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Theorising Sensory Cultures in Asia: Sociohistorical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Sociocultural meanings of the senses in society have recently received scholarly attention in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history and geography. With some exceptions, extant works have mainly focused on Euro–American contexts, or non-industrial societies. This article ethnographically documents and analyses the social life of the senses in everyday life historical contexts within Asia. I propose three theoretical themes: sensory models and modalities; sensory moral economies; and sensory transnationalism. These themes exemplify how social actors and institutions employ and accord meanings to the senses that can be located in the fabric of everyday cultural experiences, spanning different social arrangements and encounters. I examine more closely indigenous sensoria where sensory practices stemming from different parts of Asia are marshalled as sources of sociocultural theorising. This is a response to and continuation of extant works on sensory cultures in other contexts, raising, concurrently, cross-cultural comparisons. These comparisons will also initiate a rethinking of “Asia” through sensory intercrossings and encounters.

KEYWORDS

Senses; Asia; history; sensory models; morality; sensory transnationalism

Introduction

Sociocultural meanings of the senses have recently garnered academic attention in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history and geography. Current works have mainly focused on Euro–American contexts or on non-industrial societies, while sensory research in Asian settings is in a largely nascent stage. This article documents and analyses how the senses in everyday life manifest in historical contexts within Asian cultures. It deliberates upon how social actors and institutions accord meanings to sensory practices that can be found in the fabric of everyday life experiences, spanning different social encounters. I propose three theoretical directions – sensory models and modalities, sensory moral economies, and sensory transnationalism – for engaging with Asian sensescapes across a plurality of sociocultural settings. Broadly, the article locates the meaningfulness of sensory experiences by examining how they bridge selves, community, social institutions and varied cultural forms.

I analyse works stemming from a range of disciplinary approaches including history, anthropology, sociology and philosophy. By discussing them as examples of sensory

lives in historical contexts, I show that more attention should be paid to the Asian milieu. While sensory articulations may abound in different genres of writing on Asia, most such works largely remain descriptive (e.g. Lam et al., 2017) in abutting the senses. These often lead to “surface impressions” (Howes, 2003) shy of deeper examinations of their sociocultural significance. Analytical possibilities of demonstrating how domains of everyday life including foodways, morality, religious beliefs, class dynamics and power relations are mediated through the senses are usually not substantially pursued, or focus mainly on Western historical contexts, notwithstanding some exceptions (e.g. Chau, 2008; Howes & Classen, 2014; Huang, 2016; Jenner, 2010; McHugh, 2012). I indicate my ethnographic interests in “history” and “Asia” as contexts for theorising sensory empirical phenomena. I refer to both sensory encounters in and of Asia, where the “site” under consideration is neither limited to a geographical referent (c.f. Chakrabarty, 2000) nor regarded as a unitary continent (Ho, 2017; Subrahmanyam, 2016); the focus is rather on sensory practices and their interfaces. I am intrigued by the dynamics of sensory encounters that are not only rooted in a specific locale, but that are grounded in cultural frameworks emanating from Asian societies and thereby to be compared with both Asian and non-Asian frames where relevant. In conceiving of Asia as a “product of interaction with other regions” (Wang, 2010, p. 989), this view parenthetically carves out further transregional analytical space for addressing sensory mobilities in terms of diaspora and migration (Fisher, 2004; Visram, 2002). As a densely populous region that has undergone manifold transformations and developments over the centuries, and as a site that is steeped in religious traditions, philosophies and linguistic practices that both converge and diverge across different webs of connectivities and relationships, Asia and its connected historical contexts (Subrahmanyam, 2016) serve as a fertile and legitimate cross-cultural site for developing newer theoretical interventions in examining sensory knowledge and practice. Given that archival materials, travellers’ accounts and other imaginings of Asia have often been documented through various sensory modalities (Collingham, 2006; Jenner, 2010; Stoler, 2010; Visram, 2002), the article also prompts a rethinking of the category of “Asia” through the lens of sensory flows, encounters and intercrossings.

Cultures adopt different emphases on the various senses, including the meanings that are attributed to a range of sense acts (Howes & Classen, 2014). The ways we use or refer to the senses in our social encounters are cultural acts that warrant sociocultural examination. My investigation is supported by empirical material that I corral from a range of ethnographies and other works on Asian societies that are accompanied by sensory accounts. These include travel writing, literature (poetry/verse) and letters written to the press in colonial periods that highlight sensory encounters among different social groups or classes.¹ Print constitutes the principal medium where senses and their meanings may be accessed (Smith, 2007, p. 125).² The materials on which I advance my theoretical discussions are written historical accounts or “texts” – ethnographic accounts that serve as sociohistorical data (Blee & Billings, 1986) – as a body of data for sensory analysis.

This article is undergirded by the following queries that elucidate the sociocultural significance of the senses in Asian contexts:

Sensory models and modalities: How can one conceptualise different sensory paradigms by challenging the dominant five-senses model in relation to “non-Western”

models that may include balance, or bodily energies (Java, Indonesia), for example? As a corollary, what do the different classes for each sensory modality (e.g. the five taste categories in Japanese culture) indicate in terms of cultural diversity of sensory models?

Sensory moral economies and social structures: How is morality and its accompanying features expressed through sensory idioms and behaviour? How would an identification of moral economies of diverse sensescapes throw light on the socialities of self and community? How are the structures and norms of various cultures then further illuminated phenomenologically?

Sensory transnationalism: Developing from the point about sensory models, how would the historical contexts of colonialism and migration provide the platform for interrogating sensory interfaces and negotiations of dissimilar sensory reasoning? The scope of inquiry is then widened to formulate conceptual toolkits of sensory transnationalism toward problematising the meeting points of different sensory behaviours.

