

Navigating the Smellscape of Medieval China



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Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

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It does not exceed the statutory word limit prescribed by the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.

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Abstract

Smell mattered in medieval China. Through the sense of smell, people navigated the natural and social world, structured human-divine relationships. Medieval Chinese texts are replete with references to smells of people, things, and places. Mediated through the minds of their recorders, olfactory accounts vividly reveal hitherto overlooked patterns of the beliefs and ideas that people in medieval China had on the human person, their surrounding world, as well as the unseen realms of the dead and divine.

This study traces historical smells of medieval China and examines how the people navigating that smellscape made sense of their olfactory perceptions. It analyses the moral significance of olfaction in medieval China and its expression in ethno-cultural discourse as well as in the relationship with the unseen worlds of ghosts, spirits, and the divine.

Through its analysis, this dissertation makes two interrelated claims: first, for medieval Chinese people, smell was not only a physical sensation, it also embodied a combination of social, moral, and cosmological significance. It was the conduit to the worlds of the gods and the spirits; it was a marker of social status and cultural alignments; it symptomised virtue or moral decadence; and it could also signify a divine manifestation. Second, smells were not only perceived, but also constructed. Conscious of the social, moral, and cosmological connotation odours implied, medieval Chinese literati employed smells – both in their own right and in the form of rhetoric – to create and assert social and cultural distinctions. Smells separated us from the Other, the poor from the wealthy, the virtuous from the corrupted, the civilised from the barbarians, and the sacred from the profane.

This study situates medieval Chinese olfactory history in the context of an increasingly open world characterised by dynamic cross-cultural contacts, remaking of demographic and religious landscapes, as well as growing knowledge about hygiene and medicine. Building on the established scholarship in multiple disciplines, this first study on smells and smelling in medieval China seeks to contribute to the understanding of medieval views and practices regarding the body, identity, religion, culture, and society.

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Abbreviations and Conventions

CYQZ	<i>Chaoye qianzai</i> 朝野僉載
GSZ	<i>Gaoseng zhuan</i> 高僧傳
HHS	<i>Hou Han shu</i> 後漢書
JTS	<i>Jiu Tang shu</i> 舊唐書
P.	Numbered manuscripts from Dunhuang in Fonds Pelliot chinois held in Bibliothèque nationale, Paris
QTS	<i>Quan Tang shi</i> 全唐詩
QTW	<i>Quan Tang wen</i> 全唐文
S.	Numbered manuscripts from Dunhuang in the Stein collection held in British Library
T.	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> , ed. Takakusu Junjirō, Watanabe Kaigyoku
TPGJ	<i>Taiping guangji</i> 太平廣記
THY	<i>Tang huiyao</i> 唐會要
TLJCFK	<i>Tang Liangjing chengfang kao</i> 唐兩京城坊考
TLSY	<i>Tanglü shuyi</i> 唐律疏議
XTS	<i>Xin Tang shu</i> 新唐書
XGSZ	<i>Xu Gaoseng zhuan</i> 續高僧傳
YCJXL	<i>Yongcheng jixian lu</i> 壩城集仙錄
YYZZ	<i>Youyang zazhu</i> 酉陽雜俎
ZZTJ	<i>Zizhi tongjian</i> 資治通鑑

The pronunciation of Chinese words is given according to the official Pinyin system. Phonetic reconstructions are given only when relevant, using Pulleyblank's system (Pulleyblank 1991).

References to works bound in a traditional Chinese format include *juan* number, page number, and side. References to multivolume works in modern format include volume and page.

All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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Handscroll; ink, colour, and gold on silk
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
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Stein collection, British Museum
Source: British Museum

Introduction

High we load the stands,
The stands of wood and of earthenware.
As soon as the smell rises
Lord-on-High is pleased:
‘What smell is this, so strong and good?’

*The Book of Songs*¹

History Re-odorised

The past was an odorous place – just like the present. If you were to find yourself in the capital of the Tang 唐 empire (618–907), Chang’an 長安, in the eighth century, one of the first things that you would notice would be the smells. Streets and markets were packed with merchants, pilgrims, and travellers from across Eurasia, exchanging goods such as foods, animals, and aromatics, each emanating their sound and smell, creating a symphony of senses.

However, this aspect of its recollection is often neglected. As Roy Porter incisively remarked: ‘Today’s history comes deodorised.’² Disparaged by Hegel, Kant, and Darwin as a lower, useless, and inarticulate sense, an evolutionary vestige that does not yield any intellectual stimulation, the sense of smell and its experiences have been long eschewed as a subject of historical enquiry.³ This trend is being redressed in the study of western history, but this ‘olfactory silence’ persists in the field of premodern Chinese history.

¹ 印盛于豆，于豆于登。其香始升，上帝居歆。胡臭亶時 [...] ‘Shengmin’ 生民, in *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, 17.1146. Trans. in Waley 1996, 247.

² Foreword to the English translation of Alain Corbin’s seminal work on the olfactory culture in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, 1986, 1.

³ Kant 2012, 65–70; Hegel 1988, 38; Darwin 1981, 24. Cf. Corbin 1986, 6–8; Shiner 2020, 19–34; Barwich 2020, 9–11.

This dissertation seeks to fill this lacuna by examining the cultural history of smells and smelling in medieval China.⁴ Through this investigation, this study makes two interrelated claims: first, for people in medieval China, smell was not only a physical sensation, but also embodied a combination of social, moral, and cosmological significance. It was the conduit to the worlds of the gods and the spirits; it was a marker of social status and cultural alignment; it symptomised virtue or moral decadence; and it could also signify a divine manifestation. Second, smells were not only perceived, but also constructed. Conscious of the social, moral, and cosmological connotations, medieval Chinese literati employed smells – both in their own right and in the form of rhetoric – to create and assert social and cultural distinctions. Smells separated the poor from the wealthy, the virtuous from the corrupted, the civilised from the barbarians, and the sacred from the profane.

To understand what smells meant to the medieval Chinese population and what values they placed on their olfactory encounters, we ought to first look at *what* they smelled. Thus, the first chapter of this dissertation seeks to excavate the historical smells of medieval China from a variety of sources ranging from anecdotal accounts to legal documents. The chapter takes Chang'an of the eighth and ninth centuries as an epitome. It aims to present an olfactory version of the 'Qingming shanghe tu' 清明上河圖, the famed painting that depicts everyday life in an idealised Northern Song 宋 (960–1127) city, by delineating the olfactory spaces of Tang Chang'an.⁵

Drawing on smell's celebrated evocative and affective power, Chapter 1 also seeks to 'transport' the readers to an earlier time and place by navigating the city's smellscape. From the smell of a

⁴ Using the term 'China' for the medieval period is not unproblematic, especially when this study also touches on the theme of ethno-cultural boundaries. What makes and whether there is a continuous Chinese identity have been a subject of continuous debate (See for example Pines 2005, 59–102; Behr 2010, 567–87; Mullaney 2011; Mullaney et al. 2012; Yang 2019; Saussy 2022, 85–107. For some of the Chinese scholars' responses, see Ge 2011 and Zhang 2015, 193–209). The geographic area and demographic makeup of the period we examine are clearly different from modern China as a nation state; even during the period from the fifth to the tenth century that I will cover, who and which areas belonged to the centre were in constant flux. However, my analysis mainly regards the mainstream views endorsed and transmitted by those who wrote in Chinese and considered themselves the bearer of classical Chinese learning and culture. China and Chinese will be used in this cultural sense.

⁵ The 'Qingming shanghe tu' has been variously translated as translated as *Going Upriver for the Qingming Festival*, *Qingming Festival on the River* and *Peace Reigns on the River*. In the past, the painting had been viewed as a realistic record of the Qingming festival in Kaifeng 開封, the Eastern Capital of the Northern Song during the twelfth century. However, Valerie Hansen suggests that the painting depicts an idealised Northern Song city, as a eulogy of the regime at the beginning of the twelfth century (Hansen 1996, 183–200). See Tsao 2003 for a recent study of the painting and a summary of the past scholarship on the subject.

rental donkey waiting at the city gate to the soporific scent of grape wine served in a tavern, from the odoriferous ‘Sicker’s Ward’ (*bingfang* 病坊) populated by beggars and lepers, to the luxurious fragrance of aloeswood pavilion in a noble’s garden, the chapter presents a medieval capital city with spaces demarcated along differing socio-cultural lines. It then stops at a scented moment, which saw the contest between incense offering and animal sacrifice in Tang state rituals and popular festivities. Behind the olfactory contest, I argue, lie shifting ideas about modes of communicating with gods and ancestors. Certainly, the smellscape of Chang’an would have been different from other urban or rural environments in the Tang empire. This dissertation will not attempt to offer a detailed account of all the regional characteristics, but rather uses Tang Chang’an in this particular period as an example of an olfactory odyssey into a past time and place.

From what their world may have smelled like, the dissertation moves on to examine what medieval people recorded about their olfactory encounters. The smells that stood out for a medieval nose were different from what we as modern readers may find noteworthy. In the accounts surveyed in Chapter 1, we uncover that medieval literati rarely lamented the effluvium of pollution or excreta, nor did they voice against the odour of the working class, the beggars, or the leper colonies – all smells that would likely disturb a modern visitor. For them, a smell was worth commenting about when the world of gods and spirits was disturbed and when a moral issue was concerned. This leads us to one of the most significant ‘cultural habits’ in Chinese olfactory culture: the close association between olfaction and morality.

This association is neither a unique phenomenon in China, nor a singular feature of smell. In ancient China, other sensations such as the auditory and the gustative were also considered morally significant. However, the association between scent and virtue has an unusual feature in the Chinese context –virtue and vice are characterised with smells. In the same manner, the fragrance of humans and things was attributed to their virtue. Chapter 2 of this dissertation shows that this association was rooted both in classical literary tradition epitomised by Qu Yuan’s 屈原 (fl. ca. 4th century BCE) southern anthology and the articulations of human-divine relationship in early sacrifice. Virtuous conducts and good governance were considered to emanate fragrance, and so vile behaviours and corruption gave off an unbearable stench. This concept also calls into question the relationship between the physical appearance and inner quality, which had ramifications on the cultures of

scenting and grooming. Modern scholarship on the premodern culture of aromatics has demonstrated the prolific use of scenting objects in medieval China, however, people's attitudes towards such practice were complex. The way one smelled was a constant negotiation between vanity and purity, pedigree and modesty, adornment, and self-cultivation.

The dissertation then examines the significant role that the moral association of smells played in medieval Chinese encounters with the Other. Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate how the Other was not only sensed, but also constructed for political and religious ends. The 'Other' is used here to indicate those who were singled out as different. This section considers three groups of Other. The first is the cultural other, especially the frontier peoples. Investigating the historical and cultural underpinnings of the association between frontier peoples and the odour of mutton, an idea that is still relevant today, Chapter 3 shows how the sense of smell was actively employed to mark cultural boundaries, display political allegiances, and justify antagonism. Then it considers the close relationship between this olfactory perception and construction of the cultural Other with another group – the pests, spirits, and demons that populated the unseen worlds –, and discusses the connection between smell and the idea of contagion. The fear or the disgust of olfactory otherness mirrors anxiety and distress about the danger of pollution and blurring boundaries. Smell was a physiological sensation, but it was also conditioned and manipulated by culture.

Finally, the dissertation explores medieval Chinese olfactory perception of another type of Other: the encounter with the divine. In particular, it examines the accounts of the sweet scent perceived at the death of a person of exceptional spiritual achievement. It traces the sources and meanings of the olfactory motifs and explores the complexity of the term 'unusual fragrance' (*yixiang* 異香), which is often used in this context by discussing the consequences of its malleability. The olfactory anomaly in relation to the divine has been noticed by several scholars, usually seen as part of a group of auspicious signs as well as a symbol of purity and spiritual achievement.⁶ This study further probes the symbolism and the potency of olfaction and shows how an olfactory education enabled by hagiographic narratives and ritual practices played an essential role in the establishment of sainthood. With this, this research seeks to contribute to medieval

⁶ See, for example, Verellen 1998, 363–384; Cahill 1999, 171–86; and Company 2012.

Chinese religion at large by showing the significance of sensory experience and the potential such approach provides in exploring patterns at a deeply human level.

In addressing these questions, this study demonstrates that smell was not at all a marginal sense in medieval China. Accounts of medieval olfactory encounters reflect shifts in the social, cultural, and religious landscape. They also reveal how the sense of smell was actively mobilised for religious and political ends. In delving into the senses, which are mediators between meaning and materiality, this research provides new avenues to understand sociopolitical dynamics and cultural transformations in medieval China.

Established Scholarship on Olfactory History

Situating olfactory experiences in medieval China in the context of an increasingly open world characterized by dynamic cultural contact, the remaking of demographic and religious landscapes, as well as growing knowledge about hygiene and medicine, this research bridges several fields of study. It engages with the current scholarships on the history of senses in general, and the history of medicine and the body, culture, religion, and literature in medieval China as well as the research on cultural exchanges in the medieval world.

The sense of smell, as many scholars who work on its history have pointed out, has remained little examined for a long time. The early 1980s marked a watershed moment for olfactory history with the publication of Alain Corbin's seminal work, *the Foul and the Fragrant*, originally published in French in 1982. This influential work not only drew attention to odours and their influence on major social and cultural changes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, but it also proposed key methodologies to study the role of olfaction in society by considering the views around smell and the modes of its consumption.⁷

Numerous studies emerged since then and explored the potential of the nose in enquiries of history as well as art, food, literature, diseases, urban landscape, and racial discourse in the Western context.⁸ Writings by Constance Classen and David Howes have provided insightful theoretical

⁷ Corbin 1982 (English translation 1986).

⁸ For some major studies, see Smith 2008 and Kettler 2020 on race and smell; Shiner 2020 on olfaction and aesthetics and works on olfaction in history and literature including Drobnick 2006, Reinartz 2014, Hsu 2020, Muchembled 2020, Cockayne 2021.

frameworks to ponder on the symbolic behind olfactory sensations and practices, especially the ways in which smell negotiates with power and socio-cultural boundaries.⁹ Howes has further pointed out that the study of senses is not only evocative, but also interpretive, as it allows us to ‘make sense of the past through the analysis of sensory practices and ideologies.’¹⁰ Susan Harvey’s survey of the relationship between olfaction and religion is another key publication in sensory history. She analysed the role of smell in the construction of holiness in early Christianity and convincingly demonstrated that Christians used olfactory experience for ‘formulating knowledge of the divine’ to ‘yield a particular human identity.’¹¹ A recent publication striding the fields of philosophy and neuroscience by A. S. Barwich illuminates the ways in which olfaction relates to cognition. Advances in current scientific research on smell and smelling also provides validity for adopting olfactory accounts as basis for historical enquiry.¹² Beyond the study of the European cultural sphere, James McHugh makes an important contribution to the world history of smells by examining ideas around olfaction and usages of perfume in premodern South Asia.¹³

Few works have tackled the history of olfaction in the field of China studies, especially in terms of the premodern period. Roel Sterckx’s research on the role of senses, including olfaction, in sacrifice and conceptions of sagehood in early China has provided valuable references and methodological insights for this dissertation. Jeanne Geaney’s study on the epistemology on senses in early China and Olivia Milburn’s article on the olfactory culture before the arrival of Buddhism in China provided useful data about olfactory culture in early China.¹⁴ Xuelel Huang’s writing looks at the tension between hygiene, modernity, and colonialism from an olfactory perspective, providing a stimulating example of olfactory history in modern China.¹⁵

The material strand of the olfactory culture in China is relatively well-documented. A variety of studies have examined the culture of aromatics, especially in the context of exotica and intercultural

⁹ Howes 1987, 398–416 and 2003; Classen 1992, 133–66.

¹⁰ Howes 2005, 400.

¹¹ Harvey 2006.

¹² Barwich 2020.

¹³ MuHugh 2012.

¹⁴ Geaney 2002; Milburn 2016, 441–64.

¹⁵ Huang 2016, 1092–1122.

exchange. The encyclopaedic works by Berthold Laufer, Yamada Kentarō, and Edward Schafer have traced the types of aromatics known and used in premodern China as well as their connections to the wider world.¹⁶ Studies reveal that the knowledge and usage of aromatics increased remarkably from the watershed moment of Emperor Wu of Han's 漢武帝 reign (141 – 87 BCE). The territorial expansion included the area of current day Vietnam into the state, intensified contacts with the West through the routes that later became known as the Silk Roads greatly facilitated the flows of goods, peoples, knowledge, and trends.¹⁷ Compared to the herbal fragrant plants used till this period, aromatics that produce much more intense fragrance such as camphor (*longnao* 龍腦, earlier referred to as *guobu* 果布), styrax benzoin (*Anxi xiang* 安息香¹⁸), aloeswood (*chenxiang* 沉香) are introduced. Aromatics were arguably the most important commodity that flowed into China from the lands of the south and from the West, via the overland and the maritime Silk Road. The influx of aromatics grew in quantity and types from the Han to the Tang. In the tenth century, the trade became so lucrative that the newly found Song government decided to make incense trade a state monopoly, managed by a specialised bureau called *queyi yuan* 榷易院.¹⁹ The culture of incense also arrives to such a high point that aromatic substances were catalogued in a section titled 'xiang' 香 in the imperial compendium *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (compiled by Li Fang 李昉 et al. in 984). Scholars started to compile and publish manuals for appreciating and using censing paraphernalia, 'incense repertoires' (*xiangpu* 香譜). The earliest extant one is a short treatise written

¹⁶ Laufer 1919; Kentarō 1956; 1976; Schafer (1963) 1985.

