Rios et al. 2002, pp. 239–48; Schultes et al. 1998, pp. 124–37); to the Siberian shamanism, which utilizes the fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) to induce altered states of consciousness, this vividly colored mushroom is believed to assist the shaman in communicating with spirits (Carboué and Lopez 2021, pp. 905–14); and further to the Soma juice recorded in the ancient Indian Vedic text, the Rigveda, whose specific botanical source has been lost to history, yet the text explicitly describes its efficacy in enabling one to unite with the divine (Frawley 2012; Ruck 2016, pp. 70–71); and the kykeon, a hallucinogenic drink that may have been used in the Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient Greece, through which participants received mystical revelations (Ruck 2016, pp. 72–73; Rätsch 2005, pp. 1862–65). Nearly every ancient civilization developed traditions of using specific plants or substances in religious rituals. Though these traditions varied in form, they all pointed to the same core: achieving transcendent religious experiences by altering ordinary states of consciousness. This cross-cultural universality sug-

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gests that entheogens may tap into deep, shared mechanisms within the human nervous system, offering a unique perspective for understanding the material foundations of religious experience.

Within China's profound cultural traditions, there also exists a deep-rooted practice of employing specific substances for religious cultivation. As a vital component of China's indigenous religious systems, Daoism's unique concepts and practices concerning medicinal substances hold a significant place in global research on psychoactive substances within religious contexts. Daoism embodies a syncretic intellectual heritage, intricately weaving together the philosophical dialectics of Huang-Lao 黃老 thought, the immortality pursuits of *Fangxian* Dao 方仙道 (the Way of the Immortals), the folk shamanistic traditions, and the immortality beliefs prevalent during the Qin 秦 and Han 漢 dynasties (Kong 2013, p. 1; S. Xu 2020, pp. 18–25; Zhong 2001, p. 1). The religious use of psychoactive substances in Daoism can, to some extent, be traced back to the more ancient Wu-shaman (*wu* 巫) culture of the Shang 商 Dynasty (c. 1600 BCE–c. 1046 BCE). The Shang dynasty is the second dynasty in Chinese history, renowned for its bronze culture, oracle bone script, and a profoundly religious and shamanistic atmosphere. Wu-shamans played an exceptionally vital role within Shang society, serving not only as officiants at religious sacrifices but also as central participants in political power, and were regarded as intermediaries between humans and the divine. Wu-shaman held a high status during the Shang dynasty, not only practicing divination and astrology but also employing medicinal substances to bestow blessings, avert calamities, and cure illnesses. The Wu-shaman's tools and methods for communicating with deities primarily involve ascending high mountains to enter the realm of the deities, as mountains are often regarded as the dwelling places of the spirits, using trees as ladders to heaven, consulting oracle bones and milfoil stalks for divination, and connecting with spirits through rituals, wine, medicinal substances, food, drink, and dance (Chang 2013, pp. 261–90). Chang (2013, p. 288) noted that during the Yin-Shang period, Wu-shaman were permitted to consume wine during sacrificial rites, and excessive drinking might well have facilitated the induction of visions. Bronze wine vessels from the Shang dynasty and the early Western Zhou 周 period bear one or two mushroom-shaped short pillars cast upon them. These are associated with the "*juchang* 矩鬯", a ritual beverage prepared by grinding the *ju* 矩 and boiling it in water, enabling Wu-shaman to rapidly enter a trance-like state of divine communion. The *ju* may have been a hallucinogenic mushroom, specifically the Amanita muscaria (Chai 2025, pp. 137–43).

The academic community has accumulated a certain amount of research on Daoist psychoactive substances. For example, in his paper *Daoist Meditation as Guided Framework in Psychedelic Self-Care and Therapy*, Steavu explores the historical application of entheogen substances within Daoism and their potential therapeutic value. He notes that throughout its two millennia of history, Daoism has frequently intertwined meditation with these substances, particularly during the early medieval period. Through detailed analysis of Daoist canonical texts, he reveals how practitioners utilized various fungal plants—primarily *Ganoderma lucidum*—as psychoactive substances. These fungi were believed to possess longevity-enhancing properties and the capacity to connect practitioners with the spiritual realm. Consumed during specific rituals, they induced transcendental experiences, heightened introspective abilities, or facilitated communication with deities. Moreover, he contends that these time-honored Daoist practices not only offer fresh perspectives and methodologies for contemporary mental health but also demonstrate the positive psychological and spiritual outcomes that entheogen substances may yield when administered within structured, ritualized meditative frameworks (Steavu 2025, pp. 223–45). Liu Zhongyu 劉仲宇 pointed out that Daoist priests would also consume certain substances during rituals to achieve spiritual communion, such as ingesting *Polygonatum sibiricum*

(*huangjing* 黄精), *Ephedra* (mahuang 麻黄), or *Hyoscyamus niger* (*langdang* 莨菪) (Liu 2002, pp. 203–14). The *Psychedelic Prayers After The Tao Te Ching* is a series of prayers composed by Leary under the influence of LSD and cannabis. Its purpose is to ensure psychological safety and provide culturally contextualized spiritual guidance during participants' exploration of altered states induced by hallucinogens (Leary 1966, p. 4). Xin Lili 忻麗麗's (Xin 2016, pp. 58–63) study of marijuana found in the ancient tombs of Yanghai[1]洋海 reveals its dual shamanic role: as a therapeutic anesthetic and a ritual hallucinogen facilitating spirit communication. While exploring these topics, she also briefly analyzed hallucinogenic substances used in Daoism and traditional Chinese medicine, including *langdang*, *Oreoselinum* (*fangkui* 防葵), *Caesalpinia decapetala (Roth) Alston* (*yunshi* 雲實), and *Papermulberry fruit* (*chushi* 褚實), among others.

Additionally, several publications exploring Daoism, other religions, and related subjects such as meditation occasionally touch upon Daoist practices involving psychoactive substances. For instance, Komjathy, in discussing Daoist dietary culture, noted that Daoist adherents in medieval China consumed a substance known as "*zhi* 芝" (generally translated as mushroom), and inferred that certain components possessed hallucinogenic properties capable of inducing altered states of consciousness (Komjathy 2013, p. 177). Hammond, in introducing Li Shizhen 李時珍 as an early modern scientist, discussed research into Chinese pharmacology. He noted that around the third century AD, Daoism developed a profound interest in immortality, seeking to communicate with deities by ingesting certain miraculous elixirs. Some of these golden elixirs contained toxins such as mercury, while other ingredients comprised various hallucinogenic compounds (Hammond 2008, p. 5). Arthur notes in his article *Life Without Grains: Bigu and the Daoist Body* that practitioners in the Han Dynasty would take certain elixirs over long periods of time, which produced hallucinations, ecstatic visions of flight, and experiences of supernatural strength (Arthur 2006, p. 97). In his discussion of hallucinogen use in China, Chen also provided a brief overview of Daoist psychoactive substances (Chen 2021, pp. 16–24).