Sensuous scholarship that focuses on historical contexts has mainly examined Western societies. Examples include Corbin's works on sociohistorical readings of the senses in France (1750–1880) through olfactory deliberations (Corbin, 1986), and on historical patterns of village life in his study on bells in 19th-century France (Corbin, 1998), as well as Classen's (1998) take on the rich symbolism of the senses in Western culture through the ages, and Howes and Classen's (2014) cross-cultural comparison of sensory registers found in medicine, politics, art and law. By engaging with the aforementioned three theoretical lines of inquiry, I build on and extend sensory endeavours that have addressed such spheres of social life in Asian contexts including heritage and sensory pasts (Low, 2015a; 2017), colonial encounters (Collingham, 2001; 2006; Henry, 2005; Huang, 2016; Low, 2009), philosophies of sense perception (Geaney, 2002; Holdrege, 2016), and migration and urbanity (Low, 2015b).

Apart from taking up Howes' (2003, p. 54) suggestion that comprehending sensory formations in non-Western societies requires not Western theorisation but rather that "developed within the society under study", I subscribe to Alatas' (S. F. Alatas, 2006) proposition for alternative discourses in the social sciences. By tabling a critique of the state of the social sciences in Asia that includes deliberations on Orientalism, Eurocentrism, the captive mind (S. H. Alatas, 1974) and others, two organising principles that form the call for alternative perspectives are relevance and irrelevance – covering the domains of theory, empirical studies and meta-analysis. A concrete step towards a sensory history of Asia should attend to "indigenous, local and regional ideas and concepts" (S. F. Alatas, 2006, p. 14) about the sociocultural significance and relevance of different sensory models. I take my three theoretical propositions below as concrete moves towards sensory relevance in terms of analysis grounded on the basis of what the senses mean in the context in which they transpire; there is therefore a need to recognise and practise theorising from diverse locations (Sinha, 2003). Take, for example, the phenomenon of smell that is simultaneously regarded as antithetical to modernity and its drive toward cleanliness and sanitation, and valuable in medical and cultural ways. Huang's (2016) study on how 19th-century Shanghai smelled to the Western nose – with its filthy streets and canals, the stench of manure and rubbish heaps – pinpoints how deodorisation may not always be a universal desirable. This is despite the progressive narrative of modernity where otherness is connoted through filth and stench that required eradication from the viewpoint of colonisers. The

imposition of one's sensibilities onto others is reflective of power relations at work. While colonisers were in pursuit of cleanliness, human waste possessed important economic value in Chinese agricultural tradition. This is a case of epistemological irrelevance where social actors differ in what constitutes sensory civilisation and modernity. The aim here is to "reconcile the cultural specificity of concepts with the self-understanding of the people being studied" (S. F. Alatas, 2006, p. 15). Such reconciliation includes how communities employ differentiated terminology and accord significance to different sense modalities, the complexities that may be discerned, and the corresponding sociocultural consequences of sensory discourses and practices among these groups. Such attention would thereby depart from, for example, Aristotelian or Durkheimian categorisation (Low, 2015b) of what is a sense as received theorisation, as well as what constitutes the different modalities and signification of each sense, among other sensory interrogations.

I am not, however, claiming that there are no overlaps in these modes of theoretical framing. Neither am I suggesting a schism that sets these two domains (c.f. S. H. Alatas, 1974; Alatas & Sinha, 2017) of thinking and talking about sensory cultures as mutually exclusive or static. Overlaps in how the senses operate in social life avail far more important comparative possibilities, which can only enrich the ambit of sensory research. It is the asymmetric attention placed on senses in Asian contexts as compared to others that undergirds the theoretical impetus here. My interest lies in examining indigenous cultural sensoria where sensory practices stemming from different parts of Asia are marshalled as sources of sociocultural theorising (c.f. S. F. Alatas, 2006). This approach serves as a response to and continuation of existing works on sensory cultures in different contexts.

Sensory Models and Modalities

A comparison of a whole range of categories that delineate different senses, as well as the varying modalities per sense, may be accomplished through investigations on linguistic descriptors of senses as a starting point. How a particular culture names the senses that wield cultural importance is not merely an exercise in description or enumeration. Language is harnessed to identify different senses, including their variant cultural nuances. I analyse sensory nomenclatures in a three-fold manner to unveil the phenomenological epistemology (c.f. Porath, 2008) of the senses. First, I engage with the numbers of modalities per sense in order to acknowledge alternate sensory models beyond the hegemonic Romano–Grecian five-sense categorisation. Second, I query the social significance of the nuances of each sense. Third, I raise examples of how two or more senses may be employed synaesthetically. Kuipers (1991) has it right when he notes that basic taste categories dating back to Aristotle who listed terms including sweet, sour, bitter, salty, astringent, pungent and harsh may not always readily reflect taste sensations of other cultures. Much of the taste lexicon of the Weyéwa (Kuipers, 1991, p. 118) of the western highlands of Sumba, Eastern Indonesia, "fall[s] into the interstices, which are labelled by narrowly defined, non-leximic, object-bound terms, terms which nonetheless cannot be included in any of the so-called basic terms". This pertinently reflects upon the variations of local sensory epistemology, leading to

situations in which sensory descriptions that resonate in Western contexts are not always meaningful in other contexts.