¹⁷ This has been noted by many scholars. See, for instance, Bedini 1994, 1–31; Milburn 2016, 441–64; Wen 2010, 320–30. See Chin 2013, 194–219 for a history of the denomination of the Silk Road.

¹⁸ *Anxi* 安息 was the Chinese transliteration of the Arsacid dynasty in Parthia, so the aromatic *anxi xiang* 安息香 literally means 'Parthian aromatic.' Scholars have long noticed the difficulty in identifying with precision this aromatic. Both Laufer and Schafer maintain that there were two types of *anxi xiang* known in medieval China. The first is *bdellium* or *gum guggul* (sometimes rendered as *zhuojuluo xiang* 拙具羅香 in Buddhist texts), the gum-resin obtained from *Boswellia serrata* and the produce of *Balsamodendron mukul* in pre-Tang times. In the ninth century, Sumatran benzoin, then known to the Arabs as *lubān Jāwi*, 'frankincense of Java,' was introduced to the Tang as a substitute for *bdellium*. The name originally assigned to *bdellium* was passed to this new material. Laufer 1919, 466–67; Schafer 1985, 169–70. Stanley-Baker translates the term as storax (*Styrax tonkinensis*). For the sake of clarity and consistency, in this study I will follow this translation of *Anxi xiang* as storax. Stanley-Baker, trans. of Chen 2022, 477.

¹⁹ *Song shi* 宋史, compiled by Toqto'a (Tuotuo 脫脫; 1314–1356) in 1345, 186.4559.

by the northern Song chief minister, Ding Wei 丁謂 (966–1037), in praise of aloeswood and frankincense which he entitled the ‘Biography of Heavenly Scents’ (*Tianxiang zhuan* 天香傳).²⁰

The established scholarship on the culture of smell in premodern China has thus far focused on aromatic materials by examining the types of exotic aromatics imported into China as well as their provenance, attributes, and usages. Some scholars followed specific aromatics to trace the transmission routes, others followed the people involved in the trades (first the Sogdians, later also the Persians and Arabs who mainly traded via maritime routes).²¹ Some explored the application of exotic aromatics in medicine. Chen Ming is one of the most prolific writers on the transmission of medical knowledge into medieval China. He has demonstrated how materials and knowledge from the West, especially India, has shaped the medical culture in medieval China.²² Numerous articles included in a series of three volumes on medicine, religion, and society in medieval China edited by Catherine Despeux offer useful insights on types of aromatics mentioned in Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts.²³ Another thread follows the olfactory culture in a narrow sense, tracing the history of using and appreciating incense and incense burners.²⁴ New incense burners were made or imported to accommodate changing aromatic materials and culture. Scholars have also examined several types of incense burner and traced their connections with the objects from Central and Western Asia or even Europe.²⁵

Managing smell also meant removing unpleasant odours, which translate into hygienic practices. This aspect is less examined. The idea of ‘hygiene’ itself, as scholars have noted, underwent a radical

²⁰ *Tianxiang zhuan*, in *Quan Song wen* 全宋文, 208.268–72, collected in *Chenshi xiangpu* 陳氏香譜 (compiled by Chen Jing 陳敬) and *Xiangcheng* 香乘 (compiled by Zhou Jiazhou 周家胄 in 1641).

²¹ For Sogdians, see Sims-Williams 2001, 267–80; Trombert and de La Vaissière 2005; Bi 2013, 299–323. For the maritime trade, see, for instance, Wang 2003, 107–35. For specific aromatics, see Donkin 2009 for camphor; King 2017 and Akasoy and Yoeli-Tlalim 2007 for musk.

²² Chen 2002, 2005, 2018.

²³ Despeux 2010.

²⁴ Key publications include the volume based on an exhibition of Chinese incense paraphernalia at the Musée Cernuschi edited by Éric Lefebvre (2018); Chen Qingguang’s volume (1994) following an exhibition of incense burners in Taipei Palace Museum, as well as numerous publications in Chinese on the culture of *xiang* 香 (see, for instance, Yang 2011; Liu 2010).

²⁵ See, for instance, Rawson 2006, 75–86; Lin and Hao 2017, 63–74.

change in the nineteenth century when it transformed from the traditional idea of self-preservation techniques to be associated with the state, the nation, race, and the public.²⁶ For premodern hygienic technology, Needham's research provides the richest source. He has pointed out the Indian influence in Chinese dental hygiene practice with Buddhism, which involved the usage of toothwood, but he also indicates that toothbrushes made with bristles originated in the Liao 遼 empire (937–1125).²⁷ Needham has further indicated the types of saponins known and used in premodern China as well as their development over time.²⁸ An updated hygienic knowledge, as we will see in a story of soap bean, was a way to show social distinction.

This research differs from the scholarships on the history of aromatic materials and hygiene technologies by centering on the ideas about and values assigned to smells, smelling, and scenting in medieval China. In particular, it asks which odours were considered agreeable or unpleasant in medieval China, what kind of meanings were encoded in olfactory encounters, as well as how smell was used to fulfil specific purposes. As such, it provides the cultural context in which such trades and usages of aromatics were situated in.

This first study on the cultural history of smell in medieval China contributes to the pioneering field of the history of senses by examining shared patterns across cultures and the specificity of premodern olfactory Chinese culture. Examining the history of smell in medieval China does not only provides knowledge about an unexamined topic, but also brings fresh insight into the survey of broader topics of medieval Chinese history, such as the views around the senses and the body, the relationship between sensory attributes and cultural identity, as well as the interplay between religious thought and practices.

Understanding Olfaction in Early and Medieval China

How was odour understood? There does not seem to be any analytical discussion dedicated to the nature of odours in early and medieval China, such as investigations concerning what constitutes

²⁶ Rogaski 2004, 22.

²⁷ Needham 2000, 91.

²⁸ Ibid., 67–93.

odours, who or what can or cannot possess odours. However, it seems that odour was thought to be carried by the wind, the same as sound.²⁹ Medical treatises, however, theorised the mechanism of smelling, the causes for strong or unpleasant body odour, as well as causes and treatments for the loss of the sense of smell. In the medical theories of smells and smelling, the concept of *qi* 氣, figures prominently.³⁰

The nose was already identified as the organ associated with the sense of smell in various early philosophical texts.³¹ The medical texts collected in the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic) further associate the nose with the lungs³² and explain how the transmission of the *qi* from the lungs to the nose enables an odour perception:

The *qi* of the lungs pass through the nose. When the [*qi* of the] nose are in harmony, then the nose is able to distinguish the foul from the fragrant.

肺氣通於鼻，鼻和則知臭香矣。³³

Consequently, the loss of sense of smell was also attribute to a problem with the *qi*. The condition was called *weng* 鼽 and it referred both to a temporary loss of smell with a stuffed nose and the longer-term problem of anosmia.³⁴ The *Zhubing yuanhou lun* explains that the

²⁹ Geaney 2002, 22–30, 186, n. 24. See also the example in footnote 16 below.

³⁰ *Qi*, sometimes rendered as ‘vital breaths’ or ‘energy,’ is one of the untranslatable terms that incorporate numerous conceptual layers. Originally the character denoted vapours, but soon its significance was extended to include a wide range of phenomena. Paul Unschuld suggests that we could assume that *qi*, ‘despite its many diverse applications, always referred to a vague concept of finest matter believed to exist in all possible aggregate states’ (2011, 20). It was seen as a matter shared by the body and the dynamic cosmos (Lewis 2006, 20–21). I follow Unschuld by considering *qi* as a plural term.

³¹ For instance, *Xunzi jijie*, 16.416.

³² *Huangdi neijing*, 371.

³³ *Huangdi neijing*, ‘Lingshu’ 靈樞, Chapter 17. Cf. Unschuld 2016, 245–6. The passage is found in a slightly different form in the *Nanjing* 難經 originally attributed to the legendary physician Bian Que 扁鵲 (d. c. 310 BCE). A Tang historian Zhang Shoujie's 張守節 (fl. late 7th to early 8th centuries) recorded the *Nanjing* passage in his subcommentary to Bian Que's biography in the *Shiji* 史記 (*Shiji* 150.2820).

³⁴ The character appears in various early texts. The *Lunheng* 論衡 (composed by Wang Chong 王充 in 80 CE) first indicates that those who suffer from *weng* could not differentiate good and bad odours. *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 13.590. The character is written as *yong* 癰 in the *Lunheng*. However, commentators generally maintain that the character is a

problem arises ‘when the cold wind damages the organs and the evil wind [travels] along the Taiyin 太陰 meridian. Its *qi* aggregate in the nose and causes the obstruction of [the nostrils] with essence and liquids. When the *qi* of the nose are not able to circulate, [the nose] is not able to tell pleasant and unpleasant smells.’³⁵ The treatment of stuffed nose or anosmia, likewise, targeted at enabling the circulation of *qi*.

Moreover, humans are endowed with the ‘five *qi*’ from the heaven:

Heaven feeds man with the five *qi*; the earth feeds man with the five flavours. The five *qi* enter through the nose and are stored in the heart and in the lungs. They cause the five complexions to be clear above, and the tones and voices can manifest themselves...

天食人以五氣，地食人以五味。五氣入鼻，藏於心肺。上，使五色修明，音聲能彰...³⁶

This passage in the *Huangdi neijing* does not make any explicit association between the *qi* and smells, but the Tang dynasty Daoist and physician, Wang Bing 王冰 (710–805), added olfactory qualities to the heavenly *qi* in his influential commentary to the text. Wang also indicated the allocation of the five *qi* in the various human organs:

As for the the five *qi* that the Heaven feeds man, they are foul *qi* which collect in the liver; burnt *qi* that collect in the heart; fragrant *qi* in the spleen; bloody *qi* in the lungs; and putrid *qi* in the kidneys.

天以五氣食人者，臊氣湊肝，焦氣湊心，香氣湊脾，腥氣湊肺，腐氣湊腎。³⁷

Wang Bing’s interpretation is clearly influenced by the fivefold correspondence frameworks mentioned above. He almost describes a human body constituted by different smells endowed by the Heaven. This commentary was endorsed by some later commentators and challenged by others, but

mistake for 鼽. The *Lunheng* defines a person suffering from this condition as one whose nose cannot tell the fragrant from the foul, seemingly suggesting a condition like anosmia. However, the later medical treatise, *Zhubing yuanhou lun* 諸病源候論 (*On the Origins and Symptoms of All Illnesses*, by Chao Yuanfang 巢元方 et al. in 610 under imperial decree), indicates that this refers to a temporary condition of stuffed nose, when the *qi* of the nose does not travel freely.

³⁵ *Zhubing yuanhou lun*, 23.12a.

³⁶ *Huangdi neijing suwen buzhu shiwen*, juan 9.14a-b. Trans. in Unschuld 2011, 176.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

these elements were accepted in general: that *qi* were shared by the human body and the wider cosmos, and that *qi* have olfactory qualities.³⁸

Notably, a conflation between smell and *qi* became more underscored from the seventh century. Early commentaries and dictionaries already occasionally allude to their connection. A classical scholar from the Wu 吳 Kingdom (222–280) in the southeast, Yu Fan 虞翻 (164–233), notes in his commentary to the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) that ‘Odour is the *qi*. When wind arrives, one perceives the *qi*.’³⁹ However, this seems a rare explicit reference to a ‘*qi* – smell’ correspondence in early China. The *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, a dictionary composed by Xu Shen 許慎 around 100 CE, for instance, notes a dog’s excellent sense of smell and defines that ‘To smell, is to approach the odours with the nose’ (嗅，以鼻就臭也), making no reference to the *qi*.⁴⁰ The sixth-century dictionary *Yupian* 玉篇 (compiled by Gu Yewang 顧野王 circa 543) oscillates between *qi* and odour when glossing specific smells, but when it comes to the definition of ‘smelling,’ it simply cites the one from *Shuowen*.⁴¹ In contrast, the Sui 隋 dynasty (581–618) dictionary *Qieyun* 切韻 (compiled by Lu Fayan 陸法言 et al., published in 601) reads:

To smell, is to obtain the *qi* with the nose.

嗅，以鼻取氣也。⁴²

³⁸ See Lewis 2006, 20–21 for the connection of the human body and the wider world through essence and *qi*.

³⁹ 臭，氣也。風至知氣。《Zhouyi jijie》, 17.524. He remarkably identifies the wind as the carrier of smells.

⁴⁰ *Shuowen jiezi*, 113. The character *xiu* 嗅 was already obsolete in medieval times and largely replaced by its vulgar form *xiu* 嗅. The character for odour, *xiu* 臭, was used to denote the action of smelling; while the word for hearing, *wen* 聞, was also used to denote the obtainment of olfactory information. Cf. Wang and Akitani 2014, 703–4. For the connection between the character and dog, see *Shuowen jiezi*, 319. The text notes that the character for smell, *xiu* 臭, follows the dog (犬) and nose (自, an ancient variant of *bi* 鼻) radicals. Cf. Bottéro and Harbsmeier 2008, 249–71 for dates, authorship, and textual history of the *Shuowen jiezi*.

⁴¹ *Yupian*, 23.813. The text glosses stench (*chou* 臭) as a foul *qi* and breath (惡氣息), *shan* 羴 as the *qi* and odour of mutton (羊氣臭), while *xing* 鯢 the odour of fish (魚臭). Cf. *Yupian*, 10.127, 23.813, 24.865.

⁴² The earliest extant text of the *Qieyun* is found in Dunhuang manuscripts. I follow the text recorded in Zhang Yongquan’s compilation of Dunhuang classical texts (2008, 2485).

This definition is cited by other Tang dictionaries⁴³ and echoed by an eleventh-century court-commissioned dictionary which states ‘to smell is to chase after the *qi*.’ (臭，逐氣也).⁴⁴

The definition of odour, as well, became closely associated with *qi* in Tang and later texts.⁴⁵ Noteworthy is a line in the early Tang classicist Kong Yingda’s 孔穎達 (574–648) sub-commentary to the *Shangshu* 尚書, which explains that ‘odour (*xiu* 臭) is another name for *qi*.’⁴⁶ This suggests that not only odour and *qi* were considered equivalents at the time, but *qi* was also the more common character for designating smell. Kong also sheds light on another much-debated issue regarding *xiu* 臭, that is when the character passed from an earlier connotation as including both fragrant and foul smells to only denoting the latter. He notes that ‘[i]n ancient times, both fragrant *qi* and foul *qi* were referred to as *xiu*.’⁴⁷ The fact that he had to specify this means that the character’s connotation of fragrance was already not familiar to scholars in early Tang.⁴⁸

The connection between smell, *qi*, and wind perhaps also contributed to a type of synaesthesia that has often perplexed scholars, which is the interrelation between hearing and smelling. This can be epitomised by the character *wen* 聞 which was used to denote ‘to hear,’ ‘to perceive a smell,’ and also ‘to know’ in early and medieval China. The ear radical (耳) seems to suggest that the character was originally associated with hearing, though in modern mandarin, the character is used

⁴³ Cf. Huilin’s 慧琳 (736–820) *Yiqiejing yinyi* 一切經音義 (T. 2128, 339c16), which cites an eighth-century dictionary, *Yunying* 韻英, which is now lost. See Xu 2016, 248–59 for a history of the *Yunying*.

⁴⁴ *Jiyun* 集韻 (compiled by Ding Du 丁度 et al., published in 1037), 8.42a.

⁴⁵ Both Huilin’s *Yiqiejing yinyi* and an early eleventh-century dictionary, *Guangyun* 廣韻, note that ‘the odour is the generic of the *qi* (of things)’ 臭，物氣之總稱也. Cf. T.2128, 350c5-6. The entry from *Guangyun* is quoted in *Guangya shuyi*, 15.593.

⁴⁶ *Shangshu zhengyi*, 9.261.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (fl. 7th century) also notes a similar thing but refers to different preferences of vocabulary choice between Daoist and non-Daoist texts. His commentary explains that the ‘heretic books’ (*waishu* 外書) call fragrances (*xiang* 香) ‘odours’ (*xiu* 臭), whereas the Daoist classics talk about ‘five fragrances’ (*wuxiang* 五香) instead of ‘five odours.’ *Nanhua zhenjing zhushu* 南華真經註疏, 5.256.

⁴⁸ The pronunciation of the character probably had already passed to *chou* by the sixth century, at least when it is used as a noun. The *Yupian* notes both the verb (23.813) and the noun (10.127) 臭 as pronounced *chou*. The *Jingdian shiwen* 經典釋文 (edited by Lu Deming 陸德明, completed c. 583), in contrast, indicates the pronunciation of foul odours as *chou* and the verb as *xiu* (12.38a). The *Yiqiejing yinyi* only indicates the *chou* pronunciation, but it does not cite any case in which the character is used as a verb (T. 2128, 350c5, 486c17).

predominantly to denote the act of smelling, which is different from all its usages in Classical Chinese. Linguists have debated over when and how smelling came to be included in the connotation of this character. The current opinion is that its connotation of smelling appears at the latest in the text of the *Hanfei zi* 韓非子, but till the early medieval period, the frequency of *wen* denoting ‘to hear’ is significantly higher than the one referring to olfaction.⁴⁹ Theories that have been proposed include a passage from ‘hearing → knowing → smelling’⁵⁰ and a general tendency of inter-borrowing between the verbs denoting olfactory and auditory perceptions.⁵¹ It has been observed that the same phenomenon is also found in Greek, Latin, Welsh, Irish, and many African languages.⁵² Similarly, the *xing* 馨, which the *Shuowen jiezi* glosses as ‘a fragrance that could be heard/perceived/smelled from a distance’ (*xiang zhi yuanwen ye* 香之遠聞也) combines the radicals of sound and fragrance.⁵³ The idea that both sounds and smells were carried by the wind might have contributed to the synaesthesia between the sensations.⁵⁴

Another important sensory interrelation was that between the gustative and the olfactory senses. This synaesthesia would be more familiar to us and it was not only reflected in concepts, but also in practice. Roel Sterckx has noted how the gods were thought to appreciate the offerings for ‘those that belong to the realm of fragrance, or *qi*, and not that of the palate.’⁵⁵ In addition, smell was placed on a higher hierarchy compared to taste in the human-divine relationship: ‘The most reverent force (Heaven) does not appreciate [offerings] for their taste but rather because of the odour of its *qi*’.⁵⁶ The above postulation was followed during the Sui and Tang period, when the state ceremonies replicated the ancient patterns.⁵⁷ The connection and tension between food offering and incense

⁴⁹ See the examples listed in Hong 1989, 108–9. Cf. Zhang 2015, Wang and Akitani 2014, 706. Sterckx 2011, 87.