In the present study, the term "psychoactive substances" has been consciously adopted instead of "psychedelic substances" to encompass the broader spectrum of pharmacological agents employed in Daoist traditions. This terminological choice reflects both the complexity of historical Daoist pharmacological practices and the need to maintain scientific precision when discussing these substances from a modern research perspective. While certain materials like Marijuana and *Hyoscyamus niger* have been pharmacologically verified as possessing hallucinogenic properties through their interactions with the central nervous system, many other substances traditionally regarded as psychedelic in Daoist contexts, including *Polygonatum sibiricum*, *Poria cocos* (*fuling* 茯苓), and *Cecapetalous caesalpinia*, lack conclusive scientific evidence demonstrating classical psychedelic effects through established neurochemical pathways. The designation "psychoactive substances" serves several critical functions in this investigation. First, it acknowledges the full range of materials used in Daoist practices, which may include not only substances with confirmed hallucinogenic properties but also those producing stimulant, sedative, or other consciousness-modifying effects through different mechanisms. Second, this terminology accommodates the important cultural dimension of Daoist pharmacological traditions, where the attribution of psychedelic properties to certain substances may reflect complex intersections of spiritual belief, ritual context, and subjective experience rather than measurable neurochemical activity. Third, by employing this more inclusive category, the paper avoids prematurely medicalizing or pathologizing traditional Daoist conceptions of altered states while still maintaining a framework for rigorous scientific inquiry. The visionary states described in Daoist texts may result from synergistic combinations of phar-

macological, psychological, and ritual factors that resist simple classification according to modern psychopharmacological models.

Existing research on Daoist psychoactive practices primarily examines their roles in religious psychology, ritual contexts, and medicinal applications. While these studies offer valuable insights, the academic discourse remains fragmented, lacking a cohesive framework. To address this scholarly gap, the present study aims to conduct an in-depth investigation into the ritualistic application of psychoactive substances within the Daoist cultivation system, revealing how Daoism organically integrates material usage with transcendental pursuits through its unique *fushi* practices: these substances serve both as mediums for communicating with spirits and as crucial pathways to achieving immortality. Through textual analysis of relevant Daoist scriptures, this study will demonstrate that the practice of these substances in Daoism essentially constitutes a sacred technology with material as its vehicle, whose core value lies not only in the pharmacological properties of the substances themselves, but also in the transformation of the use of psychoactive substances into a religiously significant practice of cultivating immortality through rigorous ritual procedures.

2. Daoist Ingestion and Daoist Psychoactive Substances

Daoism is characterized by its belief in the ultimate reality of Dao 道 and the pursuit of immortality through Daoist practices. These practices, which include meditation, physical exercise, and dietary regimens, are believed to facilitate unity with Dao, thereby achieving immortality. Historically, Daoists have experimented with diverse methods in their quest for immortality. In the early stages of Daoism, methods of cultivation such as visualization and meditation (*Cunsi* 存思), sitting in oblivion (*Zuowang* 坐忘), chanting (*Songjing* 誦經), and Ingestion (*Fushi* 服食) were employed to enable Daoists to live forever and become immortals. The use of psychoactive substances by Daoists falls within the scope of Daoist *fushi* cultivation practices. *Fushi* refers to a set of methods of taking medicines to achieve longevity, which include herbal medicines, elixirs, and others (Hu 1995, p. 976; G. Xu 2018, p. 319). Rooted in the Daoist cultivation principle of "using external substances to fortify oneself (*jia waiwu yizi jiangu* 假外物以自堅固)", these practices aim to achieve the cultivation goal of "perfecting both body and spirit (*xingshen jumiao* 形神俱妙)" through the ingestion of specific substances.

Daoism adherents believe humans can ingest certain medicines to combat diseases, extend life, and even achieve immortality. In addition to herbal and single-flavored gold and mineral-based medicines, Daoist priests consumed more elaborate elixirs composed of burnt and refined gold and minerals. These medicines were originally used in the pursuit of immortality, incorporating a variety of plants and animals, as well as gold and minerals, and their smelting. Some of these medicines could cure diseases and promote fitness, while others were ineffective and even poisonous. By using and combining these medicines in large quantities, Daoists gradually learned the forms of various medicines, the methods for identifying them, and the ways to artificially control their changes and generation. The pursuit of medicines, and the fabrication of medicines, from the perspective of their intended purpose and the various steps involved in the fabrication process, are all subordinate to and serve the purpose of achieving psychic capabilities and attaining immortality (Liu 2002, pp. 203–4).

Daoism contends that *yao* (medicines 藥) have miraculous effects, and priests who take medicines can become psychic. The ancient Daoist scripture *Scripture of the Mysterious Transformation of the Eight Emperors, of the Dongshen Canon* (*Dongshen badi yuanbian jing* 洞神八帝元變經), Volume 6, "Taking Medicines to Communicate with the Divine (*e'yao*

tongshen 餌藥通神)", which arose during the Eastern Jin 東晉 Dynasty in China, records that the role of medicine is both extensive and significant:

> The applications of medicine are vast and profound. All sentient beings rely on medicinal support for their survival. Whether it be the esoteric alchemical practices of Daoism, such as the reverted elixir (*huandan* 還丹) and jade liquor (*yuye* 玉液), or rare medicinal herbs like *lingzhi* mushrooms that serve as vital resources for health cultivation, all exemplify the indispensable role of medicine. At its core, medicine constitutes the material foundation for sustaining life and has long been a subject of deep inquiry by sages and scholars. In terms of efficacy, the functions of medicine span multiple dimensions. In the realm of the supernatural, certain medicines are believed to influence meteorological phenomena (e.g., summoning clouds and rain), cure intractable diseases, commune with the spirits, grant protection against wild beasts and weapons, ward off disasters, or even deter thieves. On a physiological level, medicines can enhance sensory perception or alter one's mental state and temperament. Specific examples include: cinnabar (*jinzhu* 金朱) prolonging lifespan, powdered silver (*yinxie* 銀屑) delaying aging, gypsum inducing perspiration, Spurge (*daji* 大戟) invariably causing purgation, excessive Ephedra producing ghostly visions, and *Hyoscyamus niger* induces the peculiar illusion of needle-gathering. These pharmacological properties demonstrate nearly limitless potential, with mechanisms as profound as the laws governing heaven and earth and as dynamic as the cyclical changes of the four seasons. The breadth of their practical applications is so extensive that it defies complete description. 藥之為用，廣矣大矣，然則含靈通識，莫不資之所以存身。故還丹玉液，神仙之秘道，異草靈芝，養生之要路。故藥者，可謂流形之命，聖達之心。語其功也，或能興雲致雨，愈疾通神，威虎辟兵，禳災厭盜。或明人耳目，或移人性靈。故金朱增年，銀屑益壽，石膏發汗，大戟必瀉，麻黃見鬼，莨菪拾針，此乃藥性，殊能無所不致。斯則與覆載侔功，四時齊變，功庸無盡，難得而稱焉. (*Dongshen Badi Yuanbian Jing* 1988, pp. 399–400)

As is evident, the term "medicines" in this context encompasses a wide range of substances, including, but not limited to, elixirs capable of prolonging life, precious medicinal herbs employed for health maintenance, and various plants or minerals that possess specific therapeutic properties. This shows that ancient Daoism exhibited a profound comprehension and extensive utilization of medicinal practices. This understanding transcended the realm of pharmaceuticals employed for treating diseases, instead perceiving medicines as a form of magical substance capable of exerting influence on human health, mental state, and even destiny. This scripture's account of the hallucinogenic potency of Ephedra and *Hyoscyamus niger* reflects an accurate understanding of their psychoactive properties.

3. Psychoactive Substances in Daoist Cultivation

Within the Daoist cultivation tradition, psychoactive substances bear a unique dual cultural significance: from a practical perspective, they serve as specialized chemical agents systematically employed in Daoist priests' personal spiritual practices, functioning as vital tools for exploring life's mysteries and achieving self-transcendence; symbolically, these substances transcend into vibrant cultural symbols deeply embedded within Daoism's cosmology, philosophy of life, and cultivation systems.