Geaney's (2002) discussion on senses in philosophical texts of the Warring States era (5th century to 3rd century BCE) reveals that while early Chinese thought also includes a five-fold classification of the senses, it nevertheless differs from the hegemonic pentad model. Where vision is privileged in Plato's and Descartes' perception models, the eyes and ears were of parallel importance in Chinese philosophy. They were ranked above the other senses in terms of their audio-visual pairing for knowledge acquisition. Furthermore, the *Xunzi* (c.310–215 BCE) labels the senses as the "five officials" (thereby portraying them as controlled and orderly) and includes the heart–mind and body as the fourth and fifth senses respectively. Other lists in the Mencius (c.382–300 BCE) or the *Mozi* (c.480–390 BCE) differ in varying ways (Geaney, 2002, p. 17). These examples reiterate the need for a more sustained analysis of how different cultures derive and interpret their own sense models.³

To further illustrate the first two points on sensory nomenclature and symbolism, Babb's (1981) study on visual interaction in Hinduism, Desjarlais' (2003) sensory ethnography of the Yolmo *wa*, and Porath's (2008) work on the Orang Sakai of Riau, Sumatra are helpful. Varying modalities of sight are traced to two differing notions of seeing that Babb (1981) discusses in relation to the Hindu milieu. Visual exchanges that take place between deities and worshippers – where worshippers aim to have the *darshan* (sight) of the deity's *mūrti* (image) – occur along two contrasting manners. On the one hand, devotees want to both see and be seen by their deities as such visualisation serves as a "vital step in embarking on the road to salvation" (Babb, 1981, p. 388); the *drishti* ("seeing" or "glance") of the guru "aids the devotee in achieving his deliverance" (Babb, 1981, p. 390). On the other hand, a deity's glance can also be destructive. Contrary to the "glance of kindness" that is found in the Radhasoami tradition (a religious movement founded in Agra in the mid-19th century), a deity's eyes can be dangerous. This is seen, for example, through Shiva's third eye, which "reduced the God of Love to ashes" and which "will consume the whole world in fire at the end of the cosmic cycle" (Babb, 1981, p. 392). In the Hindu world, therefore, seeing is not merely a passive form of sensory data that originates on the exterior. Instead, visual experiences emanate from the interior where "seer and seen come into contact" (Babb, 1981, p. 400) with each other, thereby inviting either the benevolent or destructive gaze of deities. A brief comparison may be undertaken with other South Asian communities such as the Yolmo *wa*, an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist people living in the valley of north-central Nepal (Desjarlais, 2003). Vision serves as a profound conduit of either harm and malevolence or friendship and intimacy. For the former, *mi zuge*, a Yolmo phrase that refers to how a person's gaze "pierces" or "sticks into" another person's body or possessions, stems from an envious position; such as a hungry person staring at another's food (thereby "piercing" the food through his/her gaze, making that person sick thereafter). In the latter case, *mi zinge* ("eye encounter" or "eye meeting") stands for "any mutual, ongoing rapport of eyes between two or more persons" (Desjarlais, 2003, p. 59) in such instances as flirtatious exchanges of the glance, or in other contexts of familial or friendship ties. These examples together illustrate distinct modalities of seeing, accompanied by contrasting consequences that are culturally contingent.

In Sakai shamanic healing rituals, physicalist conceptions of sound may not be relevant for how sound is heard or felt in one's consciousness (Porath, 2008). Sound

is intersensorially experienced through sight, premised upon the Sakai worldview as comprising either material physicality or material non-physicality. Sound (*bunyi*) comprises two modalities of refinement (*bunyi `alus*) or coarseness (*bunyi kasa*), which relates to how the Sakai sense these modalities through feeling, and the senses of sight and hearing (Porath, 2008, p. 651). One may choose to focus on the object that is making a sound, thereby differentiating the sound from the object that had initially drawn one's attention. Another way is to continue focusing on the sound that has garnered one's attention, "so that on seeing what produces the sound, the sound does not become a property of the thing that is producing it but the movement of the thing becomes the condition of the sound in its entirety" (Porath, 2008, p. 652). The relationship between sound and sight further means that "seeing can also imply a different type of sensory experience not necessarily relating to the eyes but still utilising clear and vivid ocular sensations" (Porath, 2008, p. 660). This other way to appreciate and examine the Sakai sensorium through intersensoriality (and which I elaborate below) offers alternative discourses to the imperialism of sight in Western historical contexts.⁴

Sounds are also linked to different sensory analogies that facilitate effective communication, seen in the case of sound expressives among the Semai (an ethnolinguistic group of Peninsular Malaysia). The Semai encode sounds vis-à-vis their natural acoustic environment comprising animal and human activity, the weather, the forest, and other types of water sounds (Tufvesson, 2011). By encoding acoustic differences according to perceived loudness and/or pitch, these expressives enable speakers to gauge distance and to navigate their surroundings. "Roaring sounds" from a waterfall are denoted by *ch__s*, while "crispy sounds" of eating particular foods are indicated by *gr__p*, with subtypes denoting the chewing of fruit (*grε:p*) or crisps (*gra:p*) (Tufvesson, 2011). The use of analogy engenders "form-meaning mapping" that guides the Semai in comprehending fine-grained acoustic differences of a variety of sensory events through "unconventional forms" of sensory referents (Tufvesson, 2011, p. 86).

If Porath's (2008) work demonstrates nuanced sensory modalities in an indigenous sensorium, a similar argument for further cross-cultural comparison in the semantic domain of sensory perception can be found in Enfield's (2011) study on taste lexicon between the two languages of Lao and Kri in Laos, or in Burenhult and Majid's (2011) work on Aslian ideology and language. Both studies draw attention to semantic nuances of taste and odour across Austroasiatic languages – ancient language families where their communities live across Southeast Asia and India – inherited from ancestral language states. Lao vocabulary – a southwestern Tai language spoken by people in Laos, Cambodia and Thailand – contains a distinct set of flavour terms that is contrasted with the English language (or the basic taste set including sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami). While Lao possesses similar terms for the basic set (for example, *vaan3* = sweet, and *som5* = sour; Enfield, 2011, p. 32), there are other nuances that the English language does not articulate, or that the European palate does not readily incorporate. For example, *caang3* means "not salty (enough)", and *khêm2* means "(too) salty". As for Kri, an Austroasiatic language spoken by upland central Laotians, there are some similarities with Lao. The term for "hot, minty" in Lao is *hùn2*, and in Kri is *hùl*, suggesting a borrowing of terms between these two languages (Enfield, 2011, pp. 33–34). These convergences could be explained through commonalities in either cosmological beliefs or culinary practices.

