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Book Review of Xuelei Huang's *Scents of China: A Modern History of Smell*

Scents of China: A Modern History of Smell
ISBN-10: 1009207040
ISBN-13: 9781009207041
309 Pages
Publication date: October 19th, 2023
Cambridge University Press

Introduction

Academic interest in sensory experiences is surging.[1] Studies that focus on seeing, hearing or tasting take Chinese readers on sensory and emotional journeys through late imperial and modern Chinese history. Among them, Xuelei Huang's thought-provoking work, *Scents of China: A Modern History of Smell* (hereafter *Scents of China*), is pioneering in bringing the olfactory sense of China to light, exploring an uncharted realm closely linked to everyday social life. This review seeks to present the endeavor of this groundbreaking work to enrich the critical understanding of modern sensibilities beyond the remarkable priority of visuality (Heidegger 170) and to "theorize the sensorial–social connectivity" (Huang 8).

Scents of China explores the environmental, literary, cultural, historical, and sociopolitical dimensions of the sense of smell in China since the eighteenth century. Huang revisits Chinese history through a careful examination of changes in China's smellscapes within a globalizing regime of olfactory modernity. The question of the sense of smell, in other words, is intertwined with social and technological developments, literary and political revolutions, cultural transformations, public knowledge of hygiene, collective memory, and private understandings of sexual sensitivity. In Huang's own words, odors help to "conceptualize physical and social space, store memories, evoke desires, and engage with history" (Huang 72).

The first chapter of the book explores the scents in the masterpiece *Dream of the Red Chamber* within the framework of material culture. Based on the delicate writing of material details in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Huang analyzes how

1. Xiayun Yu's article also highlights and analyzes this growing academic interest (Yu 118–125).

doi: 10.54591/GWAR9256

the use of scent creates a temporal and spatial distinction between the novel's worlds. The exquisite scent of pre-modern China contrasts sharply with the foul odor of, and even foreshadows, the end of the story. To be more specific, Huang points out that main female characters in the fictional world of the red chambers are depicted in relation to different scents. In the context of the global mobility of goods during the High Qing period (roughly 1683-1799), perfume had become a fashionable commodity among the Chinese aristocracy. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Jia Baoyu has vast knowledge of perfume and its sources. Fragrant objects, in this literary text, have multiple functions, including their use as gifts, purifiers, messengers, and symbols. They can be used to create a religious space for rituals, a personal space of reverence, a private space of intimacy, and an allegorical space for illusion. In other words, smell, with its "transcorporeality" (59), plays a mediating role.

The second chapter ostensibly illustrates a conflict between Western olfactory modernity and Oriental olfactory primitiveness in nineteenth-century travel writing. In fact, the social power behind this contrast is revealed through the language of smell. For the privileged noses of Western travelers, the unpleasant odor of China includes atmospheric foulness, the bad smell of people's bodies, the garlicky scent recognized as Chinese, the 'foul-smelling' opium, and so on. The discourse of "China stinks," as Xuelei Huang suggests, conjures up the concept of the uneasy "stranger." To travelers from the West, smell in China is neither Self nor Other, but stranger. Huang extracts from missionary travelogues what is referred to as Orientalism in the "unfolding process of physical and psychical encounters with the Orient" (65). What is most intriguing and impressive here is that Huang argues against the existence of a pre-defined orientalist structure of feeling. The author's discussion of China's response to this smelly accusation seems somewhat abbreviated. How strong Chinese emotions, such as feelings of humiliation and defeat, underpinned the rise of nationalism and the formation of modern Chinese subjectivity remains to be explored.

The second part of the book, "Smellscapes in Flux," comprises the next two chapters. The third chapter examines the process of environmental deodorization in modern China, which has been driven by the need to address the issue that "China stinks." Meanwhile, it investigates power relationships behind the Chinese war against water contamination and its pursuit of "hygienic modernity." Water played a crucial role in sanitary campaigns from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. It is worth noting that all three projects mentioned by the author took place in Shanghai over the course of the century. Unpleasant odors, especially stagnant water, came to be seen as the enemy of modernity and associated with unhealthiness with the renewal of hygiene knowledge in European countries. In colonial Shanghai,

the need for sewage treatment also arose under these circumstances. However, capitalist economic expansion in Shanghai was in many cases at odds with public health needs. Colonial deodorization demonstrates its tension. The elites and authorities of imperial Shanghai implemented several measures to address the issue of the troublesome water and to deodorize the city. During the subsequent wartime and socialist periods, the olfactory revolution continued.

In Chapter Four, Huang explains how China is implementing the re-perfuming program. The chapter starts with a soap advertisement that caught Mao Zedong's (1893-1976) attention. After the Opium War, more beauty products were imported into China than during the High Qing period, which contributed to the development of a new olfactory sensibility in China. The concept of "stranger" plays an essential role. Artificial fragrances, particularly those industrially manufactured, had been used to replace natural scents. This had contributed to the advancement of knowledge on smell, individual bodies, and national commodity.

The last two chapters form the third part, "A Whiff of Alterity," focusing on the allegorical, moral, and political aspects of smell. The author's meticulous reading of texts by May Fourth writers, from the point of view of scent, is one of the chapters in which the skill of close reading is most evident. In Yu Dafu's (1896-1945) short story "Sinking," the protagonist is stirred by a provocative perfume and the unique scent of a Japanese woman's flesh. At this moment, the personal olfactory language is linked with sensual desire and the expression of individuality and national identity. Particularly creative is Huang's reading of Lu Xun's (1881-1936) "Soap," which adopts an analytical strategy. She envisions the story "as a concerto comprising three movements, with the two olfactory motifs running throughout" (202). As she points out, Lu Xun's phrase, 'a scent she couldn't quite put her finger on—that might or might not have been olive' suggests that women who are "sexually attractive" (203) are subjects beyond being wives and mothers. Additionally, the sexually-charged phrase *gezhi gezhi* (a good scrubbing) suggests that women cannot be physically and morally fragrant.

From Huang's insight, some literary rhetoric associates olfactory revolution with Chinese political revolution. Huang argues in the final chapter that, in Communist China, the description of the malodorous *fentu* (muck) in Chairman Mao's poem can be interpreted as a symbol of new moral standards and a transformed society. This verb form of muck, as Huang suggests, is "a form of empowerment given to stench to instigate a revolution in the soul and the nervous system" (234). By carefully examining the political messages encoded in odors, this chapter deals with moral-political sniffing. What remains to be explained in detail is how the private olfactory experience is more intertwined with public emotion than with the intimate.

Xuelei Huang offers a thorough and fascinating account of the history of the senses in China. Looking beyond familiar literature, and drawing on a wide range of historical records and visual materials, the heteroglossia of Chinese modernity is presented through solid historical research and close readings of literary and visual texts. The study presents the modern history of China through urban history, local history, environmental history, revolutionary history and emotional history. Moreover, for Huang, new olfactory experiences and representations not only interact with Chinese "multiple modernities" and sensibility, but also reflect China's adaptation to Western influence. It is worth noting, however, that there are more smells described in contemporary Chinese novels than are discussed. The olfactory trail runs through the landscape of contemporary Chinese literature across the borderland. In this light, Huang's study, which explores the relationship between olfactory modernity and various socio-cultural issues in modern China, is thus an inspiration for further studies of contemporary Chinese cultural history and literature.

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