⁵⁰ Xu 1999, 35–42.

⁵¹ Zhang 2015, 7–18; Wang and Akitani 2014, 705–6.

⁵² Ibid. See Dimmendaal 2001, 387 for African languages, cit. in Wang and Akitani 2014, 706.

⁵³ *Shuowen jiezi*, 7.225.

⁵⁴ See Geaney 2002, 186, n. 24. 22–30 for the role of wind in hearing.

⁵⁵ Sterckx 2005, 85.

⁵⁶ *Liji jijie*, 禮記集解, 25.671. Trans. in Sterckx 2005, 85.

⁵⁷ *Sui shu* 6.111; JTS, 23.893. Interestingly, similar observations on the hierarchy of smell over taste in venerating the gods can still be found in contemporary anthropologist accounts from Taiwan. There, the worshippers interviewed stated that only lower-rank gods need to ‘eat’ food, whereas higher-rank gods only ‘eat’ fragrance. Other worshippers compared the

burning were key issues that became manifest in the medieval period with the emerging influence of Buddhism and Daoism among the ruling class. We will further explore this subject in the dissertation.

The Vocabulary of Smells

As most studies on olfaction note, odours are elusive and difficult to classify. Barwich has indicated the attempts that scientists and philosopher in the West from Plato to Henning made to organise the world of scents into rational categories.⁵⁸ And yet these efforts seem futile. We still know very little about the classifications of odours today. Scholars have also pointed out the absence of a true olfactory vocabulary in European languages, in which the terms for describing odours are borrowed from taste terms or designated by reference to the things from which they emanate.⁵⁹

There is a relatively long list of vocabularies designating smells mentioned in early Chinese philosophical texts, demonstrating the keen interest of early Chinese people in categorising the phenomena in the human and natural world in olfactory terms. Many of the terms had become obsolete already by the medieval times, but some of them continued in use with some shifts in semantic fields. The meanings of some of these olfactory terms are essential for our discussions, it is therefore useful to review them here.

As a more generic model, the opposite binaries ‘the fragrant and the foul’ are mentioned in texts as ‘*xiang* 香 – *chou/xiu* 臭’⁶⁰ or ‘*fenfang* 芬芳 (both characters denoting the scent of aromatic plants) – *xingsao* 腥臊 (both indicating an animal-related smell) for foul odours.’⁶¹ Comparisons were given to illustrate what a fragrant scent should be like: it was like the smell of ‘pepper and orchid.’⁶²

incense burners to rice bowls used by the gods, as each god would possess a different burner, just like each human has their own rice bowl. Chang 2006, 26.

⁵⁸ Barwich 2020, 13–53.

⁵⁹ Classen et al. 1994, 109–16.

⁶⁰ See, for instance, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 13.590.

⁶¹ 鼻辨芬芳腥臊。 *Xunzi jijie*, 2.63.

⁶² *Xunzi jijie*, 10.269.

In the section on ‘Rectifying Names’ (*zhengming* 正名), Xunzi 荀子 (c. 316–237/235 BCE) gives one of the longest lists of odour categories. In this passage, he expounds on the functions of sensory organs and states that, just as the mouth differentiates sweet and bitter, salty and bland, pungent and sour, as well as strange flavours, the nose, too, distinguishes various olfactory sensations.⁶³ Then follow nine categories⁶⁴ of smells the Xunzi indicates that the nose distinguishes: 1) *xiang* 香, fragrance;⁶⁵ 2) *xiu/chou* 臭: a foul or odoriferous smell; 3) *fen* 芬: the fragrant scent of flowers and plants;⁶⁶ 4) *yu* 鬱, putridity;⁶⁶ 5) *xing* 腥, the odour of dog fat, pig fat, or raw meat;⁶⁷ 6) *sao* 臊, the smell of pig fat or dog fat; 7) *xi* 洒, a rotten smell;⁶⁸ 8) *suan* 酸, the sour *qi* of summer dampness;⁶⁹ 9) *qi* 奇,⁷⁰ strange.⁷¹ It is not clear whether these denominations were meant to be representative (i.e., exemplifying several categories of odours) or exhaustive (i.e., classifying all the odours). Geaney has points out the category of ‘strange’ ensures that nothing is left out, but as this term defines a very loose boundary, the other eight categories were probably not meant to be comprehensive.

⁶³ 甘苦鹹淡辛酸奇味以口異，香臭芬鬱腥臊洒酸奇臭以鼻異。 *Xunzi jijie*, 16.416. Cf. Sterckx 2011, 183; Geaney 2002, 16–22.

⁶⁴ The meanings of some olfactory denominations are far from straightforward. In those cases, I summarise what the commentators annotated.

⁶⁵ The *Shuowen jiezi* suggests that *xiang* 香 is composed with the radical of millet (*shu* 黍) and sweetness (*gan* 甘). The character may have originally denoted the sweet smell of grains. This definition is cited in various medieval and later imperial texts.

⁶⁶ Elsewhere in the early Chinese context, *yu* also means strong fragrance. It also referred to curcuma (*yujin* 鬱金), which was used to aromatise the sacrificial wine.

⁶⁷ The meaning of this character is relegated to the comments in the *Liji* and *Zhouli*, where the character is glossed variously as the odour of dog fat, pig fat, or raw meat. Similar debates are made for the next odour listed, *sao* 臊. See the commentaries in the section for the characters in the ‘Paoren’ 庖人 section of the *Zhouli* (*Zhouli zhengyi*, 1.264–66).

⁶⁸ The commentators generally consider this to be a mistake and that the character should be *you* 腐 (the smell of rotten wood) or *lou* 漏, which is itself a homophone of *lou* 虯, meaning the odour of mole cricket (*Xunzi jijie*, 16.416–17).

⁶⁹ The character’s conflation with the gustative taste of sour is noted. See *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Geaney maintains that the addition of the category ‘strange’ guarantees that nothing is left out, so the category designates the sense’s range of possible forms of distinction (Geaney 2002, 45). However, as ‘strange’ does not define any specific attribute of smell. With this list, Xunzi in fact hints that there are odours beyond his scheme of odour discrimination.

⁷¹ *Xunzi jijie*, 16.416–17.

Many efforts of distinguishing smells were related to the concern of separating the edibles from the non-edibles. That is perhaps why many of these terms describe the olfactory properties of animals. There was relatively a long list of characters used to describe the smell of spoiled food, including a character denoting the smell of rice gone bad (*ai* 餿⁷²). However, most of the characters were no longer used in medieval times. We will survey the development of three olfactory terms (*xing*, *sao*, and *shan*) that are relevant to our discussion of medieval olfactory culture and probe how their meanings change. In general, the meanings related to the terms designating fragrant smells seem to be more stable. *Fen* and *fang* continued to denote delicate and plant related scents. *Xiang*, which originally designates the scent of grains, came to indicate fragrance in a more generic sense. However, the words for other scents underwent more significant changes. In fact, the meanings of the terms designating animal-related smells already had ambiguous designations in early times.

The *Zhouli* 周禮 provides two sets of interesting odour categories. They are both found in the section prescribing the rules for the grand steward of the palace. The first describes the olfactory properties of the animal fats (*gao* 膏) to be consumed in accordance with the four seasons: *xiang* 香 in spring, *sao* 臊 in summer, *xing* 腥 in autumn, and *shan* 羶 in winter. There was no consensus on what these referred to exactly among the commentators. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) glossed these as beef tallow, lard, chicken fat, and sheep fat respectively, but his suggestions were not unquestioned.⁷³ We are not so concerned about the precise references these characters denoted here, but they were clearly used to indicate pleasant smells of edibles. In the section that follows immediately after, we encounter some of the descriptors again – *shan*, *sao*, and *xing* –, but their associations become negative. The section instructs the Grand Chef of the Palace (*neiyong* 內饗) how to tell the smell of the flesh of an animal based on its appearance and behaviour, and states:

When an ox bellows at night, its meat smells *you* (like rotten wood). When a sheep has long and felted fur, its hair has a *shan* odour. If a dog has red thighs and a hasty walk, [its meat] has a *sao* smell. When a bird loses its colour and sings with an exhausted voice, [its meat] is *li* (fetid).

⁷² Cf. *Guangya shuyi*, 594. The character appears in the ‘Xiangdang’ 鄉黨 chapter of the *Lunyu* 論語. Some commentators note that this describes more generally the smell of spoiled food (*Lunyu zhushu*, 20.5419–20).

⁷³ *Zhouli zhengyi*, 1.264. Very similar passages are found in the *Liji*, ‘neize’ 內則.

When a pig looks blind and squint-eyed its flesh is *xing*. When a horse is black over its spine and striped on the legs, it tastes *lou* (rotten).

牛夜鳴則廋；羊冷毛而毳，羶；犬赤股而躁，臊；鳥鵞色而沙鳴，狸；豕盲眊而交睫，腥；馬黑脊而般臂，蠼。⁷⁴

And these, the text notes, are signs indicating which among the *xing*, *sao*, *shan*, *xiang* were not edible (or not worthy for sacrifices and for the consumption of the imperial family). It has become clear that the three characters mentioned in both sections – *xing*, *sao*, and *shan* – were used in two distinct ways: as metonyms to indicate the animals associated with certain smells, and as descriptions of the olfactory properties of certain types of animal flesh. Elsewhere these smells were used as classifying marks of animals according to a different set of criteria:

‘Acquatic animals have a *xing* smell, canivores a *sao* scent, and herbivores a *shan* odour.’⁷⁵ The exact associations of these terms seem fluid in early times. What remains constant is that they were always associated with the smells of animals. A gradual transition of these smells to designate almost exclusively unpleasant odours in medieval times mirrors a change in culture – the distance from the natural world and the world of animals became more prominent.

The meanings of the terms *xiang*, *fen*, and *fang* became relatively stable by the Tang period: *xing* was associated with either a fish-like smell or a bloody odour; *sao* with the smell of animals, in particular pork; and *shan* that of mutton.⁷⁶ The debates around the precise meaning of some terms and the difficulty of translating them in English reflects the complexity of their

⁷⁴ *Zhouli zhengyi*, 1.271, cit. in Sterckx 2005, 42.

⁷⁵ 水居者腥，肉獮者臊，草食者羶。 *Lüshi chunqiu*, 14.740, cit. in Sterckx 2005, 42 and Milburn 2016, 451. The unstable and complex connotation of the three odour terms is reflected in the different word choices that Sterckx and Milburn made to translate them.

⁷⁶ The Tang Buddhist monk and lexicographer from Kucha, Huilin 慧琳 (736–820), explains some of these terms in his *Yiqiejing yinyi* 一切經音義. Citing an Eastern Han dictionary, the *Tongsu wen* 通俗文, he explains that ‘the smell of fish is called *xing*, while the smell of pig (*jia* 豕) is called *sao*’ (T. 2128, 363a19). Under another item, he glosses that *xing* is the smell of meat or dog fat following the commentaries to the Confucian classics (Ibid., 392c10, 672c23–24). See Ibid., 582b19 for a definition of *shan*. In early China, the character *xing* 鯢 was used to indicate a fish-like smell, this might have been replaced by its homophone *xing* 腥, which was related mainly with meat. The tenth-century scholar Xu Xuan 徐鉉 (916–991) notes a character written as *xing* 鯢 used at his time as a vernacular form of 鯢, but this also appears to be rare.

semantic fields, but also suggests that these terms are less dependent on the objects compared to terms such as ‘garlicky’ or ‘woody.’

Like many other things in early Chinese cosmology, smells were also adapted into a five-fold framework, which correlates with other pentic groupings of human senses, cardinal directions, temporal nodes, deities, sacrifices, etc. Paul Unschuld listed ten correspondences of pentic groupings mentioned in early texts in his study on the medical treatise *Suwen* 素問. Smells are mentioned in a number of these and the same five odour categories are always indicated, though the characters used were sometimes different. They are: gamey (*shan* 膾 or 羶), burnt (*jiao* 焦), fragrant (*xiang* 香), bloody/fishy (*xing* 腥), and putrid (*fu* 腐 or *xiu* 朽). Their correspondence to seasons, cardinal directions, and the five phases (*wuxing* 五行), remains constant, though that with organs varies in some texts.⁷⁷ An Eastern Han text, *Baihu tong* 白虎通⁷⁸ gives a tentative ontological explanation to the olfactory associations with the cardinal directions:

Why is the North associated with putridity? The North represents the phase Water; it is the place where the myriad creatures hide in the dark. Furthermore, water collects and becomes foul and stagnant; therefore, its smell is rotten and corrupt. The East represents the phase Wood; the myriad creatures are newly emerged from the ground; therefore, its scent is gamey. The South represents the phase Fire. Yang is at its zenith, and it burns; therefore its scent is burnt. The West represents the phase Metal; the myriad creatures have reached maturity and they begin to decline; therefore, its smell is blood-like. The Center is Earth, and its main duty is nurturing; therefore, its scent is sweet...

北方其臭朽者何？北方水，萬物所幽藏也。又，水者受垢濁，故臭腐朽也。東方者木也，萬物新出地中，故其臭膾。南方者火也，盛陽承動，故其臭焦。西方者金也，萬物成熟，始復諾，故其臭腥。中央者土也，主養，故其臭香也...⁷⁹

⁷⁷ See Unschuld’s tables listing the pentic correspondences in early texts (2003, 106–112, tables 1–7).

⁷⁸ The text is traditionally thought to have been compiled by Ban Gu 班固 et al. to record the discussion of a group of court officials concerning the true meanings of the classics held in 79 CE. However, scholars have argued that it may have been produced as late as the 3rd century CE. Cf. Loewe 1993, 347–356.

⁷⁹ *Bohu tong shuzheng* 白虎通疏證, 172–73. Trans. in Milburn 2016, 452–53, modified to keep a consistent translation of the ‘five odours.’

The Han court philosophers thus attributed the olfactory attributes to natural events related to the environmental characteristics of the geographic cardinals.

It is hard to tell how significant these theories were in medieval China apart from being subjects of learning for certain groups of people (e.g., classicists, court ritual specialists, physicians). However, the schemes had two important broader implications on medieval olfactory culture: the ‘five odours’ framework became engrained in the mind of people;⁸⁰ and the correlation of smells with the human organism as well as natural phenomena of time and space locates them in the physical and moral cosmos. Olfactory perceptions were thus not only sensory experiences, but also physiological processes with great moral and cosmological significance. This significance was also at least well felt, so olfactory motifs were employed in various discourse and narratives for political and religious ends that we will explore in this dissertation.

Sources

This dissertation approaches the cultural history of smell drawing on three groups of materials:

- 1) Tang and pre-Tang narratives, including miracle tales, anecdotal writings, and hagiographic stories to garner ‘popular’ olfactory perceptions and representations. The main corpus of sources is the Northern Song collection that Li Fang 李昉 (925–996) et al. compiled under imperial decree, the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Records of the Taiping Era, completed in 978), which contains stories from the Tang and earlier period. Two anecdotal collections, *Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載 (Draft Notes from the Court and the Country) by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (658–730) and *Youyang zazhu* 酉陽雜俎 (Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang) by Duan Chengshi 段成式 (c. 803–863) provide rich information about everyday life in eighth and ninth centuries.

Hagiographic narratives from the *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of Nuns) by Baochang

⁸⁰ For example, when a Southern Song 南宋 (1127–1279) Confucian scholar wrote a preface for a repertoire of aromatics, he started by saying: ‘Fragrance is one of the five odours, which people wear to please (*mei* 媚) others.’ *Chenshi xiangpu*, 2a. We will discuss this preface in detail in Chapter 2.

寶唱 (fl. 6th century), the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks) compiled by Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), and the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks) by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) as well as Du Guangting's 杜光庭 (850–933) *Yongcheng jixianlu* 壩城集仙錄 and *Xianzhuan shiyi* 仙傳拾遺 form the main source for discussing the role of scent in religious discourse and practice.

- 2) Formal literati writings such as institutional histories, legal documents, memorials, decrees, and poetry for sources on the attitudes toward smells in a formal context.
- 3) Medical treatises, mainly those by the three physicians from the Sui 隋 (581–618) and Tang period – Chao Yuanfang, Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (fl. 6th–7th centuries), and Wang Tao 王燾 (670–755).
- 4) Manuscripts and visual materials from Dunhuang for exploring the practice.

Chapter Synopsis

The materials of the dissertation are organised as the following:

Chapter 1 reconstructs historical smells of medieval China by focusing on the Tang capital, Chang'an, in the eighth and ninth centuries. Gleaning materials from anecdotes, legal documents, poetry as well as manuscripts, the chapter represents medieval Chinese people's lived experience by tracing the smells that their activities produced. It delineates the contours of olfactory spaces and demonstrates that smells revealed and structured social hierarchies. The chapter also shows that this period witnesses a shift in the smellscape which mirrors broader changes in the society, especially the ways in which medieval people bonded with the gods and spirits.