The point on cosmology is illustrated in Burenhult and Majid's (2011) research on the Jahai, an ethnolinguistic group who live in northern Peninsular Malaysia and southernmost Thailand. Contingent on the relationship between humans and the supernatural, the Jahai deploy lexical elaboration of odour terms. Olfaction is not regarded in vestigial terms and is partnered with audition and vision. Odour verbs run along a gamut of pleasant–unpleasant modalities, associated with their belief system, healing magic, and Karey. Terms include *çḡas* (“to smell edible, tasty”), *crḡir* (“to smell roasted”), *çḡes* (“to have a stinging smell”) and *haḡcīḡ* (“to have a urine-like smell”) (Burenhult & Majid, 2011, p. 23). Karey is a benevolent deity whose anger is “manifest in thunder, lightning, and the emission of odour” (Burenhult & Majid, 2011, p. 21). Offensive smells include the stench of human dirt and the blood of game animals. Apart from olfaction, Karey is also affronted by visual transgressions such as the washing of metal pots and mirrors in the river that are turned up facing the sky. Handling his mirror image in a sloppy manner enrages him. A careful employment of the senses of smell, sight and hearing is key to maintaining one's relationship with Karey; noticeably, the other senses of touch and taste are absent. The Jahai cosmology reveals a hierarchical ordering of the senses. Comparatively, intent engagement with odour is also found among other groups of the Malay Peninsula including the Batek (Endicott, 1979), the Chewong (Howell, 1984) and the Temiar (Roseman, 1991).⁵

The third point on intersensorial relations and synesthetic practices can be illuminated through the history of incense in Japan and class dynamics in the Heian period (794–1192 CE). The burning of incense outside of religious contexts was a favourite pastime among elites including aristocrats and warriors (Morita, 1992). Known as *kōdō* (“way of incense”), connoisseurs compounded incense and then guessed the ingredients after burning, in conjunction with the tea ceremony (Osborne, 1984). In the 14th century, sensory vocabularies linking the tastes and smells of incense – *jinko* (aloeswood) originating from such places as Manaban, Southern India and Rakoku from Thailand – were devised, such as sweetness associated with syrup-like aroma, saltiness indicative of perspiration and bitterness reflecting a medicinal aroma. Over time, such gustatory delineations began to incorporate a class dimension. Given its unrefined, sweet and somewhat gritty characteristics, the scent of Manaban was tied to the figure of “The Coarse Peasant” – the “smell is coarse and unrefined, just like that of a peasant”. Conversely, Rakoku, with its “sharp and pungent smell . . . generally bitter, and reminds one of a warrior” (Morita, 1992, p. 55), was therefore known as “The Samurai”. Beyond the taste–smell dyad, incense is also being listened to (*ko wo kiku*). Listening to, instead of smelling, incense took place around the 15th century (Morita, 1992), which far better conveys the required concentration in *kōdō*. Etymologically, “listening to incense” has its roots in the Chinese language (*wénxiāng*), a term that was later adopted by the Japanese incense connoisseurs. Another explanation is related to cosmology, where Buddha's teachings or words are to be both scented and heard. According to the Mahayana sutra of Buddhism, everything in Buddha's world, including Buddha's words, is fragrant like incense. Bodhisattvas “listen to Buddha's words, in the form of incense, instead of smelling them” (Morita, 1992, p. 43).

Cosmological intersensoriality may also be discerned in other instances including seeing scents in South Asian religions (McHugh, 2011). In analysing Hindu religious instructional texts including the *Āgamas* and *Purānas*, McHugh (2011) makes a case for

the “multisensory nature of aromatics” by focusing on perfumes (*gandha*) and their formulae. While smell may be ephemeral given its invisibility, South Asian uses of aromatics value the tactile, visual and other sensory traits. McHugh also discusses the materiality of perfumed pastes as recorded in an early 17th-century compendium on rites, *The Elucidation of Pūjā*. In his book on *Sandalwood and Carrion* (2012), McHugh further provides a presentation of South Asian religious and cultural history, material culture and intersensoriality through olfactory investigations. He notes that most knowledge systems in Hindu Sanskrit bear discourses on odours that are closely associated with the element earth. Another instance of the tactility and materiality of smell is seen in the following description of *candana* (or sandalwood): “Light, unctuous, not dry, smearing oil like ghee, of pleasant smell, suitable for the skin, mild, not fading, tolerant of warmth, absorbs great heat, and pleasant to touch” (McHugh, 2012, p. 187).⁶ Comparatively, the materiality of scent in spiritual contexts may be extended to the symbolic significance of musk in Islamic cultures. Musk serves as a purifying substance, or as an important link to the religious – the appearance of Muhammad being made known through the scent of his perfume where sweat on Muhammad’s face was equivalent to pearls and deemed more fragrant than pungent musk (*al-misk al-adhfār*), or the anointing and censuring of the Dome of the Rock with ground saffron, musk and ambergris as recorded in the early 11th-century *Faḍā’il bayt al-muqaddas* of al-Wāsiṭī (King, 2017). Examples that illustrate the sensory proximity of religion and the sacred through materiality evident in embodied intersensoriality define religious experience in more concrete terms. In this respect, there are “[m]ultisensory modes of constructing and experiencing the world” (Howes, 2003, p. 45) where religious and cosmic orders are mediated through intersensory contact with the sacred. If religious experience and spiritual focus can be made meaningful through the different senses (Leaman, 2004; McGuire, 2016; Skora, 2007), these cases of intersensoriality corroborate the integral role that the senses play in religious life. On a broader level, studying religion and its embodied aspects bridges a divide that opposes the textual/theological with the material/substantial (McHugh, 2012).