3.1. The Daoist Classification of Psychoactive Substances

According to the prescription for *fushi* recorded in Daoist scriptures, Daoist psychoactive substances are mostly categorized into the following two types. The first category com-

prises naturally occurring hallucinogenic substances. Those belonging to a single class of plant hallucinogens include *Broussonetia papyrifera*, *Cannabis sativa* L. (*mafen* 麻蕡), *Poria cocos*, *Hyoscyamus niger*, Sealwort (*huangjing* 黃精), *Cecapetalous Caesalpinia*, *Phytolacca acinosa Roxb.* (*shanglu* 商陸), and Oreoselinum (*fangkui* 防葵), etc. Although some of these plants are not considered hallucinogenic by modern medical standards, Daoist belief holds that ingesting any of them induces hallucinations, divine apparitions, and the manifestation of supernatural abilities.

According to Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343 or 363 CE), who was a Daoist master, alchemist, medical doctor, and scholar during the Eastern Jin 東晉 Dynasty, in his book The *Book of the Master Who Keeps to Simplicity, Inner Chapters* (*Baopu zineipian* 抱樸子內篇): "The red fruits of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), when consumed for a full year, can reverse aging in the elderly and grant the ability to see spirits in the dark. In ancient times, a Daoist named Liang Xu began taking them at the age of seventy and gradually regained youthfulness. He lived to be one hundred and forty years old, retaining such vitality that he could read and write at night and outrun galloping horses. Eventually, he departed for the Qinglong Mountain, presumably achieving transcendence 樗木實之赤者，餌之一年，老者還少，令人徹視見鬼。昔道士梁須年七十乃服之，轉更少，至年百四十歲，能夜書，行及奔馬，後入青龍山去" (M. Wang 1996, p. 205). From the perspective of Daoist cultivation practices, the paper mulberry fruit is attributed with mystical efficacies, such as reversing aging, enhancing night vision, and facilitating spiritual communion. However, within the framework of traditional Chinese medicine, the medicinal properties of the paper mulberry fruit present a distinct profile. In traditional Chinese medicine, the paper mulberry fruit possesses the following medicinal properties: nourishing the kidneys, clearing liver heat, improving eyesight, and promoting diuresis. It is primarily indicated for the treatment of liver/kidney deficiency, vision obstruction (ocular opacity), and edema with abdominal distension (Gong 1984, p. 233; Huang 2012, p. 41). This cognitive dichotomy highlights the fundamental distinction between religious experience and clinical medicine: the former pursues supernatural states of cultivation, while the latter focuses on tangible therapeutic outcomes.[2] The Daoist deification of paper mulberry fruit likely originates from altered states of perception experienced by practitioners during specific psychosomatic conditions induced by spiritual practices.

The *Illustrated Classic with Expanded Meaning Materia Medica* (*Tujing Yanyi Bencao* 圖經演義本草) records the hallucinogenic effects of *Cannabis sativa* L.: "Excessive consumption causes visions of ghosts and manic running. Prolonged ingestion leads to communion with divine spirits and bodily lightness (麻蕡 *mafen*) 多食令人見鬼狂走。久服通神明，輕身" (*Tujing Yanyi Bencao* 1988, p. 737). Pharmacology expert Wang Jia Kui 王家葵 noted that *mafen* may refer to the male inflorescence of *Cannabis sativa* L., which contains components such as cannabinol and tetrahydrocannabinol and possesses potent hallucinogenic effects (J. Wang 2025, p. 160). This passage reflects Daoist understanding of the medicinal properties of cannabis plants, while also embodying the fusion of pharmacological perspectives with mystical thought. *Tujing Yanyi Bencao* also records that consuming the flowers of *Caesalpinia decapetala (Roth) Alston* may induce hallucinations: *Yunshi* is characterized by a pungent, bitter flavor and is not toxic. Its primary applications are in the treatment of dysentery, the elimination of insects and parasites, the removal of harmful obstructions of *qi* within the body, the alleviation of pain, and the treatment of diseases associated with thirst-quenching disease. Long-term use of *Yunshi* produces a sensation of profound lightness, as well as significantly prolonging life. Its flowers possess the ability to perceive apparitions and spirits. However, it is noted that consuming an excessive amount of these flowers can induce a state of delirium and cause individuals to behave in a frenzied manner (*Tujing Yanyi Bencao* 1988, p. 391).

The second category includes hallucinogenic compound preparations. Such hallucinogenic compound preparations differ significantly from the first category of naturally occurring hallucinogenic substances in terms of their composition and methods of preparation. Substances in the first category are typically derived from a single plant and are ingested in a relatively straightforward manner, such as by chewing. In contrast, the second category of compound preparations involves a ritualized preparation process, in which multiple medicinal ingredients are blended in specific proportions and subjected to complex processing procedures, such as grinding, honey-refined preparation, repeated boiling, and pounding tens of thousands of times. For instance, in *The Supreme Three-Five Orthodox Unity Covenant of Power Register* (*Taishang Shanwu Zhengyi Mengwei Lu* 太上三五正一盟威籙), there is a "Seeing Ghosts formula (*jiangui fang* 見鬼方)", recorded as follows: White quartz (*bai shiying* 白石英), *Poria cocos*, and *Anemarrhena rhizome* (*zhimu* 知母), take these three herbs in equal amounts, grind them into powder, sift finely, and consume a *daogui*[3] 刀圭 dose. This will enable one to see ghosts (*Taishang Shanwu Zhengyi Mengwei Lu* 1988, p. 447).

Daoism holds that refining and purifying specific herbs through unique processing techniques can often unlock their latent spiritual properties, thereby enabling practitioners to attain the mystical states they seek—such as psychic abilities, the acquisition of supernatural powers, and ultimately, becoming immortal. The *Notes Kept Inside the Pillow* records the intricate process of preparing medicinal preparations from *Poria cocos*:

> Take five *jin*[4] 斤 of *Poria cocos*, remove impurities, pound it into powder, and sift it for later use. Add three *shengs*[5] mixture in a bronze vessel and steam it repeatedly in a double-layered cauldron[6] (*chongfu* 重釜). If a bronze vessel is unavailable, high-quality porcelain may be substituted. After the honey liquid has completely evaporated, remove the medicinal material and pound it thirty thousand times with a mortar and pestle. Take thirty pills daily at dawn, each pill the size of a *Firmiana simplex* seed (*wutong zi* 梧桐子), three times per day. Continuous use for one hundred days will eliminate all ailments; after two hundred days, the ability to see in darkness will be attained; after two years, one will gain power to command spirits; and after four years, a jade maiden[7] (*yunü* 玉女) will come to serve 取茯苓五斤，淨治，搗，下篩。白蜜三升，和之，納銅器中，重釜煮之，數過轉。非銅器，好瓷器亦佳。蜜乾出，搗三萬杵，旦服三十丸，如梧桐子，日三服。百日百病除，二百日夜書，二年使鬼，四年玉女來侍. (*Zhenzhong Ji* 1988, p. 470)

This passage demonstrates Daoism's ingenious integration of the actual pharmacological effects of medicinal substances with mystical religious experiences. The progressive descriptions, from "all ailments cured in a hundred days" to "jade maidens attending after four years", construct a complete spiritual ladder that ascends from physical healing to divine communion.