Chapter 2 examines the most important feature in medieval Chinese olfactory culture: the moral associations of smells. It traces the origin of this tradition in Classical literature as well as in the early religio-philosophical thought and examines its expression in medieval accounts. The chapter argues that ascribing moral values to olfactory perceptions had become a 'cultural habit' by medieval times, which had ramifications in the use of olfactory motifs in the contexts discussed in the next two

chapters. It also traces the implication of this association in complicating the attitudes body odour as a physical and social product, towards practices of grooming and scenting, and to the sensory judgment itself.

Chapter 3 examines how the moral association with smell figures in the olfactory encounters with the Other. It focuses on the phenomenon that frontier peoples became associated with the odour of mutton from the middle of the eighth century, which in turn justified and reinforced cultural divide. This chapter demonstrates that this discourse, which had a long-lasting impact in Chinese culture, was shaped by the shifting power relations over the Tang. It was rooted in the tradition of ascribing moral and cosmological significance to smells, which paralleled with the phenomenon of perceived foul odours from pests, demons, and spirits. Together, these account of the olfactory features of the Other demonstrate the significance of the sense of smell in the ways in which the medieval Chinese people sensed and constructed the Other.

Chapter 4 focuses on the association of olfaction with a different type of virtue, which is associated with spiritual achievement. In particular, it analyses the idea of the ‘odour of sanctity’ in medieval China and examines the role of olfaction in the construction of sainthood in the Chinese context. It also explores the complexity of the term ‘unusual fragrance’ (*yixiang* 異香) which is often used in this context by discussing the aroma it might have evoked and the consequences of its malleability. The chapter demonstrates the ways in which hagiographic narratives and multisensory rituals were used as didactic media to impart new sensory meanings. In turn, I contend that changes in the olfactory culture reshaped the relationship between medieval Chinese people and the body and death.

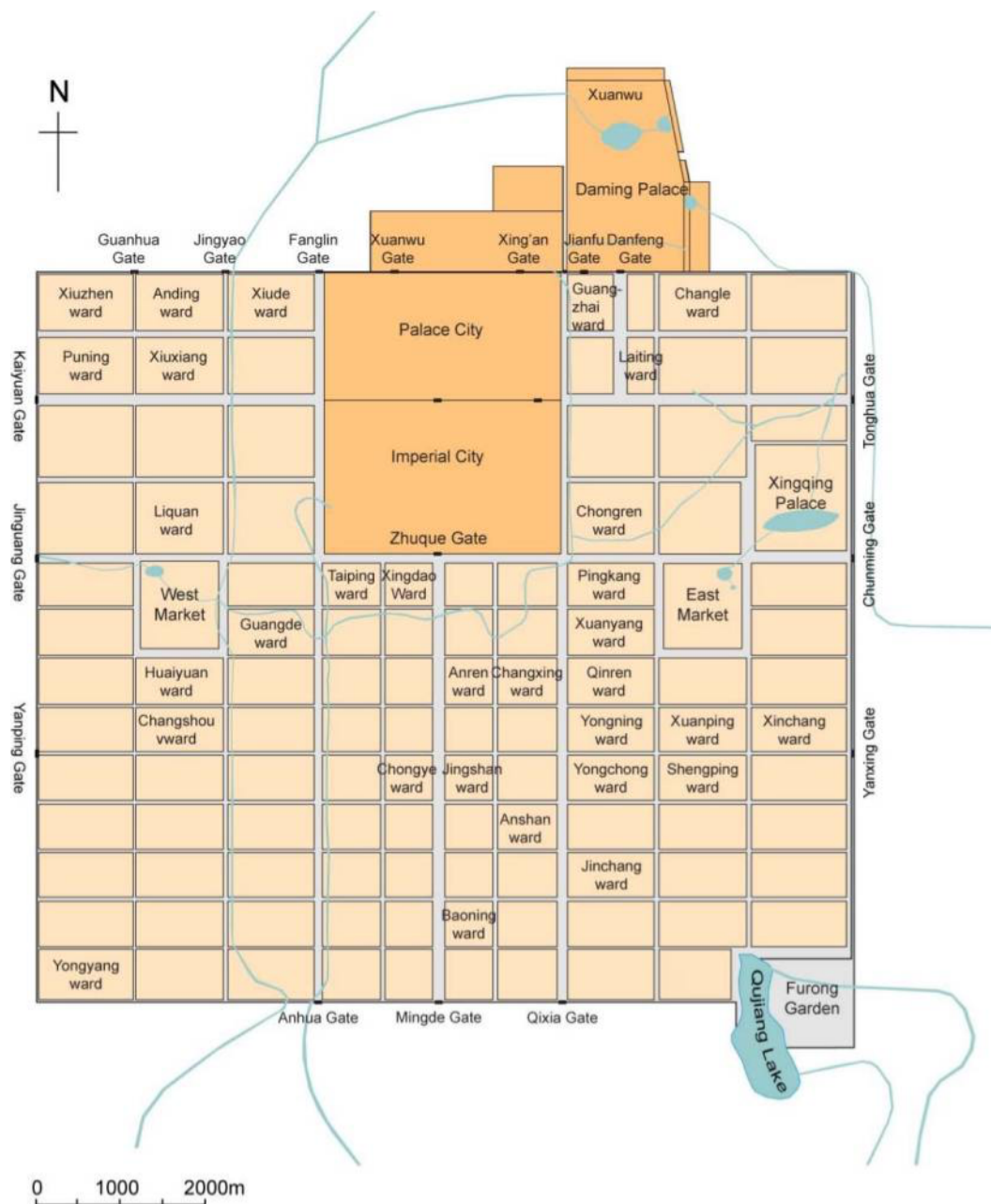


Fig. 1 Plan of Chang'an (After Kiang 2014, 93)

Chapter 1. Smells of a Medieval City

Charme profond, magique, dont nous grise

Dans le présent le passé restauré!

Charles Baudelaire, *Le Parfum*, vv. 5–6

To understand what smells meant to people in medieval China and what values they placed on their olfactory encounters, we ought to first look at *what* they smelled. This chapter examines some of these historical smells by focusing on Chang'an 長安, the capital of the Tang 唐 empire (618–906) in the eighth and ninth centuries, a period that witnessed the heyday of the exchanges along the Silk Roads and the Tang empire, as well as its turning point towards decline and eventual collapse.

Established scholarship on Tang Chang'an tends to present an idealised city, emphasising its prosperous and cosmopolitan aspects.⁸¹ However, Chang'an was foremost a place where people lived, ate, drank, travelled, celebrated festivities, carried out religious activities, and conducted trade and businesses.

This chapter thus seeks to represent the lived experience by tracing the smells these activities produced. In this process, we also explore how smells structured and revealed social hierarchies: the degree to which one could control one's body and environment, indicated levels of wealth, status, and power. The smellscape of the city was likewise divided into different social olfactory spaces. Following the scented moments, we examine how smells changed in the religious landscape, especially in state rituals and popular festivals where incense was increasingly used and the traditional 'blood sacrifice' in ancestral rites became contested. Lastly, Chang'an was probably also an odoriferous place, and yet literati remained mainly silent about the issue, unless the world of the gods and spirits was concerned. By tracing how they complained about certain offensive odours but

⁸¹ Ishida Mikinosuke's classic *Chōan no haru* (1948) gives a poetic account of a city that seems to be in everlasting spring blossoms, symbolising vitality and an eternal renaissance; Edward Schafer (1963) similarly depicts a city of exotic sounds, sights, tastes, and smells; and Linda Rui Feng (2015) presents a dreamlike city that holds political promise, hope, and frustrations for aspiring scholars.

remained silent about others, we begin to understand how olfactory perceptions reveal medieval Chinese worldviews, which will be further discussed in the following chapters.

Olfactory spaces

In the eighth century, just under a million inhabitants lived in Chang'an.⁸² A destination for merchants, soldiers, performers, monks, students, and travellers from what are now Korea, Japan, India, Iran, and Central Asia, the city was truly a cultural melting pot.

Markets, for instance, would have been a carnival of smells given the variety of commodities handled there. There were two vast commercial areas in Chang'an, the Eastern and Western Markets, sitting symmetrically to either side of the Vermillion Bird Avenue. Walking in those areas, one might have smelled the pungent odours of leather from the saddlers' bazaar, and the earthy scent of cotton and silk in the overcoat and silk bazaar. Smells of metal and sweat permeated the ironmongers' bazaar and the sweet scent of cereal in the wheat bran bazaar.⁸³

The smells of the foodscape might have been reminiscent of the Muslim Quarter (*huimin jie* 回民街) in modern Xi'an. Though over a thousand years apart, the basic makeup of the culinary culture in the past and present demonstrates striking similarities.⁸⁴ The most common foods in Chang'an, as texts reveal, were based on wheat. One of the most often documented ones was 'barbarian flatbread' (*hubing* 胡餅), a kind of baked or steamed pastry with sesame.⁸⁵ Some of these contained fillings, such as one type called the '*gulouzi*' 古樓子, which had lamb as filling and was seasoned with

⁸² Scholars have offered different estimates of the population, ranging from half a million to one million. Seo Tatsuhiko reexamined earlier studies of Tang Chang'an's population and put forward a convincing estimate of 700,000 people in Chang'an in the first half of the eighth century (and the beginning of the ninth). Cf. Kiang 2014.

⁸³ These are called respectively *qiupei hang* 鞦轡行, *taiyi hang* 太衣行, *juan hang* 絹行, *tie hang* 鐵行, *fu hang* 麩行. Katō 1991, 378–381; Xiong 1996, 179. Xiong further indicates that there were around 40 types of bazaars (*hang* 行) nationwide. In addition to the businesses listed for Chang'an, there were also those that dealt in fruit, rice, wheat, vegetables, dyeing, charcoal, cloth, hats, edible oil, watermills, boots, groceries, etc. He believes that most of them were likely present also in Chang'an (1996, 179). For the organisation of the marketplaces of Chang'an, see Twichett 1966, 230–233, Liu 1992, 457–59, Xiong 1996, 182–87.

⁸⁴ See Schafer 1977, 87–140 and Huang 1998, 1–51 for foods in the Tang society.

⁸⁵ See Xiang 1933 (2001), 49–51.

pepper and fermented soy beans.⁸⁶ Pancakes (*jianbing* 煎餅), rice balls (*tuanzi* 糰子), and wonton were also mentioned for sale on street or in restaurants.⁸⁷ Another exotic staple food mentioned in several texts was the Indian-style pilau rice (*piluo* 畢羅 or 饌饌). Seasoned with spices and sometimes even garlic, the scent of the rice reportedly deterred a ghost from entering a pilau shop and covered its nose.⁸⁸ Garlic, as well as other odorous vegetables, were thought to have the power to expel evil spirits.⁸⁹

Mutton or lamb⁹⁰ seemed to be the most commonly consumed meat, at least for those who could afford it.⁹¹ The imperial kitchen prepared it for the emperor and literati delighted in consuming it in restaurants and taverns.⁹² The mid-Tang aristocrat and writer, Duan Chengshi 段成式 (800–863), mentions a dish made of dried mutton cooked in milk, together with more exotic viands such as grilled donkey neck or camel hump.⁹³ One famous dish served at the banquet that the emperor laid out for military officers was called ‘*hunyang mohu*’ 渾羊歿忽, which consisted of a goose filled with meat, rice, and seasoning, cooked inside a lamb.⁹⁴ *Mohu* 歿忽 (written as 沒忽 elsewhere) is not a known Chinese word and it might be related to the Mongolian word *makh*, which means ‘meat.’

⁸⁶ *Tang Yulin*, juan 6. Cit. in Huang 1998, 5. The name sounds like a transliteration of a foreign word, but it is not clear what the original might be.

⁸⁷ TPGJ, 343.1877; Seo 1990, 196, nos. 18–19. A certain ‘Wonton Lane’ (*huntun qu* 餛飩曲) in Banzheng 頒政 Ward west of the Imperial City points to the existence of establishments specialising in wontons. QTW bubian 74.918, ‘Tomb inscription of Du Ying’ 堵穎墓記. Seo 1990, 201, no. 56; Xiong 1996, 188.

⁸⁸ YYZZ, 1483. Pilau had been considered either a type of cake or rice. Xiang Da 向達 believes that this is a transliteration of the word *pilau*, or *pillow/pilaf*, a type of Indian-style spiced rice eaten with the hands (2001, 48–50). I follow Xiang’s identification here. Both the Eastern Market and Changxing Ward (長興坊) had *biluo* restaurants. See *Tang Liangjing Chengfang kao*, 2.43, Seo 1990, 195, no. 6 and Xiong 1996, 181.

⁸⁹ Tao Hongjing’s 陶弘景 (456–536) *Yangxing yanming lu* 養性延命錄 prescribes that if one needs to visit a dead body, one must first drink wine and bite some garlic in order to dispel the poisonous vapour.

⁹⁰ There was no distinction between lamb and mutton, or the meat from goat or sheep in the everyday context. They were all simply referred to as *yang* 羊.

⁹¹ Cf. Huang 1998, 15.

⁹² See the story ‘Tang Xuanzong’ 唐玄宗 in TPGJ, 165.1201 as well as Li Bai’s 李白 (701–762) ‘Bring in the Wine’ (*Qiang jin jiu* 將進酒) and He Zhao’s 賀朝 (fl. ca. 711) ‘To a Hu lady in a tavern’ (*Zeng jiudian Hu ji* 贈酒店胡姬) in QTS, 162.1682, 117.1181.

⁹³ YYZZ, 607.

⁹⁴ *Nanbu xinshu* 南部新書 by Qian Yi 錢易 (968–1026), 140–41.

The dish thus might have come from the traditional cuisine of the Xianbei 鮮卑, the Mongolic speaking people who ruled north China before the Sui-Tang period,⁹⁵ suggesting a lasting influence of the northern culture.

Butchers and fish shops were found in various parts of the city and one might also find fish vendors on the streets.⁹⁶ Minced fish (*kuai* 鱠) was a widely craved delicacy.⁹⁷ The best ones were thought to be made from bass (*lu* 鱸) and miiuy croaker (*haimian* 海鯢), two types of fish considered less pungent (*xing* 腥).⁹⁸ In a poem written in the voice of an official from the Southeast (Wu 吳, in modern-day Zhejiang), Wang Wei 王維 (699–761) illustrates the regional culinary differences of the time: while suffering in the boiling hot Chang'an guesthouse, the official ardently awaited the salted fish sent from his river home. Here in the capital, without tea-infused congee (*mingmi* 茗糜) to mitigate the heat, he had to make do with the noodle soup (*tangbing* 湯餅) of the people of Qin 秦 (referring to the Guanzhong 關中 area where the capital was located).⁹⁹ That people in the Western Regions favoured meat and in the south preferred fish was already a stereotype.¹⁰⁰

Along with the foods, the soporific aroma of various types of alcohol permeated taverns, pleasure quarters, or even in the parks like the ones along the Serpentine River (*qujiang* 曲江).

⁹⁵ The pronunciation of the character 歿 in middle Chinese, *mjunX*, is not a perfect correspondence with the modern Mongolian word. Neither the word *mohu* nor the one for meat appears in the Taghbach (the language of the Xianbei) lexicon reconstructed by Shimunek. (2017, 165–68) The identification of the word might benefit from further discussion with linguists, meanwhile I would like to thank Iskandar Ding for his insights.

⁹⁶ One story from the *Yishi* 逸史 records an official named Cui Jie 崔潔 bumping into a fish stall selling fresh fish on the Tianmen 天門 Street (TPGJ, 156, 1125) and in another story, a fortune-teller asked for fish in a shop in the Western Market to make minced fish (Ibid., 18.126).

⁹⁷ Tang narratives record several stories about people craving minced fish and some died of it. See for instance, TPGJ, 132.942, CYQZ, 1.5.

⁹⁸ TPGJ, 234.1790–92, quoting the *Daye shiyi ji* 大業拾遺記. Both types of fish came from the Wu area in the Southeast, where they were also said to present sun-dried diced fish to the court.

⁹⁹ Wang Wei. See Paul Rouzer's translation (2020, vol. 1, 219).

¹⁰⁰ See Cui Rong's 崔融 argumentative text against the ban on hunting and fishing (THY, 41.731).

Chang'an was particularly famous for its 'Western Market Brew' (*xishi qiang* 西市腔).¹⁰¹ It is not clear what this type of beverage was like, but its name suggests that it was, or purported to be, something new and exotic, as the Western Market was where most foreigners sojourned. Some Tang officials and literati in the north praised the taste of the grape wine from the Western Regions, though wine appears to have remained relatively unknown in the South even in the ninth century.¹⁰² Likewise appreciated was an exotic beverage resembling wine called the 'Three Fruits Juice' (*sanlejiang* 三勒漿, from Sanskrit *triphalā*, 'three fruits') which was said to have originated in Persia.¹⁰³ Consumption of this beverage was probably limited to the privileged as it is mentioned mainly in the context of official banquets.¹⁰⁴ Tea came to be a major competitor of alcohol in the Tang dynasty.¹⁰⁵ By the eighth century, tea had become a kind of daily necessity and tea houses started to flourish. The tea tax, first introduced by Emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. 779–805) in 780, brought enormous revenue to the court.¹⁰⁶ Literati began praising the pure and fresh fragrance of tea, which suggested a shift not only in consumption culture, but also in aesthetics and ideological tendencies.¹⁰⁷ More delicate sensory stimuli and austere lifestyle started to gain influence.

¹⁰¹ TPGJ, 233.1785, quoting the *Guoshi bu* 國史補.