My discussion of sensory nomenclature and intersensoriality demonstrates that localised sensoria need to be appreciated and studied on their own terms and terminologies so that the symbolic significance and theoretical relevance of the senses in these various contexts are addressed. By focusing on emic/etic interpretations of sensory practices, pairings and intersections, such an approach pertinently casts analytical attention upon “folk” orderings of sensory categories and nomenclature and their cultural significance (Kuipers, 1991). This coheres with Howes’ (2003; 2011) discussion on the interplay of the senses whereby sensory conjunctions form a part of everyday life and ritual practices in many societies, as opposed to the compartmentalisation of the senses in Western aesthetics. The above examples also indicate sensory intercrossings where borrowings and modifications transpire through linguistic and cosmological references yoked to sensory practices across different Asian societies.

Sensory Moral Economies and Social Structures

Links between senses and morality are found in religion, music, food and other metaphors of consumption. Such connections point to desired or positive values that are indicated through particular sensory behaviour, which together form social structures that reflect

propriety and moral decorum or improvement. The governance of good behaviour and moral scruples also extends to the metaphysical world of spirits through a variety of corporeal and cognitive modalities (Holdrege, 2016). The senses serve as intermediaries of moral binaries such as good versus bad, or desired versus undesired. Provisional cross-cultural comparisons will underscore how sensory elements share similar underpinning moral principles, found in what I call sensory moral economies. I educe this notion from the term “moral economy” (Sieler, 2015; Thompson, 1991) – comprising a constellation of ethical conduct, moral obligations and bodily knowledge derived from prescriptive religious and philosophical texts and other sources. This constellation provides a moral compass that is articulated through sense acts that I examine below.

In terms of sensory soteriology, Tibetan Buddhism shows how sensory contact may be a source of salvation (Gayley, 2007; Tokarska-Bakir, 2000). Sensory contact (within ritual actions) with Buddhist sacra in Tibetan teachings may transform one’s sins into different forms of salvation including rebirth, Buddhahood and enlightenment (Gayley, 2007). Liberation, according to texts (such as catalogues, medicine-making rituals and histories) from collected works within the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, may be acquired through the tasting and seeing of treasure objects such as a ritually made pill called *kyedun*. These treasure objects are so highly charged with blessings that salvation is promised upon sensory contact. The notion of “liberation through tasting” (*myong grol*) transpires as the pills are also believed to contain relics of accomplished masters. Tasting *kyedun* (or Bodhisattva flesh) then implies a means through which blessings from seminal lineage figures are received.

The other strand of “liberation through seeing” (*mtshong grol*) is realised through sanctified images. Specifically, *kutsab*, a representation of the 8th-century tantric master Padmasambhava, is credited with an influential role in the propagation of Tibetan Buddhism (Gayley, 2007). Where *kutsabs* are tantamount to meeting Padmasambhava himself – regarded as a second Buddha by Tibetans – the claim for liberation through seeing is based on both apotropaic and soteriological benefits. The receiving of these benefits is however not uniform; those who are faithful (*dad Idan*) will experience the main benefit of sensory contact. One’s “moral character . . . in accord with the karmic law of cause and effect” determines the extent of benefit (Gayley, 2007, pp. 486–487). The extent of liberation through the senses is therefore tied to degrees of morality and religious commitment. Pertinently, sensory liberation discussed here is regarded as “naïve sensualism” based on European prejudice as sensory religious practices are attributed to popular religiosity and hence rendered unintelligible in European ethnology (Tokarska-Bakir, 2000). The Europeans found the term “liberation through the senses” an oddity; a perception that has been ingrained in European philosophy. Where such liberation in Tibetan terms exemplifies “cognition-not-through-discursive-consciousness”, this opposes “one of the major European prejudices that associates cognition exclusively with consciousness while equating unconsciousness with ignorance” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2000, p. 73). These bifurcated epistemological positions stemming from Tibetan and European traditions reiterate my earlier point on theoretical relevance and locality. Even if European ethnographic inquiry regards the idea of liberation through the senses as problematic, the idea resonates in the Tibetan context due to the influence of archaic ontology and its predication on unconsciousness or non-reflection (Tokarska-Bakir, 2000).

While Gayley's (2007) argument relates to morality and the sacred that also breaks away from the preferential emphasis on sight, parallels are found in Japanese culture where incense (*koh*) and its fragrance connote purity and cleanliness. Pybus' (2007) anthology of poems on smell illuminates the symbolism of *koh* in 16th-century Japan. Mind and body may be purified using *koh*, and uncleanness can be removed. Incense therefore serves as a means toward "transcendental meditation" and the provision of tranquility (Pybus, 2007). If the "odour of sanctity", such as that of a mystical fragrance that signalled the presence of the Holy Spirit, is found in Christianity (Classen, Howes, & Synnott, 1994), similar scentsual symbolism may also be located in Buddhism. Frankincense, Govinda (cited in Pybus, 2007, p. 37) notes, indicates the "golden countenance of Buddha" from afar. These varied cases are useful not only in vivifying sensory moments in Asian contexts – specifically religiosity and notions of desirable behaviour – but also lay the ground for further analytical comparisons of such sensory overlays.

Another comparative possibility lies in foodways, taste and ideas of virtue and theology. Sterckx (2011) examines regional food varieties and customs through archival Chinese texts dating between the Zhou and Han periods. Chinese attitudes to "human virtue, personal salvation, self-cultivation and conceptions of moral government" (Sterckx, 2011, p. 4) may be traced in Qin legal documents. Historical texts have sung the praises of officials, sages and worthies willing to consume coarse diets such as stews or simple vegetable broths, thereby associated with the "virtue of frugality" (Sterckx, 2011, p. 15). Similar moral ideas are situated within the Hindu sensorium. If a person's mind (*manas*) is dominated by inertia, the preference is for "stale, smelly, half-cooked food and food devoid of its natural juices", where "[l]aziness, dullness and mental unsteadiness mark his personality" (Kakr, quoted in Pinard, 1991, p. 227). Conversely, a person with an active mind (*rajasic manas*) prefers foods that are sour, spicy and bitter; his chief psychological traits include impatience, pride and sensuality. Finally, a person "dominated by the purity of *sattva* (the more luminous of the three mental qualities) prefers sweet and agreeable-tasting food that 'brightens the intellect and spirit'" (Kakr, quoted in Pinard, 1991, p. 227).