In addition, such plants, imbued with mystical energy, cannot be gathered at any time; they must be harvested on specific dates. The Daoist text *The Preface to the Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure of the Most High* (*Taishang lingbao wufu xu* 太上靈寶五符序) contains "A prescription to prevent aging and attain longevity, eliminate the Three Worms[8] (*sanchong* 三蟲), cure all ailments, and render one invulnerable to pathogenic factors (*lingren Changsheng bulao qu shanchong zhibai bingdu buneng shangren fang* 令人不老長生去三蟲治百病毒不能傷人方)" detailing the method for crafting the immortal elixir of *Phytolacca acinosa Roxb.*: "Take thirty *jin* 斤 of Phytolacca root, which must be collected specifically during the first, second, ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth lunar months; roots harvested in any other seasons are unsuitable. After washing, cut them into segments approximately two cun[9] 寸 in length, taking care to avoid exposure to wind during processing. Place all the cut pokeberry into a fine silk bag, hang it on the northern side of a house, and dry it in

the shade for sixty days. Once completely dried, grind it into a fine powder and sift. For each dose, take one *fangcunbi*[10] 方寸匕 of the powder, to be taken with water once daily before meals on an empty stomach. After ten consecutive days of consumption, one will gain the ability to see ghosts. After sixty days, one can command spirits to acquire gold, silver, and treasures, construct buildings, and fulfill any desire at will. Eighty days of ingestion enable clear vision of objects a thousand miles away. After one hundred days, the body becomes capable of aerial flight, riding winds and treading upon clouds, while the internal organs transform to become as tough as sinews. Persistent long-term consumption ultimately leads to spiritual transcendence" (*Taishang Lingbao Wufu Xu* 1988, p. 327). This scripture passage explains the selection of the harvesting time for medicinal herbs according to the specific season to ensure optimal therapeutic efficacy. Through Daoist methods, the *Phytolacca acinosa Roxb.* is then processed, and upon ingestion, a series of progressive effects are produced. For instance, after ten days of ingestion, one may perceive spirits, signifying Daoists' initial transcendence of mundane boundaries to perceive the spirit realm. After sixty days, one may command spirits to procure gold, silver, and treasures; after eighty days, one may see events a thousand miles away, attaining supernatural powers; after a hundred days, one may fly. This stage-based transformation of nature resulted from the systematization and sanctification of medicinal responses, aiming to construct a credible Daoist technological pathway to immortality. Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536 CE), a renowned Daoist master and pharmacologist of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, documented in his *Commentaries on the Shennong's Classic of Materia Medica* (*Shennong bencao jing jizhu* 神農本草經集注) that Daoist practitioners prepared *Phytolacca acinosa Roxb.* as powdered formulations or decoctions to induce visionary states described as "perceiving spirits and deities" (Tao 1994, p. 340). From the perspective of modern medicine, *Phytolacca acinosa Roxb.* contains phytolaccagenin (a triterpenoid saponin) and phytolaccine (an alkaloid), exhibiting significant hallucinogenic effects (J. Wang 2025, p. 162).

The Spiritual Text of the Heavenly Marrow of Guigu Zi (*Guigu Zi Tianshui Lingwen* 鬼穀子天髓靈文) also has a record of prescriptions that allow people the ability to see spirits, and to take these medicines, which can also give them supernatural powers:

> Take seven medicinal ingredients: *Panax ginseng C.A.Mey.*, *Poria cocos*, *Gypsum Fibrosum*, *Gastrodia elata Blume* (also called red arrow or *tianma* 天麻), *Glycyrrhiza uralensis Fisch. ex DC.*, *Aconitum carmichaelii Debeaux*, and *Aucklandia lappa Decne.*. Grind equal amounts of each into fine powder. Mix with frankincense and water, then take two *qian*[11] 錢 per dose, three times daily until effects manifest. Strictly avoid drinking river water during this period. After persisting with the regimen for one hundred days, the medicine may then be taken freely without restrictions. After twenty-seven days of medication, remarkable bodily transformations will occur: the body becomes light and robust, eyes clear as emerald peaches, complexion glowing like red lotuses, and one can run as swiftly as a galloping horse. After twenty-one days, the mind becomes enlightened, comprehending all things in existence and mastering every written work without exception. With this mental clarity, the eyes emit light visible for ten feet at night, allowing clear vision up to three miles away, including the ability to perceive spirit forms and the golden crow (*jinwu* 金烏) and jade rabbit (*yutu* 玉兔) in the sun and moon. The awakened mind can foresee coming misfortunes, and divine beings will voluntarily reveal omens. Upon completing one hundred days of cultivation, the cultivation reaches perfection, granting abilities to transform at will, disappear and reappear instantly, and exercise supernatural powers freely as desired
> 人參、茯苓、石膏、赤箭、甘草、附子、木香，右件各分停為末。乳香水調下二錢，日進三服則止。慎勿飲河水。至百日，任意服藥。經二十七日，渾身變換：體

> 輕身健，眼如碧桃，臉若紅蓮，走如奔馬。三七日，心開一無物不知，無書不解；心開意朗，眼中夜放一丈光明，出現十裡，見鬼神狀、日月中烏兔。心如達，知未來之凶禍；神人自告。百日功成，千變萬化，坐在立亡，隨意而用.（*Guigu Zi Tianshui Lingwen* 1988, p. 683）

This record of the immortal elixir formula similarly demonstrates the unique phenomenon within Daoist cultivation culture of integrating pharmacological effects with religious experience. Based on the formula's composition, the combination of herbs such as *Aconitum carmichaelii Debeaux* clearly possesses stimulating and hallucinogenic properties. It describes the altered states of consciousness achieved through the ingestion of synthetic drugs containing hallucinogenic plants. From a psychoactive perspective, these effects may be understood as a form of consciousness expansion or perceptual reorganization, involving profound alterations across multiple dimensions, including visual perception, cognition, and the experience of space and time. First, "the mind opens—comprehending all things, mastering all texts" reflects a cognitive breakthrough, akin to the "gnosis" (sudden enlightenment) induced by psychoactive substances, where users often report a sense of "understanding everything" or "seeing through the essence of the universe". Secondly, the phrase "with this mental clarity, the eyes emit light visible for ten feet at night, allowing clear vision up to three miles away, seeing ghostly apparitions and the lunar hare/solar crow" points to classic visual hallucinations—including phosphenes (light phenomena), fractal patterns, and personified supernatural entities (e.g., spirits, mythological creatures). Progressing further, "the mind attains penetration, foreseeing calamities; divine beings spontaneously reveal omens" involves precognitive delusions and auditory hallucinations, wherein the individual believes they can predict future disasters or receive oracular revelations. Finally, "after a hundred days of accomplishment: myriad transformations, vanishing while seated/appearing while standing, deploying abilities at will" describes an absolute sense of control over self and reality, analogous to post-ego-dissolution reintegration. The practitioner appears to acquire transphysical capabilities (e.g., invisibility, shapeshifting).