¹⁰² Several Tang poems mention delicious grape wines from Liangzhou 涼州, a city in the northwest frontier. But in the South, the drink seems to have remained largely unknown. The Arabic travellers who reached Guangzhou noted that the Chinese did not know about grape wine at all. Cf. *Accounts of China and India*, 1.6.2. Huang 2000, 239–46 mentions the existence of wine in Tang China.

¹⁰³ Cf. Laufer 1919, 378; Chen 2012, 4–23. The beverage was believed to have come from Persia and these plants were known by their Persian names: *amola* (*anmole* 安摩勒), *balila* (*pilile* 毗梨勒), *halila* (*helile* 訶梨勒). That the 'Three Fruits Juice' came from Persia is mentioned in the *Sui shu* 隋書 (compiled by Wei Zheng 魏徵 et al. in 636), 83.7b, *Zhou shu* 周書 (compiled by Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 et al. in 636), 50.6, and a Song dynasty 'Treatise on Wine' (*jiupu* 酒譜) by Dou Jin 竇堇. The 'Three Fruits Juice' is also mentioned in TPGJ, 233.1785. The method of its production is indicated in the late Tang agricultural manual, *Essentials for the Four Seasons* (*Sishi zuanyao* 四時纂要, compiled by Han E 韓鄂), 195.

¹⁰⁴ Chen 2012, 6–7.

¹⁰⁵ Benn 2015, especially 42–71.

¹⁰⁶ XTS, 208.5885. One famous tea business was the Late Tang tea shop in Yongchang Ward, a residential ward east of the Palace City. It was there that Chief Minister Wang Ya 王涯 (d. 835) was captured during the 'Sweet Dew Incident,' a failed coup by Emperor Wenzong 文宗 (r. 827–840) with the intention to seize power from the eunuchs. JTS, 169.4404. See Twichett 1970, 62–65; Xiong 1996, 190.

¹⁰⁷ See Benn 2015, 72–95 for some Tang poems on tea.

While the powerful and wealthy enjoyed sophisticated delicacies based on meats as exotic as camel, meat and fish were still largely inaccessible luxuries for the ordinary people. The odour of meat, therefore, was perceived by some as a bleak reminder of the hierarchies and injustices of society.¹⁰⁸ Nothing better illustrates this than Du Fu's famous verses:

Crimson gates reek with meat and ale, while on the streets are bones of the frozen dead.

Splendour and privation, a mere foot apart, so upsetting it is hard to recount further.

朱門酒肉臭，路有凍死骨。榮枯咫尺異，惆悵難再述。¹⁰⁹

Du Fu composed these verses a few days before news arrived at the court that An Lushan had rebelled. He was on his way to Fengxian 奉先 (in present-day Pucheng, Shaanxi) to take up a low-level appointment, and he learnt that his young son had died of hunger. As he passed Mount Li 驪 near Emperor Xuanzong's favoured resort, where the emperor was hosting banquets with the nobles and imperial in-laws, Du Fu imagined the warm sable cloaks they were donning, the sounds of flutes and zithers that were accompanying the feasts, and the scent of camel-hoof stew, frosty oranges and fragrant tangerines that they might have been relishing.¹¹⁰ While the sensory pleasure enjoyed by the rich and the nobility were blocked off from the sight of the common people by the crimson gate, the odorous evidence of their indulgences transcended this physical boundary, revealing the contrast between the two worlds and their respective power and powerless.

Many discussions have been made around the exact meaning of the character *xiu/chou* 臭 in the first line cited above, which today means 'foul odour.' Judging from the context, in this verse, it probably referred to the enticing scent of meat and alcohol wafting from the homes of the wealthy and, on another level, suggested a moral 'stench' behind their consumption. Du Fu refers to the contrast of meat-consuming riches and the hunger-stricken poor elsewhere in his writings.¹¹¹ This

¹⁰⁸ This probably refers to Mencius's criticism of King Hui of Liang: 'There are fat meats in your kitchen, fat-horses in your stables, the look of starvation in your people, corpses, dead from hunger, in your wilderness, this is to let beasts eat humans.' *Mengzi zhengyi*, 2.62. See Sterckx 2005, 38–41 for the discourse on meat and morality in early China.

¹⁰⁹ Du Fu, 'Going from the Capital to Fengxian County, Singing My Feelings (five hundred words)' 自京赴奉先縣詠懷五百字, vv. 67–70. Trans. in Owen 2016, 215. These two verses had been already highly praised in the Tang times. Bai Juyi especially wrote about them in his letter of 815 to Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831). *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 323.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *Du shi xiangzhu*, 264.

¹¹¹ For instance, in his 'Hurrying off my servant boy to pick cocklebur' (*Qu shuzi zhai cang'er* 驅豎子摘蒼耳, QTS,

rhetoric that associated meat consumption with moral decadence loomed large. For some, as we will examine more in detail in Chapter 3, the smell of meat also marked the differences between the nomads and the grain-eating dwellers of the central lands, and thereby identifying the predators from the defenders, and the barbarians from the civilised.

Waste Mattered

Many descriptions of premodern European cities detail a miasma of cesspools, excreta on the streets, and concerning hygienic conditions.¹¹² Chang'an was likely in a similar condition, yet also with its own particularities. The medieval travellers who reached Tang China and left some record – Ennin 圓仁 (794–864) and the Arab mariners whose accounts are recorded in the ninth/tenth century collection by Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfi – did not mention offensive odours disturbing them (in contrast to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western observers). The Arab traveller, in fact, noted that 'China is a healthier country (compared to India), with fewer diseases and better air: the blind, the one-eyed, and the deformed are seldom seen there, although in India there are plenty of them.'¹¹³ However, Chang'an probably also reeked of dirt and muck, especially in the post-rebellion period, when urban management, like many other aspects of city infrastructure and social functions, started to fall apart. Despite the law forbidding residents from pouring their waste matter out of one's house, the habit of doing so persisted over time.¹¹⁴ The ancient site of Han Chang'an had become so polluted that, in the late sixth century, the Sui 隋 (581–618) ordered the construction of a new capital, which the Tang later adopted as the site of their court.¹¹⁵ Yet is it possible that after the

221.2344).

¹¹² See, among others, Corbin 1986, Dobson 2002, Cockayne 2007.

¹¹³ *Accounts on India and China*, 1.10.9. Trans. by Tim Mackintosh-Smith (2017, 27).

¹¹⁴ The *Tang Code* (promulgated in 652) stipulates that those who pour the waste out of their walls are to be punished by sixty strikes of bastonades, whereas pouring out water was exempted from punishment (*Tanglü shuyi jianjie* 唐律疏義箋解, 26.1822–24. While the futility of this regulation can be seen from Xuanzong's decree of the year 731 and a later imperial edict, both complained that residents' littering rendered the two capitals (Chang'an 長安 and Luoyang 洛陽) dirty and filthy. See THY, 86.1575 and QTW, 30.339–40, 'Xiuzheng jiequ fangshi zhao' 修整街衢坊市詔.

¹¹⁵ The *Sui shu* 隋書 (compiled by Wei Zheng and Linghu Defen 令狐德棻) records that Yu Jicai 庾季才 proposed the transferral of the capital in the first year of the Kaihuang 開皇 era (581). Cf *Sui shu*, 78.1766. The same episode is also recorded in the *Beishi* 北史 (Compiled by Li Yanshou 李延壽 et al. in 659), 89.2949. Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) gave a more detailed account of the process from Yu's proposal to the later realisation (ZZTJ, 175.5457).

passing of a few centuries, this new capital may have encountered similar problems to the old, with channels again filled with sewage and waste, attracting numerous flies and mosquitos.¹¹⁶ The mid Tang literatus and high official Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) complained:

Morning flies do not need to be expelled; evening mosquitoes are not beatable.

Flies and mosquitoes fill the eight directions, one can(not?) fight with them all.

朝蠅不須驅，暮蚊不可拍。蠅蚊滿八區，可盡與相格。¹¹⁷

A couple of generations later, the aristocrat and essayist, Duan Chengshi, also mentioned that Chang'an was full of flies in autumn. They were so numerous that he could not read, as flies covered his eyelashes and the words.¹¹⁸ Han Yu's writing about insects may well have been allegorical, but it could have also been based on his empirical experience. Most of the drainage channels in Chang'an, according to archaeologists, were open sewers. The only exceptions were those near the Imperial City and the two main market areas.¹¹⁹ The historian of medicine Yu Gengzhe believes that the proliferation of flies and mosquitoes was due to the polluted ground channels around the residential wards, which also gave rise to one of the most common diseases in the Tang, malaria.¹²⁰

Smells of animals would also have permeated the city. The Middle Market in the southern sector of the capital was created by the government specially to handle the trades of horses, cattle, and donkeys, as well as slaves.¹²¹ Donkeys, horses, and carriages were also common means of transportation within the urban limits and without. Just outside the city gate, rental donkeys (*yilü* 驛驢) waited in the post-shops (*yidian* 驛店) for merchants and travellers to ride on. Multiple such

See also Xiong 1996, 7–54 for the construction of the Sui-Tang Chang'an city.

¹¹⁶ Yu Gengzhe notes that the channels inside the city were open sewers (*mingqu* 明渠), into which people could pour their waste (2015, 65–75).

¹¹⁷ Han Yu, 'Miscellaneous Poems' (*zashi* 雜詩), in *Wubai jia zhu Han Changli ji* 五百家註韓昌黎集, juan 7, 436–37.

¹¹⁸ YYZZ, 17.1246.

¹¹⁹ *Zhongguo kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo Xi'an Tangcheng fajuedui* 1963, 601–03. Cf. Yu 2015, 70, 72.

¹²⁰ Yu 2015, 70.

¹²¹ Victor Xiong has noted that Hiraoka Takeo's edition of the *Chang'an zhi* 長安志 records slaves as one of the goods traded here, but the Siku edition replaces 'slaves' with 'camels.' See *Chang'an zhi* 7.16–17; Xiong 1996, 168. The *Jiu Tang shu* mentions a department under the *shaofu jian* 少府監 that specifically oversees animal trades among the foreigners.

shops existed along the routes between Chang'an and Songzhou 宋州 (modern Shangqiu 商丘, Henan 河南) and Bianzhou 汴州 (modern Kaifeng 開封, Henan) in the east, and Qizhou 岐州 (modern-day Fengxiang 鳳翔, Shaanxi 陝西) in the west, where travellers could rest and return their rental donkeys.¹²² Chickens would have been a very common animal to find in the city, not only as a food source, but also as the centrepieces of a popular form of entertainment at the time: the cockfight. The activity was so widely liked that even inside the court, according to a story written in the early ninth century, a Chicken Ward (*jifang* 雞坊) was established so that Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) could easily enjoy watching such performances.¹²³ Chickens, donkeys, and cattle, would have all left their traces of existence on the streets. We know that the Tang had various regulations about the maintenance of the streets' cleanliness, especially those of the two capitals. Although Tang legal documents do not seem to mention specific officials or workers in charge of street cleaning, the long existence of such roles in history and the Tang government's keen attitude toward urban management imply that these figures probably existed.¹²⁴ Disposing of refuse was a

¹²² The existence of rental donkeys is mentioned in the XTS 51.1346. Cf. Liu 1992, 459.

¹²³ TPGJ, 485.3992–95, 'Biography of an Old Man from Eastern City' 東城老父傳 composed by Chen Hong 陳鴻 (*jinshi* 805). The story tells with some detail the vicissitudes of a man named Jia Chang 賈昌, who gained wealth and power for his skills in raising fighting cocks during Xuanzong's reign, but gradually lost his fortune after the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763). After that, the protagonist also bewailed the 'barbarisation' of the capital, when he saw that the young people in the capital now harboured the 'foreign heart' (*huxin* 胡心). Jia's career is also briefly recorded in the late Tang collection *Yiwenji* 異聞集 by Chen Han 陳翰 (d.u.). The original text is now lost, it is cited in various Song texts including the *Suishi guangji* 歲時廣記, 17.333. The *Xin Tang shu* considers Xuanzong's zeal for such activity was one of the omens for the dynasty's downfall (34.881). For a study on cockfighting in the Tang and the possible location of the 'Cock Ward,' see Luo 1944, 127–35 and Cutter 1989.

¹²⁴ The *Zhouli* 周禮 seems to prescribe an official in charge of cleaning the streets called the *Tiaolang shi* 條狼氏 (*Zhouli zhengyi*, 2724; 2916). The original text describes more a guard-like figure in charge of expelling the crowds on the road during the king and the vassals' outing, but commentaries interpret the role as someone responsible for cleaning (*di* 滌) the mess. For instance, the Tang classicist Jia Gongyan's 賈公彥 (fl. mid seventh century) subcommentary reads the position as a role to eliminate the unclean things on the streets. (2724) It is unclear whether such role was adopted in the Tang bureaucratic system. Sterckx notes the mention of an official in charge of 'keeping things clean' (*xiu cai qing* 脩採清) called the Director of the Marketplace (*zhishi* 治市) in the *Xunzi*. The duties of this official may have included the disposing of dung and nightsoil (*Xunzi jijie*, 荀子集解, 9.169–70, cit. in Sterckx's forthcoming paper). In the tenth century, the newly founded Song dynasty ordered the foundation of a Street Management Bureau (*jiedao si* 街道司), which was in charge of the maintenance of roads as well as the drainage of stagnant water. Song sources also mention the existence of petty urban management officers called 'Goudang guan' 勾當官, who supervised the work of street cleaners (*Song hui yao jigao* 宋會要輯稿 30.18, see *Dongjing menghua lu* 東京夢華錄, 402, fn 5). Officers called 'goudang' are also mentioned in Tang sources. Some companions of the Japanese traveller monk Ennin, for

profitable business. Tang anecdotes record several wealthy residents who made their fortune by collecting and dealing with waste of various kinds. Pei Mingli 裴明禮 (d. 664), who eventually ascended to the role of Minister of Ceremonies (*taichangqing* 太常卿), reportedly accumulated his fortune by collecting rubbish.¹²⁵ A famous rich man of Chang'an, Dou Yi 竇乂, whose career was recorded by Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (ca. 812–866), turned a piece of stinking lowland full of filth near restaurants, just south of the Western Market, into a new establishment.¹²⁶

The urban smellscape and the effluvium of agricultural activities had become incompatible in some medieval urban residents' minds, especially in the case of scholar officials. However, we also notice that their main concern was not health or hygiene, but the potential pollution that might offend the gods and ancestors. Chang'an was probably relatively pleasant-smelling; it was carefully planned and managed. Laws, edicts, and decrees were issued to maintain the physical appearance and order of the city. So was the case in Luoyang 洛陽, the eastern capital of the Tang empire, at least up to the mid-eighth century. Pouring out waste on the streets of the capitals was a crime, as were unauthorised vegetable cultivations on the streets.¹²⁷ The latter was punishable by 50 strikes of thorn-switch (*chi* 笞).¹²⁸ This regulation was mainly oriented at maintaining the functionality of the streets and the orderly visual design of the capitals; indeed, it stipulates that cultivations not obstructing traffic were

instance, got into trouble with *goudang* in Yangzhou 揚州 (Ennin's Diary, 20th day of the Second Month, 839). However, the exact duties of the *goudang* are not clearly stated in Tang sources.

¹²⁵ TPGJ, 243.1874–75, citing the *Yushi taiji* 御史臺記, a text now lost. A Minister of Ceremonies named Pei Mingli is mentioned in the *Jiu Tang shu* and a tomb inscription dedicated to a person with the same name mentions several official positions he covered, which adds to some historical credibility of the anecdote (Zhang 2020, 237).

¹²⁶ TPGJ, 243.1877.

¹²⁷ In the second year of the Yongtai 永泰 era (766), the chief official of the capital area, Li Gan 黎幹 (716–779), requested that it should be forbidden to 'plant along the roads of the capital'.

¹²⁸ TLSY 26.1822. Strikes of thorn-switch (*chi* 笞) was a lighter punishment compared to that with bastonades (*zhang* 杖). Therefore, unauthorised cultivation was a lighter crime than littering on the street. This law was reiterated by a decree issued in the first year of the Guangde 廣德 era (763), demonstrating that, like littering, this was also a persistent conduct (THY, 86.1575). The regulation was supported by scholar officials. When another decree was issued later in the ninth century, Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) especially wrote a prose piece to praise it (*Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 30.1809).

permitted.¹²⁹ However, one element in agricultural cultivations may have exacerbated the problem: the use of manure. Complaints sometimes arose, especially when the religious spaces were concerned. When Emperor Xizong 僖宗 (r. 873–888) issued an edict to change the name of a Daoist temple in Chengdu 成都, where he resided for four years during his escape from Chang'an due to the Huangchao 黃巢 Rebellion (875–884), he also ordered to give the farmers in the area 200 strings of cash¹³⁰ so that the temple could recover the two hectares of farmland around its precincts. The farmers had been planting green onions and garlic on that land, whose odoriferous vapour had been soiling this 'Land of Pure Emptiness' (*qingxu zhi di* 清虛之地).¹³¹ Strong-smelling vegetables like green onions and garlic were already avoided by Daoist practitioners, and offensive odours associated with agricultural cultivation just made things worse.¹³² A similar case happened in the tumultuous tenth century, where the protestor made a clear association between cultivations and sacrilege. When Luoyang was hastily established as capital by the newly founded (and short-lived) Later Tang 後唐 dynasty (923–937) after having been abandoned for a long time, a scholar official complained how vegetable gardens were now built right next to the residences. Thus the foul vapour (*huiqi* 穢氣) rising from these cultivations was defiling both ancestral temples and human residences.¹³³ The practice was so unclean (*shenfei juanjie* 甚非蠲潔) that the scholar official requested it to be dealt with.

¹²⁹ TLSY 26.1822.

¹³⁰ A string of cash (*guan* 貫) equals 1000 coins.