These varying sociocultural associations of taste with morality, virtue and disposition present a type of sensory attunement to apprehend moral economies and social structures alongside foodways and religious beliefs. Sensory moral economies are, in effect, the product of specific sensory action (Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2012); social actors are expected to perform particular ways of being that actualise alignment with ideal, righteous states or dispositions mediated through the senses. Parameters of righteousness and purity – religious or otherwise – are delineated through purposive acts of alignment. Consequently, these acts reflect upon normative moral meaningfulness. The outcome of such sense acts is a combination of immaterial interests and moral sentiments. My deployment of sensory moral economies here expresses processes of exchange (Bowles, 2016; Sieler, 2015) where social actors are supposed to enact particular moral acts in order to acquire interests beyond the material. As sociocultural arbiters, the senses – both through sensory pairing and other embodied combinations – bring to light the moral organisation of society.

Sensory Transnationalism

The discussion hitherto has attended to local epistemologies by examining how sensory scripts of particular cultures structure everyday life. In this final section, I address cross-cultural

encounters of two (or more) sets of sensory scripts, evidenced through the wider literature on colonialism, migration and other cross-cultural interfaces. Over time, scholarship discusses how colonialists and explorers tend to operate on the basis of assuming sensory pollution from and transgressive behaviour among local populations (Henry, 2005; Huang, 2016; Kang, 2017; Konishi, 2013; Rotter, 2011). I turn the lens around by showing how local populations, on the other hand, discern these colonial communities and their sensory faculties – even if examples are relatively exiguous within the literature (Fisher, 2004; Konishi, 2013; Malabari, 1895; Mukharji, 1889). The senses “helped to create mutual impressions of the agents of imperialism and their subjects” (Rotter, 2011, p. 4) where sensory scrutiny is bi-directional; more importantly so given that the coloniser’s view is usually privileged in primary sources (Barringer, 2006; Visram, 2002). This is a pertinent point not only in terms of the Orientalist and Occidental concerns that I have outlined above, but also in that different forms of cross-cultural sensory contact – through colonisation, migration, commerce, foodways, and others (Fisher, 2004; Hsu, 2000; Jenner, 2010; Montanari, 2017) – imply that sensory practices have moved across the globe.⁷ Due to such movements, sensory ways of being may therefore also have altered (Howes & Classen, 2014, p. 87; Montanari, 2017, p. 401), which is another project for more extensive exploration beyond this article.

The focus here lies in demonstrating how sensory interfaces arising from these processes and mobilities are theorised using the notion of sensory transnationalism that I have proposed elsewhere and which I expand here. It refers to sensory interfaces of dissimilar sensory contexts and corpora, which may or may not be tied to spatiality (Low & Kalekin-Fishman, 2010), as I have also prefaced above. Conceptualising interfaces through the lens of transnationalism and social change explains how particular sensory orders take root in a culture. These orders may also be altered, adapted or modified under specific sociocultural circumstances. Mapping the notion of sensory transnationalism onto colonial–local sensory encounters illuminates four modes of sensory engagement comprising reception, rejection, regulation and reproduction. These modes exemplify how sensory encounters, stemming from contrasting power positions, lend a different understanding of empire and its everyday lived constructions.

Taking a closer examination of the history of the durian, Montanari (2017) argues that taste is a product of sociohistorical circumstances. The fruit acts as an index that reflects shifting practices of social class distinction, gender and civilised decorum over time. Initially regarded as delicious in the early days of colonialism in contexts that were less rigidly structured and culturally more fluid (and hence its reception was positive), it garnered less favourable appeal in the period of late colonialism. The durian first emerged as the king of fruits in the Western imagination in 16th-century Portuguese Malacca, described as tasty and flavourful (*gustosos*), and as charming and handsome (*fremosos*). With no mention of its smell, but mainly that it was visually pleasing, the durian was deemed the “most excellent fruit in the East” (*las mas excelente frutas de la India oriental*) (Montanari, 2017, p. 399). Widely regarded as a delicacy at the height of Portuguese rule in Malacca, it began making an appearance in the kitchens and dining rooms of the rulers, consumed alongside early modern European cuisine. This, Montanari suggests, is an incorporation of the fruit into the “early colonial ‘tastescape’” where Western disdain was absent. The earliest references to smell surfaced in travel accounts of the 17th century. Characterised as “an ungrateful taste of onion to the nose” (Montanari, 2017, p. 401) in the Spanish Philippines, the durian however still remained

delicious as “[n]ausea ... did not develop into disgust” (Montanari, 2017, p. 402). Rejection emerged in the 18th century when the “doorian” was regarded as the “favourite of the natives” who were “passionately addicted to it” despite its offensive taste and smell (Montanari, 2017, p. 402).⁸ Such association with natives was catalytic in pronouncing boundaries between civility and barbarism. Disappearing from colonial tables in the 19th century, the durian was subsequently described as “unchaste” and “unclean” (Montanari, 2017, p. 405). It epitomised gluttony, irrationality and intemperance, as craving for it by groups such as the Chinese coolies, the burly Sikhs or the Malays marked barbaric behaviour in the period of late colonialism (Montanari, 2017).