The Remaining Secrets of the Inner Canon of the Three Sovereigns (*Sanhuang Neiwen Yimi* 三皇內文遺秘) mentions methods of using specially prepared herbal pills to summon and command spirits: "Those who wish to gain the ability to command spirits must first prepare equal amounts of *Euonymus alatus (Thunb.) Siebold* (*guijian* 鬼箭) and *Sinopodophyllum hexandrum (Royle) T. S. Ying* (*guijiu* 鬼臼), two taels of each. These herbs are to be dried in a cool place and pounded to a fine powder, then blended with the sap of the mulberry tree to form a pill the size of a sycamore seed. Take seven pills at a time, in the morning on an empty stomach with clean water. Before going to bed, take another seven pills. After taking them for forty-nine consecutive days, all the spirits, the eight officials[12] (*bali* 八吏), the six dings[13] (*lauding* 六丁), and a Jade Lady will come to pay homage to you, and even lions and tigers will be able to be enslaved by you. However, after forty-nine days, the practitioner must not continue to take it. To ingest the medicine, it is necessary to inhale deeply from the exuberant directions of the five elements and recite the incantation: Essence of a hundred medicines, eyes to see ghostly shapes, serves the eight mandarins, and the six dings, commanding spirits and deities, instantly commands the spirit, prolongs life, gains longevity forever, ascends to heaven in the daytime, and soars up to the Highest Clarity (*Shangqing* 上清). Swiftly in accordance with the celestial statutes 欲役鬼神者，先取鬼箭、鬼臼等分，各二兩，陰乾搗為細末，用桑膿汁為丸，如梧桐子大。每服七丸，早晨空心服之，淨水吞下，臨臥又服七丸。至七七之後，一切鬼神八吏、六丁、玉女皆來朝拜，獅虎皆受役。七七之後，不可再服，凡服，取旺方氣一口，念呪曰：百藥之精，眼見鬼形，役使八吏，並及六丁，驅使鬼神，立即通靈，延年益壽，永得長生，白日昇天，飛騰上清。急急如律令"（*Sanhuang Neiwen Yimi* 1988, p. 584）. Followers of Daoism believe that the aforementioned combination of medicinal ingredients, when prepared in

a specific manner to form pills, can induce hallucinogenic effects. This enables practitioners not only to perceive spirits but also to command them through mystical experiences. The promise that "all the deities shall come to pay homage" reflects Daoism's endeavor to harness supernatural forces through material means; while the stipulation of a forty-nine-day period (the number forty-nine holding significant importance in Daoism as it symbolizes perfection) carries overtones of numerological mysticism. The imperative conclusion "Swiftly in accordance with the celestial statutes" in the incantation further underscores Daoism's endeavor to establish dominion over supernatural forces through a divine human covenant.

3.2. Daoist Psychoactive Substances Enable Practitioners to Communicate with Spirits and Attain Immortality

In the chapter on immortals (*lunxian* 論仙) within his work *Baopu zi neipian*, Ge Hong argued for the verifiable existence of immortals, refuting secular skepticism towards the Daoist pursuit of immortality. He employed historical precedents and logical analogies to demonstrate that the existence of immortals should not be dismissed merely because of the deceptions perpetrated by a few alchemists or the inability of ordinary mortals to perceive them. He emphasized the fundamental difference between immortals and mortals, asserting that only those who cultivate the Dao (*xiudao* 修道) can transcend the limitations of ordinary cognition. The scripture notes that historical records explicitly document instances of spirit communication. For example, when imperial concubine Li (*Li furen* 李夫人), a consort of Emperor Wu of Han, passed away, the Emperor commissioned Shao Weng 少翁 to summon her spirit so they might meet again. This demonstrates the verifiable existence of spirits. Ge Hong states: "The sacred scriptures of immortal cultivation document methods for summoning divine beings and subduing ghosts, as well as techniques that enable ordinary people to see spirits 又神仙集中有召神劾鬼之法，又有使人見鬼之術" (M. Wang 1996, p. 20). Here, in Daoist cosmology, ghosts represent a distinct category of spirits, often malevolent or unsettled dead, differentiated from deities and immortals. Ge Hong advocated for the practical verification of the Way of Immortality through methods such as ingestion and Daoist magic (M. Wang 1996, pp. 12–23). He systematically demonstrated the rationality of the existence of immortals based on the theories of historical empiricism and cognitive relativism, while the ultimate purpose of his argumentation was to guide practitioners to verify the reality of immortals through Daoist cultivation practices. For it is only by directly perceiving supernatural beings that cultivators can deepen their faith in Daoism. Van Eyghen categorizes individual experiences of spiritual entities into direct and indirect forms. Indirect experiences manifest as sensory phenomena such as fever, dizziness, or bodily tingling, which require the presupposition of spirit causation to establish relevance. Direct experiences, conversely, involve immediate perception of spiritual entities or their activities, forming cognition without intermediary interpretation. He argues that the validity of indirect experiences relies on background beliefs lacking sufficient justification, thus failing to provide effective substantiation for spirit-beliefs. In contrast, direct experiences, by virtue of their immediacy, can constitute a legitimate foundation for such beliefs (Van Eyghen 2023b, pp. 69–89).

Daoism is grounded in two fundamental doctrines: the Dao as the primordial source and governing principle of the universe, and the belief in the actual existence of immortals. For Daoists, having the ability to communicate with ghosts and deities is essential. The utilization of hallucinogenic drugs in the pursuit of communication with supernatural entities is a practice that is replete with profound symbolic significance and religious connotations. It serves as a tangible manifestation of faith and a form of worship, while concurrently representing a significant avenue for spiritual solace and contemplation. Daoist priests believe in the existence of supernatural beings such as ghosts and immortals, which are viewed as

manifestations of energies and laws that govern the relationship between heaven and earth. Daoists utilize psychoactive substances in an attempt to establish communication with these supernatural entities through drug-induced hallucinations or disorientation. This direct engagement serves multiple functions: it validates the ontological reality of these beings, deepens the practitioners' devotional bonds, and enables dynamic exchanges that transform both the human participants and the spiritual realm. Furthermore, such experiences provide an embodied epistemology, through ritualized interactions with the numinous, practitioners gain privileged insights into cosmological structures and existential truths that transcend ordinary cognition. The use of psychoactive substances in Daoism serves not only to demonstrate the existence of spirits (which most practitioners already acknowledge), but also to reinforce Daoists' belief that immortality can be attained through cultivation (*shenxian kexue* 神仙可學). This experiential confirmation strengthens their commitment to the Daoist path. As Liu Zhongyu pointed out: "Daoists' quest for medicinal substances and their preparation, both in terms of purpose and the various practices involved in their manufacture, are entirely subordinate to and serve the goal of attaining spiritual communion and becoming immortals" (Liu 2002, pp. 203–4).

4. Daoist Disciplining of Psychoactive Substance Practices

Daoism advocates the use of psychoactive substances, yet it firmly opposes their indiscriminate abuse. It has established a rigorous and comprehensive system of cultivation, integrating psychoactive practices into its religious, physical, and ethical framework. This ensures practitioners can walk the correct path towards immortality with ease. Daoism's regulations governing psychoactive substances are primarily manifested in the following three aspects:

Firstly, Daoism holds that the process of manufacturing hallucinogenic substances is not a mere physical operation, but rather one that must adhere to strict corresponding regulations, manifested in the stages of sourcing medicinal substances, preparing medicines, and administering them. This medicine is also known as the "elixir of immortality (*xianyao* 仙藥)", these preparations belong primarily to the external alchemy (*waidan* 外丹) tradition, though later inner alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) practices reinterpreted their symbolic dimensions, likening the human body's essence (*jing* 精), pneuma (*qi* 氣) and spirit (*shen* 神) to medicinal substances. For example, The *Notes Kept Inside the Pillow* (*Zhenzhong Ji* 枕中記) documents the following: "When preparing immortal elixirs, one must first observe three days of purification. The medicine should be decocted in a secluded and hidden place, avoiding the sight of people or animals. Only the alchemists themselves should be present during the process 凡合仙藥，先齋戒三日，煎藥於幽隱處，勿使人畜見之，唯作藥者身自臨之" (*Zhenzhong Ji* 1988, p. 470). In terms of content, this passage stipulates the purification procedures before alchemical refinement (a three-day fast), the requirement for a secluded location (a hidden place), as well as strict pharmaceutical gaze avoidance taboos, which require that the pharmaceutical process avoid entering the visual field of certain people or animals; such taboos may relate to contamination control (like avoiding menstruating women), the prevention of spiritual interference (such as prohibiting animals from gazing), or mechanisms for technical confidentiality (for instance, excluding non-participants in rituals).