¹³¹ QTW 87.914, 'Edict on changing the name of Yuanzhong guan 元中觀 to Qingyang gong 青羊宮.'

¹³² Aside from protesting against the perceived offensive smells of such cultivations, the Daoist priests of the temple might have also been worried that the spices might have been a temptation to disrupt their self-cultivation.

¹³³ Cf. Cui Hui's 崔慄 (d.u.) memorial to the Shatuo 沙陀 ruler of the Later Tang, Li Cunxu 李存勖 (r. 923–926), 'Qing zheng jiefang shu' 請正街坊疏, in *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (compiled by Wang Qinruo 王欽若 et al., published in the tenth century), 14.152 and 475.5381. It is also included in the *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 839.8833–4.

Manure had become a main source of fertiliser by the Tang times.¹³⁴ In the city, the waste matters were managed to a certain degree.¹³⁵ Nightsoil was transported out of the city by specialised professionals. The history of nightsoil- and manure trade, as Roel Sterckx has observed, goes back at the latest to the Qin dynasty.¹³⁶ The business was certainly flourishing in the Song dynasty, when the workers were called *qing jiao tou* 傾腳頭 (the ‘turners-over of refuse’) and there was reportedly competition for such roles.¹³⁷ We do not know how the profession was named in the Tang, but anecdotal accounts tell us about men who accumulated their riches by overcoming their sensory instincts. A man named Luo Hui 羅會, according to the *Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載 by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (658–730), made his fortune by setting up a faeces-disposal business. He became immensely wealthy, but there was clearly some social stigma against his profession. People in town nicknamed his house the ‘chicken shop’ (*jisi* 雞肆), as they considered Luo’s practice was reminiscent of chicken’s doing: searching for things among excreta.¹³⁸ A scholar invited into his house was surprised by how beautiful his lodging was and how fresh and clean the shirts and clothes inside were.¹³⁹ Despite the high profit the manure trade provided and the significance of agriculture in society, the proximity to human and animal waste was nonetheless considered lowly and repulsive.

In the countryside, the smell of manure would have been pervasive. Human and animal excreta from both cities and villages were transported there to enrich the farmlands. During the late Tang and

¹³⁴ Lewis 2009, 129. The *Sishi zuanyao* expands the knowledge of using manure contained in the Essential Methods of the Common People (*Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要朮 written by Jia Sixie 賈思勰 in the sixth century). The *Sishi zuanyao* indicates the type of dung used for a certain type of crop. It indicates, for example, that chicken dung should be used to fertilise lily plants. The author also comments that he finds this incomprehensible as lily is transformed from earthworm, and yet it likes chicken’s dung (2.63).

¹³⁵ Scholars of olfactory culture in the West have often emphasised the foul odours of cesspools, sewages, excreta on the streets of premodern European cities to contrast them with the deodorised modernity (see, among others, Dobson 2002, Muchembled 2020, 16–33, Cockayne 2021). Chang’an was certainly odorised to modern standards, but the trade of manure as a profitable business probably helped manage the obnoxious smells of human and animal wastes in the city.

¹³⁶ It was already regulated in the Qin dynasty, evinced by the Yuelu Shuyuan Qin document ‘Statutes on finance’ (*jin bu li* 金布律), dating to the late third century BCE (Sterckx, forthcoming paper).

¹³⁷ *Meng Liang lu*, Chapter 13, 13a, cit. in Needham 2000, 90.

¹³⁸ CYQZ, 3.75. The story is also collected in the *Taiping Guangji* under the title ‘Make a Living’ (*zhisheng* 治生). TPGJ, 243.1875.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

into the Northern Song, animal manure became the primary fertilizer in the south.¹⁴⁰ Mark Lewis notes that in late Tang, farmers built brick-lined manure houses near their dwellings for storing this precious commodity.¹⁴¹ A story set in the thirteenth year of the Yuanhe 元和 era (818) tells that a scholar named Cheng Zixu 成自虛 spent a night in a village in the county of Weinan 渭南, not far away from Chang'an. In the morning he walked around in the village and saw, among other things, piles of manure that the whole village stored on the side of the road, guarded by dogs.¹⁴² There is no mention of Cheng being disgusted or at all disturbed by the odour or sight of the muck pile. He simply went on with his businesses. The only time the story mentioned that 'a whiff of foul odour assailed his nose' happened during the night, when all the people (who were transformed from animals) that had been drinking and composing poems with him suddenly disappeared at the sound of bells announcing the daybreak.¹⁴³ What alerted Cheng's nose was something out of the ordinary; something pertaining to the realm of the occult, and that posed potential danger. The odour of manure in a village, conversely, was not anything 'out of place' in his mind. We will return to Cheng's experience again, as the communication with the unseen world is where the sense of smell figured most prominently.

On the more fragrant side, the trade of aromatics was a burgeoning sector in medieval China. Used as medicine, perfume, and spice, aromatics reached the Central Lands from the territories that make up modern-day Iran, India, Southeast Asia and as far as the east African coast, via land and sea along the routes now commonly known as the Silk Roads. Specialised incense bazaars (*xianghang* 香行) existed in major medieval Chinese cities, sometimes referred to as medicine bazaars (*yaohang* 藥行). There was one in Chang'an operating in the Western Market. A famous medicine vendor

¹⁴⁰ Lewis 2009, 129.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 95.

¹⁴² TPGJ, 490.4029 ('Dongyang ye guai lu' 東陽夜怪錄). The story is sometimes attributed to a Tang author named Wang Zhu 王洙, whose voice appears in the story as the narrator. We do not have any information of a Tang author Wang Zhu aside from this story. The story is in addition considered to be very similar to Niu Sengru's 牛僧孺 (779–848) story of Yuan Wuyou 元無有. They could have been from the same period.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

named Song Qing 宋清 was known for his generosity towards the poor.¹⁴⁴ Among the things he was selling, there was one formula called the ‘Three Equilibria Decoction’ (*sanyun jian* 三勻煎), consisting of camphor, musk powder, and high-quality aloeswood that he sometimes gifted to officials.¹⁴⁵ This famous blend was mentioned together with the ‘Four Superbs’ (*sijue* 四絕) as the best blends that the central lands boasted of, though people in Champa (referred to both as *Linyi* 林邑 and *Zhancheng* 占城, in today’s central Vietnam), Kalingga (*Shepo* 闍婆, in modern-day central Java), Jiaozhi 交趾 (in modern-day northern Vietnam) found no worth in these and called them ‘beggars’ aromatics.’¹⁴⁶

The incense market at Yangzhou was also likely of some fame. When the fourth ship of Ennin’s company arrived at Yangzhou after many delays, four men from the boat rushed to the marketplace to buy aromatics and medicines, where they got into trouble with the local administration.¹⁴⁷ They probably needed these both for personal care and for profit. Ennin did not record what types of aromatics were available in Yangzhou, but several decades earlier, another eminent monk, Jianzhen (Ganjin) 鑑真 (688–763), travelled from Yangzhou to Japan, bringing with him a good collection of aromatics and medicines.¹⁴⁸ According to the *Tō Daiwajō tōseiden* 唐大和上東征傳 (composed by Mahito Genkai 真人元開 in 779), Jianzhen’s ship carried 20 potions of musk, over 600 *jin* of aloeswood, onycha (*jia xiang* 甲香), camphor, storax, and frankincense (*xunlu xiang* 熏陸香), as well as other medicines such as peepuls (*bibo* 萆撥¹⁴⁹), asafoetida¹⁵⁰, and muscovado sugar (*shimi*

¹⁴⁴ Song Qing was a man of certain fame at the time. The celebrated mid Tang scholar official Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 wrote a biography for him (*Liu Zongyuan ji jiaozhu* 17.1161–62) praising his generosity while criticising the others at the time. Song’s life is also recorded in *Tang Guoshibu* 唐國史補 (see *TLJCFK*, 233) and the *Qing yi lu*, 128.

¹⁴⁵ *Qing yi lu*, 128.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ennin, op. cit., 32. 20th day of the Second Month, 839. Cit. in Wen 2016, 312.

¹⁴⁸ *Tō Daiwajō tōseiden*, 47–48; 62. Cit. in Wen, ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Also known as the Indian sacred fig trees, peepuls were imported from India. They were planted on temple grounds, where they were revered as the symbol of the Buddha (Schafer 1985, 122–123; Chen 2002, 73–78, 176–178).

¹⁵⁰ A medicinal substance derived from the latex exuded from the root or rhizome of *Ferula*. It was imported both as

石蜜).¹⁵¹ The large quantity and variety of goods suggests that these were likely meant to be gifts rather than for personal use.

Chengdu and Luoyang also had medicine or aromatic markets.¹⁵² An inscription found in a cave at Longmen 龍門 built during the Wu Zetian period (690–705) indicates that the donors were members of a ‘Southern Market Incense Bazaar Guild’ (*nanshi xianghang she sheren* 南市香行社社人). Among the names, there were five with typical Sogdian surnames –An 安, Shi 史, Kang 康, and He 何 – suggesting that both Sogdians and Han Chinese were engaged in the incense trade in Luoyang.¹⁵³ The role of the Sogdians in incense trade is well known. They had been the middlemen in the overland incense trade from the fourth century at the latest. Materials traded mentioned in the Sogdian Ancient Letters uncovered near Dunhuang include peepuls, camphor, and musk.¹⁵⁴ Seventh- and eighth-century manuscripts from Turfan not only attest to their continuous active engagement in incense trades in key Silk Road locations, but also provide further detail about the prices and types of aromatics available in the markets.¹⁵⁵ The price register from the Jiaohe 交河 commandery from the second year of the Tianbao era (743), for instance, gives a list of materials traded in that market.¹⁵⁶

sun-dried cakes of gum and as sliced roots from Jāguda, Persia and other countries of South and Central Asia (Schafer 1985, 188).

¹⁵¹ *Tō Daiwajō tōseiden*, 47–48; 62.

¹⁵² The one in Chengdu is called ‘medicine market’ (*yaoshi* 藥市), but it is noted that both aromatics and medicinal materials were traded there (ZZTJ, 253.8213).

¹⁵³ See Rong ang Zhang 2004, 129, no. 41 for the rubbing of the inscription. For a survey on the cave and the colophon, see Bi 2006, 319.

¹⁵⁴ The ‘Sogdian Ancient Letter II’ is translated by Nicholas Sims-Williams (2001, 267–80). Cf. de la Vaissière 2005 [2002], 43–70, King 2007, 110; Wen 2007, 15–19; Bi 2013, 299–323.

¹⁵⁵ One of the most relevant manuscript is a record of ‘scale fees’ (*chengjiaqian* 稱價錢) from the Gaochang 高昌 Kingdom in Turfan, which gives a rough idea about the prices, types of products and markets in this Silk Road town. The text is registered in *Tulufan chutu wenshu*, 1, 450–53. This list is a widely studied document. For recent studies, see for instance Skaff 1998, 89–96, Zhu 2012, 74–87, Bi 2013, 311–12. Incense trade takes place in various months in a year, compared to the commerce of raw silk which is more seasonal, taking place mainly between the fourth and the fifth month in spring. (Bi 2013, 313, citing Wen 2010, 323, Skaff 2003, 441) This ‘scale fees’ manuscript does not provide the exact types of aromatics, but simply says ‘aromatics’ (*xiang* 香).

¹⁵⁶ Ōtani 3096. I follow the text recorded by Ikeda On (1999, 126–142).

Table 1. Jiaohe Commandery Price Register of the Second Year of the Tianbao Era (Ōtani 3096), after Wang 210–11. Prices are in *wen* 文 per *fen* 分, one *fen* is roughly 0.3 g.

Commodity	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade
Saffron flower	60	50	40
Musk	120	110	100
Clove	35	30	25
Aloeswood	65	60	50
White sandalwood	45	40	35

This register concerns mainly the situation in Gaochang, but the relative prices may still give us an idea about how costly aromatics were compared to other commodities. One *dou* 斗 (roughly 6 litres) of the first-grade white wheat flour, for example, cost 38 *wen* in Gaochang, roughly the same price as 0.3 gram of first-grade clove. Ikeda On's research shows that a sheep cost 400 *wen* in the Tang at around the same time.¹⁵⁷ If we presume that prices of the aromatics did not fluctuate exorbitantly between Gaochang and central China, a sheep cost roughly the same as 1.2 grams of third-grade musk. High in value and light in weight, the aromatics were among the most important commodities traded in the medieval period both through the overland and the Maritime Silk Road, with the latter becoming increasingly more important from the second half of the eighth century.¹⁵⁸

Social Odours

Smell provided a measure for distinguishing social classes, especially in a world in which both adding fragrances and eliminating foul odours from one's body and surrounds were costly practices. The degree to which one could control one's body and environment, therefore, indicated levels of wealth, status, and power. While the imperial court and the social elite could enjoy the flower blossoms in their private gardens, the poorer quarters of the city probably exuded the stench of filth

¹⁵⁷ On 1999, 166–70.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Wang 2003, 107–35.

and dirt. Garden creation and cultivation had become an important occupation.¹⁵⁹ The noble and wealthy also built entire pavilions in aloeswood. Emperor Xuanzong had an Aloeswood Pavilion built in the imperial palace. However, his chancellor Yang Guozhong's 楊國忠 (d. 756) had a more extravagant one called 'Four Aroma Pavilion,' which was built in aloeswood and featured sandalwood balustrade as well as walls made of a blend of mud, musk, and frankincense.¹⁶⁰

Viewing flowers from a scented pavilion seemed an esteemed activity among the elite. Later, burning incense while viewing flowers became a new form of art. In the tenth century, the courtier and painter Han Xizai 韓熙載 (902–970) proposed five incense-flower pairs. He suggested that one ought to burn camphor while appreciating osmanthus (*gui* 桂); aloeswood in conjunction with roseleaf raspberry (*tumi* 荼靡); the 'Four Superbs' for orchids; musk for magnolia; and sandalwood for *campaka* (*zhanbo* 薝蔔) flowers.¹⁶¹ Activities such as these were highly exclusive. All the aromatics indicated – camphor, aloewood, musk, and sandalwood –, as we have seen, were expensive and exotic luxuries.

Commoners could, however, visit the gardens in the parks. The most famous parks in Chang'an were the ones along the Serpentine River and the one to the south of the river, on the Leyou Hill (*leyou yuan* 樂遊原), the city's highest point. Buddhist monasteries and Daoist temples were also known to host the most exquisite flower gardens in the city. Tang poets praised the beauty and scents of lotuses, apricot flowers, and plum blossoms – although the most fragrant and most sought after of all, were peonies. Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842) notes that the whole capital was stirred into motion in the middle of the third month, when everyone mounted horses and wagons to visit places celebrated for the beauty and abundance of peonies.¹⁶² One poet compared the scent of peonies to

¹⁵⁹ Lewis 2009, 113.

¹⁶⁰ *Kaiyuan Tianbao yishi*, 58. Laufer 1985, 165. The material is generally believed to have come from overseas. The *Jiu Tang shu* mentions that Jingzong 敬宗 (r. 824–26) received a large amount of aloeswood, sufficient for building a pavilion, from a Persian merchant named Li Susha 李蘇沙 (17.512).

¹⁶¹ *Qing yi lu*, 58.

¹⁶² QTS, 365.4119. Cf. Lewis 2009, 111.

the fragrance of a young lady walking out of the orchid room¹⁶³; others commented that the wondrous scent of peonies put lotuses to shame.¹⁶⁴ The Great Compassion Monastery (*Da ci'en si* 大慈恩寺) located in the southeast of the city was a celebrated destination for peony viewings.¹⁶⁵ In the Bathhouse Court (*yushi yuan* 浴室院) of the monastery, there were two shrubs of peonies famed for their particular scarlet-red colour. Their blossoms attracted visitors from all walks of life, and even some over-zealous admirers who came at night to steal them.¹⁶⁶

How a person smelled was a clear indication of their social status. Access to hot water or bathing facilities was probably limited for many, which is why after an official Buddhist ceremony, a local governor donated extra cash and asked two monasteries to have water heated, so that the congregations of monks could bathe over the course of three days.¹⁶⁷ As is noted, we know little about commoners' bathing habits, but for the upper layers of the society, having a clean appearance was a prerogative. The classics associated it to an individual's moral purity,¹⁶⁸ but it also denoted one's access to cleaning materials and leisure time for it.

Aside from washing away the filth, the elite were known to possess the habit of perfuming their clothes, probably both for aesthetics and for medical and hygiene purposes. Formulae for aromatising clothes and the bodies can be found in most major medieval Chinese medical treatises.¹⁶⁹ In Tang poems, the most common aromas sensed from a scented robe are orchid, musk,

¹⁶³ Zhou Yao 周繇 (841–912), 'A poem to Duan Chengshi composed while viewing peonies' (*Kan mudan zeng Duan Chengshi* 看牡丹贈段成式), QTS, 635.7293.

¹⁶⁴ Wang Jian 王建, 'Appreciating peonies' (*Shang mudan* 賞牡丹), QTS, 299.3400–01.

¹⁶⁵ *Nanbu xinshu*, 49, *Youyang zazhu*, 6.1956. See TLJCFK 3.68 for further information on the Ci'en Monastery.

¹⁶⁶ *Qing yi lu*, 628.

¹⁶⁷ Ennin, 1.81–82, 'Eighth Day of the Twelfth Month, 838.' See Heirman and Torck 2012, 27–66 for bathing rules and facilities in the monastic context.

¹⁶⁸ Schafer 1956, 59; Needham and Sivin, 1970, 365–66, Medicine, 84. Ann Heirman and Mathieu Torck have pointed out that a similar idea dominated the Chinese Buddhist community (28; 47–49). We will look at bathing and the idea of physio-moral purity more closely in Chapter 2.

