

# Psychedelic Practice in Ancient and Modern China

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## Background

**What is Psychedelic Practice in China** – Psychedelic practice in China refers to the historical and modern use of psychoactive substances. In ancient China, they were used by shamans for healing, divination, and spirit communication within religious life. In modern China, their role has shifted from sacred practice to secular therapeutic and performance-oriented use.

**Context** – Cultural and political transformations reframed psychedelics from spiritual tools to clinical instruments. Today, their use centers on mental health, productivity, and self-optimization within a strict regulatory environment under China’s secular governance system.

**Research Question** – How have cultural and political changes transformed psychedelics in China from sacred religious tools into regulated therapeutic instruments?



## Analytical Implications

### Drivers of Transformation

- Ideological secularization
- Centralization of state authority
- Modern legal codification of narcotics
- Shift from religious cosmology to scientific-medical frameworks
- Global drug control norms influencing domestic policy

### Impact on Meaning and Use

- Reclassification of psychoactive substances from sacred to criminalized/regulated
- Reduction of religious framing in public discourse
- Emphasis on prohibition over ritual or therapeutic integration
- Limited institutional space for sanctioned altered-state practices

## Research Approach

### Historical Framing

- Ancient Chinese texts situate psychoactive substances within shamanic and Daoist ritual systems (Chen; Kohn).
- Altered states functioned within cosmology, healing, and spirit mediation — not medical categories.

### Temporal Shift

- Modern China reframes psychoactive substances through prohibition and regulation (Dikötter et al.).
- Meaning shifts from sacred ritual to criminalized or controlled classification.
- Reflects ideological secularization and centralized state authority.

### Political Context

- Contemporary drug law strictly regulates and prohibits psychoactive substances.
- State governance determines acceptable narratives and access.

### Limitations

- Symbolic historical records limit certainty about pharmacological use.
- Ancient trance concepts do not align neatly with modern “psychedelic” terminology.
- Restricted transparency limits insight into present-day practices.



## Discussion

**Secularization and State Authority** – How much of the shift from sacred ritual to prohibition reflects broader ideological secularization rather than purely public health concerns?

**Reclassification of Meaning** – How does the state’s legal categorization transform substances from spiritual instruments into criminalized narcotics?

**Control of Altered States** – To what extent does regulation represent governance over consciousness rather than just substances?

**Global vs. Domestic Influence** – How much do international drug control norms shape China’s regulatory framework?

**Cultural Memory and Suppression** – What happens to religious or cosmological traditions when psychoactive practices are redefined or prohibited?

**Modern Tension** – Is there emerging pressure between global therapeutic research trends and China’s domestic prohibition policies?

## Sources