The *Seven Lots from the Bookbag of the Clouds* (*Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤) records a secret method of cultivating immortality known as the "Immortal Elixir of Azure Essence for Ascended Immortals (青精上仙靈方)" which also mentions avoiding certain animals during the search for specific medicinal substances: "The leaves and flowers of *Vitex negundo* (*jingmu* 荊木) possess the power to commune with spirits and perceive ghosts. However, when harvesting them, one must ensure that neither chickens nor dogs witness the act 荊木葉華通神見鬼精，取荊之時，勿令雞犬見也" (*Yunji Qiqian* 1988, p. 521). The scrip-

tures also stipulate specific requirements for the environment in which medicines are prepared: "Before preparing the medicine, one must first observe a three-day purification fast. Only then can the compounding begin. Above all, sexual activity and contact with defilement must be strictly avoided—otherwise, the medicine will lose its efficacy. This is a sacred formula passed down by the perfected immortals, distinct from ordinary matters. The reclusive Daoist practitioners of the mountains and forests all follow this method when compounding their medicines 合藥之始，當先齋三日，乃得為之。尤禁房室穢漫，藥不行也。此上真之方，不同他事，山林諸道士但按此而用耳" (*Yunji Qiqian* 1988, p. 521). These are all ritual regulations concerning Daoist practices during the "Compounding Immortal Medicine (*heyao* 合藥)", emphasizing requirements such as abstinence and taboos. The ritualistic requirement of three days' abstinence and fasting emphasizes not merely physical purification but also cultivates spiritual concentration. By purifying both body and mind, practitioners attain a state conducive to communicating with the divine. This dual cultivation of inner and outer refinement reflects Daoism's core philosophy of seeking harmony between heaven and humanity. The stipulation that operations must be conducted in secluded environments, with no human or animal observation permitted, may stem from both a desire to preserve the substances' mystique and the practical necessity of avoiding interference during procedures.

Secondly, it concerns the techniques of psychoactive substances and the protocols for master disciple transmission. Within Daoist scriptures, one may discover detailed recipes, approximate dosages, and methods for refining these substances. However, in preparing these immortals' medicines, mastery of heat control is paramount, as it directly determines the success or failure of the entire pharmaceutical process. Just as "The sages transmit the medicinal formula but not the fire regulation; the true art of fire mastery has always been known to few 聖人傳藥不傳火，從來火候少人知" (Xue 1992, p. 826). The practical application of heat control constitutes a closely guarded secret passed down through master apprentice transmission, which itself adheres to a strict set of corresponding protocols. Daoism has long upheld the tradition of "not transmitting the Dao lightly (*daobu qingchuan* 道不輕傳)", the master disciple inheritance system ensures that knowledge is passed down only to qualified practitioners with stable temperaments and sincere devotion. Within *Yunji qiqian*, there is recorded a formula for an immortal medicine, namely the "The Divine Recipe of Azure Essence and Hard-Stone Rice by the Supreme Ultimate Immortal (*Taiji zhenren qingjing qianshi xunfan shangxian lingfang* 太極真人青精乾石餻飯上仙靈方)". This formula is subject to an exceedingly stringent system of transmission and sacred religious constraints:

> The Supreme Ultimate Method of the Azure Essence Transcendent's Divine Formula. It allows for transmission to only ten people within a span of 2200 years. If no suitable candidate exists, it must be kept secret and not divulged. If, on a given day, a worthy candidate is found, permission is granted to transmit it to all ten at once. Beyond this limit, no further transmission is allowed. Those who receive it must establish a covenant, swearing not to reveal it. They must also kneel before the master possessing the orthodox transmission, offering thirty feet of blue silk and two pairs of golden rings as a substitute for the blood-oath pledge. If the teaching is transmitted to an unworthy person, or if the precious text is leaked, the offender will be judged by the Three Officials[14] (*Sanguan* 三官), condemned in death to become a lower ghost, flogged with stones of Mengshan, and buried in the River of Accumulated Night (*jiye* 積夜). Before receiving the scripture, the disciple must purify themselves for ten days. The master must do the same. Only then may the transmission take place 青精上仙靈方太極法，使二千二百歲中得傳十人。無其人，祕之勿泄。一日有其人，

> 聽頓授之十人，過限不得復授。受之者，皆立盟約，誓啟不宣漏，跪有方之師，青帛三十尺，金鐶兩雙，代歃血之信。傳非其人，宣泄寶文，身考三官，死爲下鬼，撻濛山之石，填積夜之河。凡受書，齋十日，授者亦然，然後乃得對傳之.（*Yunji Qiqian* 1988, p. 520）

This passage reveals the rigorous system of knowledge transmission within Daoism, establishing the scarcity of sacred knowledge through dual constraints of temporal span and numerical limitations. Its transmission system maintains rigorous principles while allowing flexibility, permitting the initiation of ten disciples under specific conditions. Simultaneously, it reinforces the sacred covenant nature of transmission through rituals such as establishing oaths and offering tokens of faith. The scripture further establishes a comprehensive punitive system that spans both the earthly realm and the afterlife, affecting transgressors in body and soul. The core mechanism of mortal punishment, judgment by the Three Officials, exemplifies the unique operation of Daoist sacred justice. The Three Officials are not merely passive recorders of human transgressions but actively intervene to alter the fate of oath-breakers. The Heaven Official systematically strips them of their blessings; the Earth Official manipulates worldly judicial systems to plunge them into litigation and imprisonment; while the Water Official afflicts their physical bodies with water-poison ailments such as edema and festering. The posthumous punishment of becoming lower ghosts is far more severe than conventional hellish suffering. To become a lower ghost means permanent exclusion from the Daoist system of sacred salvation, with the soul banished to the most desolate fringes of the cosmos. The phrase "flogging the stones of Mengshan" refers to the cursed souls being condemned to endlessly mine the infernal mountains of the underworld, while "filling the River of Accumulated Night" constitutes an even more refined form of psychological torment. This river, flowing in the deepest abyss of the netherworld, is composed of congealed darkness, its waters not liquid but condensed time itself. The souls of transgressors do not suffer ordinary drowning but endure an eternal suffocation from the stagnation of time itself. This meticulously constructed system of punishment reflects the Daoist worldview's integration of moral law into cosmic order, ensuring that the violation of sacred oaths triggers inescapable and multidimensional retribution.

Thirdly, there is an emphasis on the ethical cultivation of Daoist practitioners. Daoist ethics have gradually taken shape over the course of Daoism's long history; they constitute a faith-based philosophical system within the Chinese Daoist tradition that regards attaining the Dao and becoming an immortal as its ultimate ideal, and which addresses moral and existential phenomena (Jiang 1995, p. 5). Daoist ethics encompass a wide range of areas, including the community, interpersonal relationships, and politics (He 2010, pp. 17–19). In fact, the pursuit of attaining immortality and becoming an immortal by Daoist practitioners is closely linked to ethics and morality (Le 2010, p. 8). This connection is by no means coincidental; rather, it stems from Daoism's fundamental understanding of Dao. Within the Daoist philosophical system, attaining Dao (*dedao* 得道) is not merely a matter of acquiring supernatural powers, but rather the perfect harmonization of the individual's life with the Great Dao of the universe. This harmonization is manifested first and foremost in one's character and conduct; ethical and moral conduct is precisely the outward expression of the Daoist practitioner's union with Dao. Daoism reveals that the path to harmonious living begins with the awakening to the oneness of all things. The universe, as the manifestation of Dao, is inherently a perfectly harmonious whole where all forces interact synergistically to form an ideal natural order. This supreme goodness manifests both as inner peace within individuals and as moral principles in society.