¹⁶⁹ All the major surviving medical treatises from the medieval period include recipes for clothes aromatising, including Ge Hong's 葛洪 (283–343) *Zhouhou beiji fang* 肘後備急方, Sun Simiao's *Beiji qianjin yaofang* 備急千金要方 and *Qianjin yifang* 千金翼方, as well as the official medical book completed under the direction of Wang Tao, the *Waitai biyao*. While Sun Simiao listed these under the prescriptions for women, the *Waitai biyao* no longer considered them gender specific. Aside from formulae for aromatising, there are also those for washing face and hair as well as numerous

and camphor, and in time they became increasingly associated with women. However, these could also be generic and representative names for more diverse species of plant matter and spices. Sun Simiao, a famed physician who lived in the sixth and seventh centuries, noted that ‘facial creams and hand lotions, scents for clothing, and soap-beans for washing and bathing, are things that people of the official class, the highly placed and the powerful, all want.’¹⁷⁰ Sun endeavoured to make the formulae of these available to all – which, according to him, was in line with the sages’ intentions. However, the expensive ingredients included in most formulae, such as aloeswood, musk, and cloves, meant that they were not always affordable to all.

There are only occasional references to those who were on the other end of the olfactory scale. The beggars were sometimes singled out for being sordid and malodorous.¹⁷¹ This is purportedly not only because of their lack of access to hygiene facilities, but also because most of the times they did not have a permanent place to stay. At night, they were obliged to sleep on ‘soiled ground and in sordid dens,’ while during the day, they ‘roamed among the dusty shops.’¹⁷² People at the time were very aware of this distinction marked by smell, to the point that modifying the body odour was a key step in a heist that a group of mendicants plotted in order to swindle bulks of fine silk out of a large monastery in the capital. This happened during the reign of Emperor Yizong 懿宗 (r. 859–873), who was known sometimes to travel incognito in the capital during the evenings with his entourage. The gang carefully disguised one of their members as the emperor: they covered him with a piece of clothing that resembled what the emperor wore in his outings and perfumed it profusely with camphor and many other aromatics. Their deception worked and the silk was successfully stolen.¹⁷³

for the preparation of bathing detergents known as ‘soap-beans’ (*zaodou* 澡豆). Needham indicated that these detergents, to which various drugs and perfumes were often added, were prepared from *Gleditsia* and other vegetable products (Needham, *Medicine*, 89). There were also many well-known Buddhist formulae for the preparation of perfumed bathing water. Numerous Buddhist and non-Buddhist perfuming formulae have been found on Dunhuang manuscripts (e.g., S.4329, P.2565, P.3230, S.6107), attesting to the diffusion of such information and practice in the medieval world. Cf. Liao 2005, 207–10.

¹⁷⁰ *Qianjin yifang*, juan 5. Trans. of Needham, 89.

¹⁷¹ See YZZZ, 3.1599 for the description of a beggar living in the Ward of Compassion Field (*beitian fang* 悲田坊).

¹⁷² Bai Xingjian 白行簡, ‘Tale of Li Wa’ (*Li Wa zhuan* 李娃傳), TPGJ, 484.3989.

¹⁷³ TPGJ, 238.1835.

This example, again, shows that in the Tang times, the olfactory was a marker of social status as much as the visual.

The stench of the poor – though not much talked about in the written texts – was something that the government tried to tame. In the 22th year of the Kaiyuan 開元 era (734), Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756) ordered that all the beggars of the capital be moved to the ‘Sickers Ward’ (*bingfang* 病坊).¹⁷⁴ There the beggars were housed, and food was given to them. This way, the streets would remain clean and orderly. The ‘Sickers Ward’ started as a Buddhist institution and it became an established welfare programme during Wu Zetian’s reign. Several ministers requested the closure of the institution, either because of its connection to Buddhism or perhaps it was deemed too costly to maintain.¹⁷⁵ Under Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 814–846), who had little sympathy towards Buddhism, the institution was kept thanks to the request of Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–849). But the state took direct charge and changed its name to ‘Caring Ward’ (*Yangbing fang* 養病坊) in order to distance it from the Buddhist religion.¹⁷⁶ Later in the ninth century, the ‘Sickers Ward’ also became a place where the noble scions of Chang’an, who boasted to be members of the Army of Inspired Strategy (*shence jun* 神策軍), preyed upon the poor, and manipulated them into going to battle in their place.¹⁷⁷

Apart from beggars, lepers were also mentioned as being housed in this ward. Leprosy was referred to several ways in premodern Chinese texts: *li* 癘, *lai* 癩, ‘evil disease’ (*aji* 惡疾), ‘plague disease’ (*liji* 癘疾), and ‘great madness/wind’ (*dafeng* 大瘋/風).¹⁷⁸ Snakes in some stories were

¹⁷⁴ THY, 49.862–63.

¹⁷⁵ The celebrated chief minister Song Jing 宋璟 (663–737), for instance, asked to abolish the institutions in 717, then called ‘Halls of the Compassion Field’ (*Beitian yuan* 悲田院). However, his proposal was not accepted by Xuanzong. See Needham 54–55; Ge 1992, 87–91; Du 2001, 121–27; Qi 2009, 95–103 for further information on the history of the *bingfang*.

¹⁷⁶ THY, 49.863, see also Li Deyu’s memorial in QTW, 704.7224.

¹⁷⁷ ZZTJ, 254.8237–38.

¹⁷⁸ Needham mentions the first three in his work on medicine, 2000, 184–85.

mentioned as cures for leprosy.¹⁷⁹ Buddhist monks were mentioned in various cases to take care of patients afflicted by leprosy. The Indian monk Narendrayaśas (Ch. 那連提黎耶舍, 517–589), one of the ‘Three Great Masters of the Kaihuang 開皇 Era,’ for instance, established a leprosarium for men and women at the Sui capital and dedicated himself to providing for them.¹⁸⁰ During the Tang, these institutions continued and were established in different cities. Another eminent monk, Zhiyan 智嚴, acquired much fame by preaching and nursing in a leper institution (*lisuo* 癘所) in the Stone City (Shitoucheng 石頭城, in modern-day Nanjing).¹⁸¹ It is not clear when the institutional isolation of lepers started or how it was executed. In Tang narratives, lepers sometimes retreated to the mountains, either out of their own choice, or because their families could not bear living with them due to their nauseating appearances and smells.¹⁸²

Social distinction was also expressed by the lowered threshold of tolerance for unpleasant odours and updated hygiene knowledge. The social elite expressed disgust against offensive odours more easily and resorted to remedies to block them off. A famous story recounts that when the Jin 晉 dynasty (266–420) general Wang Dun 王敦 (266–324) first became the imperial son-in-law, he made a fool of himself through not being aware of the latest hygiene technologies. In the toilet, he mistook the dried dates intended for blocking one’s nostrils against the stench as food and ate them all. Returning to the hall, he drank the soup with soap-beans intended for washing hands.¹⁸³ Another episode featuring Wang Dun as protagonist stated that a contemporary official of his time, Shi Chong 石崇 (249–300), who was known for his luxurious lifestyle, provided onycha (a type of mollusc

¹⁷⁹ The belief that snake wine could cure leprosy was widespread. See, for instance, TPGJ, 372.2957, 458.3744. One story mentions the use of frankincense wine as an anaesthetic and brain surgery as part of the cure. TPGJ, 219.1679.

¹⁸⁰ XGSZ, 21.792–94. Cf. Needham 2000, 5.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² CYQZ, 1.2, ‘Lu Yuanqing’ 盧元欽, TPGJ, 29.190–91, ‘Li Weigong’ 李衛公 (from *Yuanxian ji* 原仙記). That contracting leprosy causes saddle-nose deformity and foul bodily odour was observed in some of these stories. Eating snake meat was considered a miraculous remedy for curing leprosy.

¹⁸³ *Shishuo xinyu*, 34.1066. Cit. in Needham 2001, 87–90; Heirman and Torck 2012, 51. As Needham has indicated, the soap bean formulae included in the *Waitai biyao* (juan 32) indicate either the use of *zaojia* 皂莢 (*Gleditsia*), *baizhu* 白朮 (*Atractylis sinensis* or *Aristolochia recurvilabra*) or soybean powder 豆末 (*Glycine soja*) as source for saponin. Animal fat such as pig brain was also indicated.

whose shell was used for perfume) powder and aloeswood water in the toilet. In addition, there were tens of lavishly dressed maids waiting outside the toilet to give the guests new clothes before they went back to the party.¹⁸⁴ Such lavish extravaganza was exceptional, but soap beans became widely used in the Tang. Sun Simiao's statement already demonstrated that the elite all wanted this type of detergent. Together with facial creams, lip balms, and medicinal aromatics, soap beans were among the gifts that the emperor granted to his ministers on the Winter Solstice Day (*lari* 臘日).¹⁸⁵

The Scent of Career

In the bureaucratic world, the way one smelt was an indication of one's rank, as scent figured prominently in state ceremonies in the Tang times. Objects of the olfactory culture then became metonyms for status and position in the bureaucratic jargon.

Cloves¹⁸⁶ were a spice that had a symbolic meaning for scholar officials. From the Han times, officials were required to hold a piece of clove in their mouths while reporting to the emperor.¹⁸⁷ Subsequently, these aromatics became a synonym for court service. Du Fu complained that he did not know that the scented service (*hanxiang* 含香) was so lowly.¹⁸⁸ When Liu Yuxi was banished to Langzhou 朗州 (in modern-day Hunan), he wrote to a colleague recalling that yesterday they were both 'holding the cloves in mouth,' but today they were banished to this 'land of canine teeth.'¹⁸⁹ Although clove as a breath freshener was known to be used among the common people, the significance it held in court etiquette meant it continued to bear relevance for those in official careers.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁴ *Shishuo xinyu* 30.1029.

¹⁸⁵ See, for instance, Bai Juyi's memorial for thanking imperial gifts (QTW, 668.6793–94).

¹⁸⁶ Clove was referred to with various names in premodern China. It was most commonly called 'chicken-tongue aromatic' (*jishe xiang* 雞舌香) or simply 'chicken-tongue' (*jishe* 雞舌). In Southern Song, Zhao Rugua 趙汝适 (1170–1231) mentioned that it was called the 'ding aromatic' (*dingxiang* 丁香) because of its similarity to the character ding 丁. The aromatic was mentioned to come from Southeast Asia and the Arab world.

¹⁸⁷ *Han guan yi*, 143.

¹⁸⁸ QTS, 229.2496.

¹⁸⁹ QTS, 359.4050. The 'land of canine teeth' refers to a place with complicated topography that makes travel difficult.

¹⁹⁰ A story from the *Youming lu* 幽明錄 suggests that clove was a familiar item for common folks as well. See the story of Zhong Dao 鐘道, collected in TPGJ, 469.3862–63.

The imperial palace was a scented place, thus those who had access to it sometimes hinted at their status by showing off the lingering fragrance that their clothes carry from a palace visit. Placed centrally in front of the Hanyuan 含元 Hall, the imperial incense brazier, together with the swirling smoke that rose from its heart, was a symbol longed and revered by the scholars, who could only admire them outside the palace walls until they gained the privilege to report directly to the emperor.¹⁹¹

Those who had the privilege to meet the emperor often wrote poems that evoked the fragrant smoke wafting from the imperial censer. Jia Zhi 賈至 (718-772), serving as a Drafter in the Secretariat (*zhongshu sheren* 中書舍人) at the time, attended the dawn imperial levee in the newly restored court and composed a poem to share with his friends:

The sounds of waist-strung swords follow steps on the pavements of jade,

Bodies in caps and gowns tease wisps of incense from imperial braziers.

劍佩聲隨玉墀步，衣冠身惹御爐香。¹⁹²

Smell, sound, and vision were all proof for the visit to the imperial palace.

During the Tang, the incense table (*xiang'an* 香案) became an established item present at the imperial levees. Tang regulations required that, at the imperial levee, when the imperial screen (*fuyi* 黼扆) and ceremonial mats (*niexi* 躡席) had been laid out in the hall, an incense burner and a censuring table were to be placed before the emperor. The state councillors would then stand before the table and proceed to conduct state affairs.¹⁹³ The censuring table demarcated the boundary between the sovereign and the subject, reminding that the emperor had the Mandate of the Heaven; it marked at

¹⁹¹ One poem records, for instance: 'Advising and elucidating every morning deep in the forbidden palace, /beyond the smoke of the censer are ministers and dignitaries' 啓沃朝朝深禁裏，香爐煙外是公卿。QTS, 333.3729.

¹⁹² QTS, 235.2596. Du Fu then wrote a companion piece remembering the fragrant smoke that Jia brought to the circle of friends after the levee: 'Dawn court done, the scented smoke you carry filling your sleeves, /The poem finished, pearls and jade are right on your flourished brush' (朝罷香煙攜滿袖，詩成珠玉在揮毫, QTS, 225.2410). Cf. Owen 2016, 362–3.

¹⁹³ XTS, 23.488–9; ZZTJ, 220.7036. Schafer suggested that the censuring table was presented as the symbol of the presence of the divine and kingly grace (Schafer 1985, 156).

the same time the bureaucratic hierarchy; the officials would have distanced themselves from the censor according to their ranks. The salutation by the censoring table was also part of the protocol of the examination ceremony. When the candidates for the title of ‘Presented Scholar’ (*jinshi* 進士) were to be examined, chief examiner and candidates alike would salute each other at the censoring table at the entrance of the examination hall.¹⁹⁴ The word ‘censoring table’ was subsequently used as a metonym for the imperial levee. When the famed poet Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831) was demoted from Left Reminder (*zuo shiyi* 左拾遺¹⁹⁵) to Commandant of the Henan 河南 County in the fifth year of the Yuanhe 元和 era (810), he lamented that ‘In the morning, I was in the company of those facing the censoring table, /In the evening, I am a commandant of wind and dust.’¹⁹⁶ The censoring table embodied both the position where he once stood in and the political ambition he once held.

Scented Moments

Evolving material culture and an increasing influence of Buddhism meant that incense became more and more important in various arenas. Aromatics were not only pivotal to Buddhist and Daoist rituals, where incense burning and offerings are known to occupy a central place, but they also played an important role in reshaping popular festivities and state rituals. Festivals that did not traditionally require the use of incense now became scented moments. On the third day of the third month, for instance, noble men and women of the capital would drive up to the Leyou Park to celebrate the Shangsi 上巳 Festival, an occasion for dispelling the evil influences. The gazetteer of Chang’an describes that strong fragrance filled the road as their carriages passed by.¹⁹⁷ Traditionally, the festival consisted of meeting by the water, drinking, and holding an orchid in hand.¹⁹⁸ A more

¹⁹⁴ ZZTJ, 252.8171. Hu Sanxing’s comment. Ouyang Xiu also describes the tradition of ‘burning incense to salute the Presented Scholars’ (焚香禮進士) in one of his poems.

¹⁹⁵ A position of the eighth rank in the Chancellery. See XTS, 47.1207; Hucker 1985, 329.

¹⁹⁶ QTS, 400.4484.

¹⁹⁷ Song Minqiu 宋敏求 (1019–1079), *Chang’an zhi* 長安志 (completed in 1076). Research and reconstruction by Seo 1996, Xiong 2000, and Jian 2012, 75–112 have helped visualise historical Chang’an. The Shangsi Festival took place on the third day of the third month. Its popularity waned after end of the Tang and became preserved mainly in the Southwest China (Jia 2015, 59–63).

¹⁹⁸ *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (compiled by Xu Jian 徐堅 et al. in 728), 4.68–73.

intense scent of incense replaced the single orchid. On the Qixi festival in the seventh night of the seventh month, when the goddess Weaver (*Zhinü* 織女, symbolising Vega) and the Cowherd (*Niulang* 牛郎, symbolising Altair) would meet once in a year, likewise, the incense banquet (*xiangyan* 香筵) was added to the offerings of delicacies for a more efficacious prayer to these two astral deities.¹⁹⁹

The procession with incense (*xingxiang* 行香) on the emperor's deceased parents' death anniversary called 'national memorial day' (*guoji* 國忌) was a state ritual that emerged during the Sui-Tang period, where the scent of plant-based aromatics became the key agency to the success of the ceremony.²⁰⁰ The Japanese Buddhist monk, Ennin, who travelled to the Tang for Buddhist teachings in the ninth century, recorded several incense processions that he witnessed in the capital and other cities. He recorded the first one in which he partook in Yangzhou 揚州 in significant detail.

This incense procession set up to commemorate Emperor Jingzong 敬宗 (824–826), who was assassinated twelve years earlier on this day,²⁰¹ was a government initiative. The local government donated 50 strings of cash to the monastery to set up feasts for 500 monks. Starting early in the morning, monastic congregations gathered in the Kaiyuan monastery. Then the Minister of State and the General entered the monastery guarded by soldiers and followed by lower-rank officials.²⁰² After ritual purification including changing slippers and washing hands, the two officials walked to the Lecture Hall, where they worshipped the Buddha. Upon hearing

¹⁹⁹ Du Shenyan 杜審言, *qixi* 七夕 (QTS, 62.736). TPGJ, 387.3088. The *Chuxue ji* records various customs related to the celebration of this festival (4.76–79).

²⁰⁰ The most important studies on this subject include Naba Toshisada 1974, 33–48, in which the author divides processions with incense in two types, one carried out by the imperial family, and the other by local officials under state sanction. He further points out that this represents a reinforcement of the central power. Other significant studies on incense procession include Wu 2002, 232–36 and Yan 2004, 149–63 for a discussion on the negotiation between state rituals and the Buddhist influence based on Wenzong's abolishment of the incense procession. Forte (1988) and McMullen (1988) offer significant insights on the relationship between state ritual and Buddhō-Daoism in the Tang dynasty. See also Lei 2009, 21–22, Nie 2019, 543–59.