Tracing the reception of and later disapprobation of the durian reveals the emergence of a colonial sensory pathology charged upon local populations. Durian eating was considered an uncivilised habit that ran counter to the symbolic boundary of bourgeois rationality. Similar sensorial pathologies were shored up in the context of the British in India (1857–1947) and the Americans in the Philippines (1898–1947) (Rotter, 2011). Imperialist attitudes governing sensory conduct, propriety and civility in both cases meant that local sensory behaviours were interpreted as transgressive and thereby pathological. Sensorial transgressions as perceived in the supposed backward behaviour and practices of natives serve as justification for sensory paternalism. The British and the Americans saw themselves as the “civilisers of backward societies” where “a vital part of the civilising process was to put the senses in the right order of priority and to ensure them against offense or affront” (Rotter, 2011, p. 5). Forms of rejection and regulation of imperial subjects’ sensory conduct included disdain for the “noise of ethnicity and the cacophony of the lower classes” (Rotter, 2011, p. 11) where prayer calls from mosques or loud music emanating from Hindu temples were frowned upon. In terms of regulating sonic behaviour, belching or farting in public was deemed impolite and “sonic manners” had to be taught in schools. In both colonised societies, the British and the Americans were trying to quieten students in “native schools” in the hope of making “Asians sound less strange and more like civilised people” through the learning of English (Rotter, 2011, p. 12). If India has been described as the “land of shit and shankers”, the Philippines was charged with poor toilet behaviour: “it does not matter which way you turn you see hundreds of natives at their toilet” (Rotter, 2011, p. 12).

Regulation was also effected through a range of legislative measures administered in different colonial contexts. Sanitary surveillance and campaigns were carried out in Seoul by the Japanese to regulate unhygienic behaviours of the Korean population that included defecating in public restroom urinals, and urinating outside of cesspools (Henry, 2005). Low’s (2009) work on the sociocultural significance of smell notes that between 1887 and 1940, the municipal government in Singapore enforced a series of sanitary regulations to ameliorate health conditions during a period of disease outbreak, combined with squalid Chinese housing and the “filthy habits of human waste disposal in house drains and neighbourhood house walls” (Low, 2009, p. 137) that further exacerbated the situation. The Municipal Ordinance of 1896, for example, accorded sanitary officers the authority to prosecute any person who would cause “offence, harm, danger or damage to the sense of sight, smell or hearing”. Officials could take action “against the use of manure on the basis of a ‘disagreeable smell’ rather than having to prove ‘injury to health’” (Low, 2009, p. 139). Land Regulations in Shanghai administered by the foreign settlement from 1845 proscribed the heaping up of filth; revised

versions in 1854 and 1869 comprised by-laws that concerned the cleaning of waste, excrement and streets as well as the management of drains and sewers with the aim of preventing foul smells (Huang, 2016). Similar to the Singapore example, Article XXVI of the by-laws stipulated that any person who did not use a proper cover to prevent stench from escaping any pail, utensil, cart or carriage would be issued with a fine or a penalty (Huang, 2016).

Beyond public regulatory measures, sensory regulation in domestic practices was also present, seen in the case of the Dutch in late colonial Indonesia. Javanese sweat marked social differentiation between the Dutch employers and their local domestic servants. Dutch children were not allowed to be held by the latter as the former were “afraid [of their children] being soaked in ... the sweat of Javanese ... [T]he sweat of Javanese is different you know” (Stoler, 2010, p. 173). These various examples of rejection and regulation are not merely about imposing a colonial sensory script on colonised subjects. Much like the example of the durian being associated with barbarism and in which enjoying the fruit would imply a decline in one’s social standing, banishing the foods of the colonised from colonial tables was a way to further uphold civilised standards, for fear that eating (or behaving) like the natives would mean becoming as “stupid, frail, and worthless as they are” (Rotter, 2011, p. 14). Regulation represented colonisers’ agenda of “hygienic modernity” (Huang, 2016) where the sensory behaviours of colonised populations were deemed to be obstacles that hindered physical and social betterment.

Apart from rejection and regulation, there is also the converse situation of sensorial reproduction or incorporation. Imitating the other’s sensory script – and by “other” I mean both the colonisers and the colonised – was commonplace during the imperial period. Subalterns strove to acquire Western manners by championing sanitation and health campaigns, eating with forks and knives and not with fingers, or happily consuming Western food as their curries or *adobos* (Rotter, 2011). Imperial agents, on the other hand, adopted or reproduced certain aspects of their subjects’ sensescapes. A range of sensory faculties including “Indianised habits and tastes” were brought back to London, Bath and Edinburgh in the 1700s by India-returnees (British agents of the East India Company). Indian curry and rice became house specialties in some upscale London restaurants by 1784 (Visram, 2002). In the early 19th century, a majority of the British in India (or Anglo-Indians) had developed a taste for a “hot” diet comprising spicy Indian food, strong alcohol and excessive consumption of hearty meats (Collingham, 2001). Furthermore, the Empire of India Exhibition held at Earls Court in the last years of the 1800s saw the construction of an Indian town replica as part of its attractions. Decorated with life-sized animal models including crocodiles and snakes, and with narrow streets occupied by Indian silk and carpet weavers as well as dancers and jugglers, Londoners were able to sensorially experience the “chaotic and exciting atmosphere of an Indian town” at the exhibition (Collingham, 2006, p. 152). From developing an appreciation for Filipino and Indian textiles, incorporating touch in Western medical examinations of patients’ bodies, to the designation of curry as Britain’s national dish and the borrowing/derivation of Tagalog words such as “boondocks” or “cooties” in English, imperial encounters demonstrate that sensory scripts, through these episodes of interface, alter or are adapted accordingly.