In the Daoist cultivation system, there is a tradition that emphasizes the ethical and moral development of practitioners, even placing virtue at the forefront. Ge Hong, in *Baopu*

zi neipian, regarded ethical principles as essential prerequisites and foundations for those seeking the path to immortality: "Those who aspire to attain immortality must take loyalty, filial piety, harmony, benevolence, and trustworthiness as their foundation. If one neglects moral cultivation and focuses solely on methods and arts (*fangshu* 方術), they shall never achieve longevity 欲求仙者，要當以忠孝和順仁信為本。若德行不修，而但務方術，皆不得長生也" (M. Wang 1996, p. 53). This reflects the Daoist belief that ethical conduct is inseparable from spiritual and physical refinement in the pursuit of transcendence. Moreover, in this work, Ge Hong vividly illustrates the relationship between moral cultivation and the practice of alchemical arts on the path of immortality for cultivators through two contrasting scenarios: "If one's accumulation of virtuous deeds remains insufficient, even the consumption of elixirs of immortality will prove futile. Conversely, should one abstain from immortal medicines yet persist in benevolent conduct, though immediate transcendence may not be attained, at least the calamity of untimely death shall be averted 積善事未滿，雖服仙藥，亦無益也。若不服仙藥，並行好事，雖未便得仙，亦可無卒死之禍矣" (M. Wang 1996, pp. 53–54). This statement first establishes a hierarchical system of cultivation efficacy. In Ge Hong's view, mere technical practices devoid of a corresponding moral foundation are like trees without roots; even the most precious medicine of immortality would prove ineffective. Conversely, even without reliance on immortal medicine, consistent virtuous deeds and accumulated merit, while not immediately attaining the ideal state of immortality, can nonetheless provide tangible protection against calamities. At a deeper level, Ge Hong here demonstrates the uniquely Daoist concept of mutual reinforcement between virtue and *fangshu*. He avoids both the pitfalls of moral idealism's empty rhetoric and the extremes of technical utilitarianism, instead viewing moral cultivation and the practice of methods and arts as an organic whole. Virtue serves not merely as a prerequisite for cultivating immortality, but its very accumulation constitutes an essential component of the cultivation process; while *fangshu* are important means, their efficacy remains fundamentally constrained by the practitioner's level of moral cultivation. This virtue-centric approach did not outright reject entheogens but subordinated them to ethical frameworks.

Contemporary academia has engaged in wide-ranging discussions on the transcendent experiences induced by psychoactive substances and their ethical implications (Jeeves and Brown 2009; Langlitz et al. 2021; Kähönen 2023), such as the sense of oneness experienced during these hallucinogenic encounters, which refers to the dissolution of the self's boundaries and a feeling of merging with others, society, nature, or the universe (Yaden et al. 2017, pp. 143–60; Watts et al. 2017, pp. 520–64). This sense of unity can alter an individual's cognitive biases, help them find meaning in life, achieve a sense of well-being, and reduce egocentric tendencies (Letheby 2017, pp. 623–42; Hartogsohn 2018; Brasher et al. 2023, pp. 1–35). Furthermore, this connection with nature allows participants to feel that they are part of a symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem, fostering the development of environmental values and reinforcing ecological ethics (Forstmann and Sagioglou 2017, pp. 975–88; Kettner et al. 2019). Of course, certain issues need to be considered, such as whether the short-term moral improvement resulting from taking psychoactive substances is sustainable, and the cultural context in which an individual's values shift (Dupuis and Veissière 2022, pp. 571–78; Van Eyghen 2023a, pp. 277–93; Kähönen 2023). While modern clinical studies on psychoactive substances in Daoism remain scarce, historical texts documenting extraordinary experiences such as communing with spirits and attaining enlightenment suggest that Daoist practitioners may have achieved expanded states of consciousness through specific substances, experiences remarkably analogous to those induced by contemporary psychoactive substances, potentially facilitating fundamental worldview transformations. Daoist tradition consistently prioritizes moral culti-

vation as a prerequisite for psychoactive substance use, systematically embedding pharmacological experiences within an ethical cultivation framework through its "governing substances with virtue (*yide yuyao* 以德馭藥)" approach. The Daoist model, which systematically incorporates chemically induced states into a framework of gradual moral refinement, may provide valuable insights for contemporary entheogen studies—particularly in bridging transient mystical experiences with sustained ethical cultivation grounded in daily practice.

5. Conclusions

In Daoist practice, the ingestion of substances containing psychoactive compounds constitutes one category of *fushi* method. Its core tenet posits that specific substances can unlock latent human potential, ultimately contributing to the goal of immortality. These substances fall into two categories: naturally occurring hallucinogens such as *Cannabis sativa* L., *Hyoscyamus niger*, and *Phytolacca acinosa Roxb.*, as well as other substances believed by Daoists to have hallucinogenic properties; and artificially synthesized compound preparations created through specific formulas. Within Daoist theory, these substances are not only regarded as capable of curing ailments and prolonging life, but are also believed to possess the efficacy to communicate with the spirits, stimulate supernatural powers, and even facilitate the ascension to immortality. However, Daoist use of psychoactive substances was by no means unregulated; rather, it was governed by a rigorous system of protocols. Firstly, the pharmaceutical process required execution within an environment of utmost purity. Practitioners were bound to observe strict abstinence, refrain from sexual intercourse, and isolate themselves from external disturbances to ensure the potency of the substances. Secondly, the techniques for preparing these substances were subject to stringent oversight, with crucial firing temperatures transmitted solely through secret master apprentice lineages. This closed system of transmission safeguarded both the precision of the craft and its sacred status. Thirdly, practitioners were bound by ethical precepts, integrating moral cultivation throughout their training. The Daoist tradition of psychoactive substance use has been systematized, ritualized, technicalized, and ethicalized, integrated into the overarching framework of cultivation practices encompassing longevity, immortality, healing, and divine communion. This has forged a distinctive tradition synthesizing pharmacological knowledge, theological systems, bodily techniques, and ritual protocols.

As psychoactive substances—particularly hallucinogens—experience a resurgence (Sessa 2012; Pinchbeck and Rokhlin 2021; Shaughnessy and Berlowitz 2021; Langlitz 2023), interest and research in psychoactive substances have grown significantly across scientific, medical, and cultural fields, particularly in their therapeutic potential for mental health (Giffort 2020; Halma et al. 2025; Gobbi et al. 2022, pp. 718–24; Ferreira and Facco 2025, pp. 85–106; Fu et al. 2025). Against this backdrop, the study of Daoist psychoactive substances also merits in-depth exploration. However, compared to modern psychoactive substances (such as psilocybin and LSD), research on Daoist psychoactive substances remains in its infancy, with their pharmacological mechanisms, clinical applications, and cultural significance yet to be fully uncovered. Future research could focus on psychoactive substances in Daoism, encompassing but not limited to the following areas: First, regarding psychotherapeutic applications, there is a need to explore the potential therapeutic effects of Daoist psychoactive substances in alleviating conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders. Second, experimental studies on subjective experiences should be conducted through rigorous clinical trials to document participants' physiological and psychological changes under the influence of these substances, with comparative analyses against the effects of modern psychoactive substances. Third, the integration of cultural and philosophical perspectives should be pursued by incorporating Daoist cultivation theories to examine

how psychoactive substances experiences may influence an individual's cognition, consciousness, and spiritual development. Daoist psychoactive substances are not merely a subject of pharmacology, but rather a focal point for interdisciplinary research, encompassing fields such as religious studies, psychology, neuroscience, and cultural anthropology. As the science of psychoactive substances continues to advance, we believe that research into Daoist psychoactive substances will offer new insights for modern psychiatry, the exploration of consciousness, and indeed humanity's understanding of its own potential.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 The Yanghai tomb complex is located 1.5 km north of Yanghaixia 洋海夏 Village, Tuyugou 吐峪溝 Township, Shanshan 鄯善 County, Turpan City, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China.

2 The relationship between Daoist psychoactive substances and Chinese medicine comprises both specific connections and significant differences. Regarding connections, both Daoist psychoactive substances and Chinese medicine originate from the traditional culture of ancient China and are deeply influenced by ancient philosophical thinking. There is also some overlap in the use of drugs between the two, and some of the psychoactive substances used in Daoist practice may also be documented in Chinese medicine texts. These drugs often have special pharmacological effects that can impact the physiological and psychological state of the human body. In addition, both are concerned with the health of the human body and the treatment of disease, and although the methods and means differ, the goal is to pursue balance and harmony in the human body. Nevertheless, the disparities between Daoist psychoactive substances and Chinese medicine are also readily apparent. On the one hand, in terms of theoretical basis, the use of Daoist psychoactive substances is often based on Daoist religious theory and practice, emphasizing the use of medicines to communicate with the spirits and achieve immortality. In contrast, Chinese medicine does not possess such a religious purpose; rather, its emphasis is placed on the healing of the patient's illness and the attainment of their physical and mental health. This disparity in theoretical underpinnings has given rise to marked distinctions between the two approaches concerning the role of drugs and the purpose of their utilization. On the other hand, in terms of the physiological impact of these substances, the primary effect of Daoist psychoactive substances is to induce hallucinations and modify the state of consciousness, thereby facilitating practitioners in attaining a particular spiritual realm. This effect is often strongly subjective and individual.

3 *Daogui* 刀圭 is a traditional Chinese measurement unit used in Daoist alchemy and herbal medicine, roughly equivalent to a small spoonful of powdered medicine (about 0.5–1 g). Historically, it referred to the amount of medicinal or alchemical substance that could be scooped with a knife-shaped spoon 圭, often used in preparing elixirs or prescriptions.

4 The *jin* 斤 is a traditional Chinese unit of weight, now standardized to 500 g in China.

5 The *sheng* 升 is a traditional Chinese unit of volume, now standardized to 1 L in China.

6 *Chongfu* 重釜 refers to the practice of placing a vessel (such as a copper or porcelain container) atop a larger pot filled with water, thereby heating it indirectly via steam, a method known as water bath decoction. This technique prevents the charring of medicinal substances or the degradation of active ingredients that might occur under direct flame.

7 In Daoist culture, jade maidens are typically depicted as virgin attendants to the immortals, often performing duties such as scattering flowers, attending scriptures, striking bells, and offering incense. The immortals frequently bestow them upon those who have successfully cultivated their spiritual practice. At times, these maidens descend from the celestial realm to the mortal world to welcome or attend to such accomplished cultivators (Zhu 2004, pp. 335–39).

8 *Shanchong* are considered to be transformed by evil *qi* in the human body; they cause disease, invite other disease-causing agents into the body, and report their host's transgressions to Heaven to shorten their lifespan.

9 The *cun* 寸 is a traditional Chinese unit of length that has been used for centuries in various fields such as tailoring, carpentry, and medicine. In modern measurements, 1 *cun* is approximately 3.33 cm or 1.31 inches, standardized under the metric system for consistency.

[10] *Fangcunbi* 方寸匕 is a traditional Chinese medicine measuring unit, roughly equivalent to 1 square inch (2–3 cm) of a medicinal powder or herb scooped with a flat spoon. It typically weighs about 1–1.5 g, depending on the substance's density. Historically used in ancient prescriptions, it provided a practical (though approximate) way to measure dry ingredients before standardized weights were adopted.

[11] *Qian* 錢 is a traditional Chinese unit of weight and currency. Historically, it served as a measurement unit (approximately 3.73 g) and a monetary denomination (as a copper coin). In traditional Chinese medicine, the *qian* was widely used to weigh herbs and medicinal powders, ensuring accurate dosages in prescriptions.

[12] The Eight Officials (*bali* 八吏) are the Eight Trigrams deities (*bagua shen* 八卦神), which not only are part of the Daoist divine world but also have specific duties and functions. For example, in some Daoist scriptures, *bali* are described as deities responsible for assembling immortals at specific times, such as the last and first days of a lunar month and the Eight Festivals (*bajie ri* 八節日), to calibrate merit and discuss good and evil.

[13] The Six Minor Fires (*lauding* 六丁), regarded in Daoism as the *yin* 陰 deities enslaved by the Heavenly Emperor (*tiandi* 天帝), specifically refer to the six deities Ding Mao 丁卯, Ding Si 丁巳, Ding Wei 丁未, Ding You 丁酉, Ding Hai 丁亥, and Ding Chou 丁醜. There are three kinds of duties and functions of *liuding*. First, guardianship and protection. In Daoism, *liuding* are considered to be the guardians of people's three souls (*sanhun* 三魂) and seven senses (*qipo* 七魄), and the custodians and administrators of heaven and earth. They are responsible for protecting the peace of Daoist believers, driving away evil spirits, and preventing evil, and are important deities for believers to pray to for peace. Second, they assist the Heavenly Emperor. As the servants of *tiandi*, *liuding* assist *tiandi* in the management of various things in heaven and earth, the execution of winds and thunder, and the control of ghosts and spirits. Third, they serve as assistants to Daoist priests. In Daoist rituals, Daoist priests often summon deities such as *liuding* to communicate with ghosts and immortals and to protect the Daoist rites and believers. As the right-hand man of Daoist priests, *liuding* plays an important role in Daoist rituals.

[14] The Three Officials in Daoism refer to the triad of celestial deities: the Heaven Official (*Tianguan* 天官), Earth Official (*Diguan* 地官), and Water Official (*Shuiguan* 水官), collectively known as the "Three Imperial Officials" or "Three Primal Officials." These deities hold unique positions in Taoist theology, with the Heaven Official bestowing blessings (celebrated during the *Shangyuan* Festival on the 15th day of the first lunar month), the Earth Official granting absolution (honored during the *Zhongyuan* Festival on the 15th of the seventh month), and the Water Official delivering deliverance (venerated during the *Xiayuan* Festival on the 15th of the tenth month). This theological system originated from the ancient Chinese nature worship of heaven, earth, and water, which was later systematized and deified within Taoist tradition. Notably, during the Eastern Han Dynasty, Zhang Daoling's Celestial Master Daoism institutionalized the "Three Officials' Letters" ritual, where penitents' confessions were inscribed in triplicate for submission to each respective Official. The Three Officials not only govern human fortunes and misfortunes but also maintain meticulous records of moral conduct. During designated cosmic cycles, they conduct celestial audits of human merits and transgressions. This belief system embodies Daoism's characteristic sacralization of natural forces through personification, while simultaneously reflecting fundamental Taoist principles of cosmic resonance (*tianren ganying* 天人感應) and moral retribution (karmic accountability).

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