Sensory transnationalism and interfaces do not always necessarily evoke contrary interpretations or outright rejection on either end. As I have detailed examples of

reception, rejection, regulation and reproduction, the case of the durian illustrates that when unfamiliar taste experiences come together, the immediate reaction (based on one's socialisation and background) may not be that of revulsion, contrary to the now commonplace taste platitudes (e.g. Modder, 2006) revolving around disgust and delectability. Accounting for changing taste sensation (and other sensory experience) needs to address in greater detail how social structures, status differentiation and cultural norms develop across time and within and between particular social groups. Additionally, rejection and reproduction are not always the sole privilege of those in power. Adopting an other's sensory script may also cut across lines of power and class, which avails different perspectives to comprehend the heterogeneity of empire building and everyday life. Civilising others through the senses was not always a Western project or a universal experience across all forms and locales of imperial expansionism (Konishi, 2013; Rotter, 2011). In the context of the British civilising mission in India, there was also a self-civilising mission with "Indians 'civilising fellow Indians'" (Watt, 2011, p. 281). Gandhi's "Constructive Program", inaugurated in the 1920s, was an attempt to construct an alternative modernity and civilisation so as not to internalise Western values. By stressing educating and uplifting "backward" and "dirty" peasants and untouchables, and by emphasising self-control, discipline and austerity, cleanliness was a key feature of Gandhi's program (Watt, 2011). In sum, the senses are socio-cultural media that lend further insights into the orderings, interactions and particularities of different societies from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, and from different status positions. Both colonial and local subjectivities are thus presented through close examinations of their sensory interfaces.

Conclusion

My foray into sensory norms, roles and structures indicates that more needs to be done to steer attention toward analysing sensoria in different Asian contexts. Comparative approaches initiated here are not only a response to either Western- or Asian-centric sensory analysis, but instead further advance the scope of sensory scholarship by prompting inter- and intra-cultural dialogue on the subject. This enriches sensory possibilities where I have taken sociocultural analyses of sensory cultures in Asia both as subject and as method, in analysing morality, imperialism, transnationalism and cultural differentiation, among many other domains of social life in historical milieux. Apart from the three theoretical lines of inquiry based on sensory nomenclature, moral economies and sensory transnationalism, it is likewise important to pay attention to the different scales of analysis presented here. Composing a sensory historiography of Asian cultures requires an anchor on three scales. The first is to examine sensory practices contingent on locality, given that such sensory orders are grounded in a particular indigenous framework. The purpose of studying the senses in historical environments is not to advance sensory regimes, modalities and rituals that are either monolithic or universal. Rather, sensory models and hierarchies need to be explained through local contexts of sensory practice. Second, sensory practices are interrogated based on meeting points and the different modes of engagement that I have discussed. Third, and last, is a proposition for sensory scholarship to take heed of comparability and thereby produce a more expansive inquiry into sociocultural perspectives across temporality

and borders. This would be the next step forward in expanding upon a sensory historiography of Asia. Sensory practices, documented in historical texts and sources, or through contemporary works of different genres that recount the past, indicate that sources of sensory lives may also be found and examined through print and other forms of media, apart from sensory phenomena as observed and/or experienced.

Sensory transnationalism illustrates how sensory orders and practices work, and more importantly, how such established sensory norms are responded to by social actors adhering to different sensory scripts in exchanges of cross-cultural sensoriality. The four analytical gears of sensory transnationalism – reception, rejection, regulation and reproduction – provide a conceptual apparatus for further cross-cultural comparisons both within and beyond the context of colonial encounters and other contact points where sensory practices are interactive and dialogic (c.f. Konishi, 2013). Finally, the ways in which sensory interfaces occur and change over time are also explained through social structures, temporality and differentiation. It is hoped that this article has added to the naissance of this strand of sensory inquiry, where more work can and needs to be accomplished within the wider scholarship on sensory relations and social life.

Notes

1. This article analyses “nuggets of historical information” (Smith, 2007, p. 1) on the senses, and how they work individually and/or interactively over different sensory models. Such data are culled from studies that focus either on presenting sensory histories in the main, or on Asian social life and its varying domains in more general terms. Instead of emphasising specific cultures and bracketing time periods in addressing the senses in history, as others have done (Lam et al., 2017; McHugh, 2012), this article serves as a preamble towards carving out broad sensory histories and comparative possibilities.
2. Other media include paintings, prints, photography and objects (Leaman, 2004; Plate, 2014; Protschky, 2011).
3. Hsu’s (2000) discussion of Chinese pulse diagnostics in early modern Europe notes that where Chinese physicians adopted more of an integrative evaluation of tactility, Western physiologists perceived touch vis-à-vis separate sense modalities and anatomical structures. This is another instance of why local context is imperative in analysing sensory practices.
4. Cook’s (2008, p. 441) essay, however, cautions critics of the ocular and suggests that an appraisal of vision in American history is also pertinent in order to eschew pitting “one perceptual register against another”.
5. A preliminary comparison of the significance of odours across Asian, African and Western cultures indicates, *prima facie*, how smell is socio-centric and intimately related to the self in the first two contexts (Howell, 1984; Pandya, 1993; Rasmussen, 1999; Roseman, 1991). Conversely, smells in the form of environmental stench and body odours were often the target of public health and personal hygiene-related policies in Western contexts given their perceived antithesis to modernity (Classen, Howes, & Synnott, 1994; Corbin, 1986; Jenner, 2011). A point of commonality across these three cultural contexts is that smell operates on the basis of olfactive binaries such as human/non-human (Roseman, 1991), clean/dirty (Henry, 2005; Vigarello, 1988) and good/evil (Dorland, 1993).
6. Touch is not only associated with physical contact, but includes such other sensations as heat and pleasure (Classen, 2012).
7. One example is the case of the Chinese priest Ganjin, who travelled to Japan in the 8th century and brought with him both Buddhist doctrines and incense blends and recipes, which reportedly had a “significant effect on the Japanese use of incense for centuries to come” (Plate, 2014, p. 91).

8. The association of durian eating with natives, thereby engendering its rejection, is also reported as follows: “Another fruit, indigenous to the Straits, for which most persons, the natives more especially, entertain a remarkable predilection is the durian ...”. The writer notes that his “olfactory nerves were assailed with such an effluvia” that he did not have the “courage to penetrate deeper into those hidden properties which render the durian ... ‘the most fascinating of fruits’” (Straits Times, 1853). Elsewhere, the fruit has been described as having an “abominable odour”, and as a “huge and foul smelling abomination” (Straits Times Overland Journal, 1874).

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