²⁰¹ Reischauer 1955, 61, fn 265.

²⁰² The Minister of State and the General here refer to Li Deyu 李德裕 and Yang Qinyi 楊欽義 respectively, they represent respectively the highest-level local official and the emperor himself.

the chanting of ‘All be worshipful! Reverence to the Three Eternal Treasures,’ the procession began. Preceded by monks holding artificial lotus flowers and green banners, the two officials held censers²⁰³ in their hands and walked along the gallery under the eaves – one towards east, the other towards west – followed by lower-ranking officials holding incense cups.²⁰⁴ The ceremony then concluded with the groups returning to where they started, all along accompanied by the scent of incense and the sound of chanting.

The question of when the incense procession practice began was already debated in the Song dynasty.²⁰⁵ Japanese scholar Naba Toshisada believes that, as a state ritual, it started in the early Tang and became spread to local governments during Xuanzong’s reign.²⁰⁶ The commemoration of the emperor’s deceased parents did not exist before the time of Emperor Wen 文 (r. 581–604) of the Sui dynasty. The ceremony was carried out regularly throughout the Tang, even during Wuzong’s suppression of Buddhism when it was moved to Daoist temples. Nevertheless, because of its close connection to Buddhism, it was not included in the ritual compendium compiled under the order of Xuanzong, the *Great Tang Kaiyuan Ritual Compendium* (*Da Tang Kaiyuan li* 大唐開元禮)²⁰⁷ and subject to a request for abolishment.²⁰⁸ This demonstrates the contradictory attitudes the court and the literati class held towards unorthodox religious practices which nonetheless appealed as efficacious rituals.

The emergence of incense procession also suggested that a changing smellculture did not only affect the elite’s clothes or individual religious expressions, but it also affected what the gods and ancestors were thought to appreciate. For the traditional Chinese sacrifice, as is well known, animal offerings were an essential component.²⁰⁹ Kleeman dubbed the Chinese cultural sphere as the sphere

²⁰³ Here the annotators note that the censer mentioned is likely a long-handled censers, as frequently seen in Dunhuang murals and paintings.

²⁰⁴ Ennin, *juan* 1, 81–82, ‘Eighth Day of the Twelfth Month, 838.’

²⁰⁵ See Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727–1814), *Gaiyu congkao* 陔餘叢考, 26.697–99.

²⁰⁶ Naba 1974, 33–48.

²⁰⁷ Nie 2015, 131–49.

²⁰⁸ THY, 23.448–51; QTW, 718.7388–89.

²⁰⁹ See, for instance, Lewis 1990; Kleeman 1994, 185–211; Sterckx 2011; Lei 2009, 201–4.

of ‘blood sacrifice.’²¹⁰ The Tang ritual programme, as recorded in Du You’s 杜佑 (735–812) *Comprehensive Compendium* (*Tongdian* 通典), made it clear that this continued to be considered an orthopraxy. Sacrificial animals and blood were prescribed for all the major rituals from the suburban rites (*jiaosi* 郊祀) to the honouring of ancestral temple (*zongmiao* 宗廟).²¹¹ Passages from canonical texts, such as the idea that ‘the most reverent force’ appreciates the offerings because of the odour of their *qi* from the *Liji*, continued to be quoted in Tang ritual texts.²¹² It was therefore recognised that scent was an efficacious conduit for communicating with the world of gods and ancestors. However, this scent that gods enjoyed was thought to be delivered from the blood of the victuals instead of aromatics. Fragrant plants or firewood were burnt to create smoke, in order to invite the gods (*jiangshen* 降神), but the main proponent of the ritual remained the sacrificial animals.²¹³

With the increasing influence of Buddhism and Daoism, including among the ruling class, however, the killing of animal became a major moral issue. There had been a clear tension between the traditional sacrificial mode and these new religious ideals which called for replacing animals with vegetarian substances both at the state and local levels. Incense was usually proposed as a valid substitute.²¹⁴ There had been several decrees to replace the traditional sacrificial animals with incense offerings, both for state and local rituals. In the nineteenth year of the Kaiyuan era (731), an edict was issued demanding that prefectures and counties stop using sacrificial animals in the She 社 rites (offerings to the god of soil) and worship of Confucius (*shidian* 釋奠).²¹⁵ However, this decree

²¹⁰ Kleeman 1994.

²¹¹ *Tongdian*, juan 42–46.

²¹² *Liji jijie*, 25.671.

²¹³ *Tongdian*, juan 42–46.

²¹⁴ Scholars have discussed Buddhist and Daoist influence on Tang state ritual and popular religions, but this specific tension between the traditional blood sacrifice and vegetarian offerings has received so far little attention. Lei Wen pointed this out in the introduction of his book on Tang rituals, but he did not expand the discussion on the topic. Cf. Lei 2009, 35.

²¹⁵ THY, 22.424; also in *Wenxian tongkao*, 82.2516–26.

must have been met with some resistance. Three years later, Emperor Xuanzong issued another edict, prescribing that

Praying for blessings in spring and autumn is a common rite in the prefectures and counties. If sacrificial animals were not used, how could one talk about blood sacrifice? Smells are the most important component of sacrifices. If [blood was not offered], what can the gods appreciate? From now on, when *She* rituals are carried out in the prefectures and counties, it is permitted that sacrificial animals are used and that the regular patterns should be followed.

春秋祈報，郡縣常禮。比不用牲，豈云血祭？陰祀貴臭，神何以歆？自今以後州縣祭祀，特以牲牢，宜依常式。²¹⁶

These measures, as Kleeman has insightfully pointed out, could also be regarded as a way for the state to exert control over the local, claiming the ‘blood sacrifice’ as a prerogative of the imperial court.²¹⁷ Nonetheless, the influence from Buddhism and Daoism, particularly the latter, is also evident. Buddhist and Daoist priests put forward various requests demanding the abolishment of blood sacrifice. In response to one such request, Xuanzong issued a veto on hunting and fishing on Mount Mao 茅山, which he referred to as ‘the origin of the Teaching and the abode of immortals.’ He ordered that gathering, hunting, and fishing in the area should be banned; that commoners who had a penchant for meat should be kept away; and that when need arose to pray to Heaven, incense and delicacies should be offered in the place of sacrificial animals.²¹⁸ In another decree issued in the eighth year of the Tianbao era (749), Xuanzong again ordered the replacement of three offerings (*sanxian* 三獻²¹⁹) with vegetarian delicacies and the burning of three times incense (*san fenxiang* 三焚香) during the triannual and quinquennial sacrifices in the ancestral temple (*di* 禘 and *xia* 祫).²²⁰ This tension between animal sacrifice and incense offering went on. In the Yuanhe era, again, the Inner Palace Department (*dianzhong sheng* 殿中省) reported on the extreme mephitis that fish and

²¹⁶ QTW, 30.342

²¹⁷ Kleeman 1994, 204.

²¹⁸ ‘自今已後，茅山中令斷採捕及漁獵。四遠百姓有喫葷血者，不須令人。如有事式申祈禱，當以香藥珍羞，亦不得以牲牢等物，’ QTW, 36.399.

²¹⁹ In the sacrifice to the distant ancestors, the ‘three offerings’ refers to the offering of blood, raw meat, and boiled meat.

²²⁰ JTS, 26.1000; see also THY, 13,306 and *Tongdian*, 50, 1400.

meat offerings buried in the Imperial Mausoleum exuded and recommended these be replaced with incense. The court quickly approved.²²¹

On the other hand, however, the ‘blood sacrifice’ tradition persisted. Its strong standing can be seen in the ways in which a foreign religion such Zoroastrianism adapted its practices in Tang China.²²² The *Chaoye qianzai* records that Hu Zoroastrians (probably Sogdians) in the capital were boiling pork and mutton, drinking and dancing to celebrate their annual festivity.²²³ Another anecdote with the Turko-Sogdian general An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757) as protagonist recounts similar celebrations in the Sogdian merchant community, where they burnt incense and offered animals to worship their god (*tian* 天).²²⁴ The history of animal sacrifices in Zoroastrian rituals in its native Persia is complex, but the use of pork was generally banned.²²⁵ Mary Boyce notes that the more common rite consisted of the creation of sacred fire, with the addition of camphor, sandalwood, aloewood, and musk.²²⁶ Sacrificial offerings in these two cases are probably cases of adaptation of the Sogdian Zoroastrians to a practice that was still considered orthodox in the Tang.²²⁷ Zhang Xiaogui argues that it was precisely the adherence to blood sacrifice that facilitated the legitimisation of Zoroastrianism during the Song.²²⁸

This contention between blood sacrifice and incense burning seems to carry on in later periods. The legitimacy of incense offerings continued to be controversial in the minds of scholar officials, as demonstrated by the Yuan 元 (1271–1368) historian Hu Sanxing’s 胡三省 (1230–1302) commentaries to a late Tang episode.²²⁹ Yet both practices continued and evolved. As Kleeman has observed, state blood sacrifices continued apace, interrupted only briefly by isolated examples of

²²¹ THY, 21.408.

²²² See Rong 2014, 247–68; Lin 2005, 256–83 for the introduction of Zoroastrianism in China and its status in the Tang.

²²³ CYQZ, 3.64–5.

²²⁴ *An Lushan shiji* 安祿山事跡 by Yao Runeng 姚汝能 (d.u.), 12. Rong Xinjiang believes that they must be worshipping the Zoroastrian deities (2011, 235).

²²⁵ De Jong 2012, Zhang 2012, 358–62.

²²⁶ Boyce 1984, 64, 67. Camphor, musk, and ambergris were also interred with the body of deceased Persian aristocrats to prevent it from rotting. *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. II, Fasc.8, 1987, 851–53. Cf. Bi 2003, 306.

²²⁷ Zhang 2012, 357–74.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 372.

²²⁹ ZZTJ, 282.9214. Citing Cheng Dachang’s 程大昌 (1123–1195) *Yanfan lu* 演繁露.

devotion to Daoism or Buddhism. Sacrifice remained the most important element of the state religious programme up until 1911.²³⁰ At the local level, strife between animal offerings and the moral issues of sacrifice continued till this day in popular religions in Taiwan.²³¹ What smells the gods appreciate continue to be a place of contention. What is interesting is that scent, in both cases, is regarded as an efficacious conduit for communicating with the unseen realms of the ancestors and the divine.

Conclusions

Chang'an in the eighth and ninth centuries encapsulated a world rich in odours, ranging from the stench of sewers to the perfumes wafting from passing carriages, from the scent of incense used in a Buddhist ritual to the foul odours of the sick and poor inhabiting the slums of the capital. It was a city with spaces demarcated along differing socio-cultural lines, with each emanating its distinctive smells. However, the smells that literati and common people noticed and commented on were different from what stands out to us as modern observers. Tang literati rarely lamented the effluvium of pollution or excreta (perhaps not because they did not care, but they considered it too indecorous to comment on) unless the ancestral temples were involved. They also seldom mentioned the stench of the working people, the beggars, or the leper colonies – all smells that would likely disturb a modern visitor. If anything, the opposite for them was true: to them, power and wealth had the strongest smell. Du Fu, one of the first medieval literati to weave smells into his depictions of social plights, denounced the reek of moral corruption as well the 'stench of blood' and of 'piled corpses' in midst of the turmoil and conflicts of the An Lushan Rebellion.²³² The literati and common people became most sensitive towards the sensory shock when there was a change to their natural or social environments: when they were faced with foreign customs, for example; when they travelled or were exiled to remote places; or when they experienced changing cultural and political milieux. Smells mattered most when they alerted individuals to shifting socio-cultural boundaries and when they were

²³⁰ Kleeman 1994, 187–88.

²³¹ Chang 2008, 269–286. I am grateful to Adam Chau for drawing my attention to this source and to the contemporary contentions between animal sacrifice and Buddhist communities.

²³² QTS, 21.2284, 'Parted at an Old Age' (*Chuilao bie* 垂老別), QTS, 216.2268, 'Lament for the Prince' (*Ai Wangsun* 哀王孫).

associated with the unseen realms of gods, ancestors, and spirits. In the following chapters, we will discuss which odours stood out for the medieval Chinese nose and what the olfactory perceptions revealed about their views on the surrounding world.

Chapter 2. Smell and Morality

I made a coat of lotus and water-chestnut leaves,
And gathered lotus petals to make myself a skirt.
I will no longer care that no one understands me,
As long as I can keep the sweet fragrance of my mind.

Qu Yuan, 'Encountering Sorrow,' vv. 113–116²³³

The Fragrance of Virtue

Hills are not famous for height alone: 'tis the Genius Loci that invests them with their charm.
Lakes are not famous for mere depth: 'tis the residing Dragon that imparts to them a spell not
their own. And so, too, my hut may be mean, but the fragrance of Virtue is diffused around.

山不在高，有仙則靈。水不在深，有龍則名。斯是陋室，惟吾德馨。²³⁴

Thus opens one of the most famous prose essays of the Tang dynasty, the 'Inscription on My Humble Home' (*Loushi ming* 陋室銘), traditionally attributed to the mid-Tang poet Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842).²³⁵ Following these lines, the poet goes on to contrast the simple living conditions of the hut with his elegant preoccupations: playing zither and flute, reading the *Diamond Sutra*, and conversing with learned men. In the end, he quotes Confucius' reply to a concerned disciple when he

²³³ 製芰荷以為衣兮，集芙蓉以為裳。不吾知其亦已兮，苟余情其信芳。Qu Yuan, 'On Encountering Trouble' (*Li sao* 離騷). Trans. in Hawkes 1985, 71.

²³⁴ QTW, 680.6145. Trans. by Herbert Giles in Minford and Lau 2000, 1009.

²³⁵ The authorship of the inscription has been a subject of debate for decades. In general the opinions are either it was authentically Liu Yuxi's work or it was written by a less well-known poet Cui Mian 崔沔 (673–739). Cf. Sun 2017, 132–141.

was about to go to the lands of the nine ‘barbarian’ tribes (*jiu Yi* 九夷): ‘What foulness can there be where virtue is?’²³⁶

With some hidden tones of self-consolation, the author echoes the sage and lodes the power of virtue. However, whereas Confucius was to transform the people on the lands of the nine foreign tribes, the Tang poet’s virtue was more enclosed in itself. It was meant to transform the aura of the space by adorning it with the fragrance of virtue, by making it pleasant so as to attract like-minded scholars. But can virtue – an abstract moral quality – have a scent? And if it does, what is the scent of virtue?

The ‘scent of virtue,’ according to Haun Saussy, is one of the untranslatable phrases representing a particular Chinese aesthetics that would provoke a ‘shock of mild surprise’ in the English language.²³⁷ He was mainly referring to Pauline Yu’s analysis of the imagery of aromatic plants in Qu Yuan’s 屈原 (fl. ca. 4th century BCE) *Songs from the South* (*Chuci* 楚辭).²³⁸ This chapter argues that the association between virtue and fragrance was not only an aesthetic tradition, but also a sort of ‘metaphor that medieval Chinese people lived by.’²³⁹ The moral association with smells came both from the literary tradition and early religious thought, which became an important part of medieval olfactory culture. The olfactory perceptions were mediated by moral judgment and the virtues of people, words, things were also perceived with olfactory features. This interplay had an impact on the ways in which medieval Chinese articulated their judgments, but also the ways in which they engaged in the olfactory culture in the narrow sense – the culture of aromatics. Although modern scholarship tends to celebrate the passion that medieval aristocrats and literati had for aromatics, the sentiment of literati was conflicted, and the attitudes also shifted over time. Equally complex were the attitudes toward the scent of the body as, at the same time, a biological, social, and moral existence.

²³⁶ QTW, 680.6145. Trans. by Herbert Giles in Minford and Lau 2000, 1009.

²³⁷ Saussy 1993, 13–17. Indeed, when I read ‘My Humble Home’ with Cambridge undergraduate students three years ago, most students remained perplexed about the idea of virtue having a fragrance, as it simply did not make any sense to them.

²³⁸ See Hawkes 1993, 48–55 for a textual history of the *Chuci*. I follow here Hawkes’ translation for the anthology’s title.

²³⁹ Lakoff and Johnson 2003.

Orchids and Garum

Under the brushes of Chinese literati, most sensations – sight, sound, smell, or taste – are associated with moral significance.²⁴⁰ The *Lunheng*, for instance, lists the loss of the sense of smell among the impairments that make a person ‘not completely human’ (不成人).²⁴¹ Impairments of sensory organs were meant to indicate a defect that the author deemed more significant: ignorance. Those who do not read extensively, learn about the past and the present, distinguish things and kinds, or tell the right from wrong, for the author, are comparable to those have blind eyes, deaf ears, and a stuffed nose.²⁴² To sense and to know, therefore, were closely related.

Among the senses, smell occupies a place of its own in the conceptions of moral knowledge: virtue and vice were both associated with scents. Even today, expressions such as *liufang baishi* 流芳百世 (a fragrance that lingers for a hundred generations) and *yichou wannian* 遺臭萬年 (a stench that persists for ten thousand years) are familiar idioms used to talk about lasting good or bad reputations. How did virtue or vice come to have olfactory attributes?

The southern anthology greatly contributed to the establishment of an association between fragrance and moral loftiness in early and medieval Chinese literary tradition. Qu Yuan put this association plainly in his ‘On Encountering Trouble’ (*Lisao* 離騷). After recalling his divine ancestry, he states:

Having from birth this inward beauty,
I added to it fair outward adornment:

紛吾既有此內美兮，又從之已修能。(vv. 9–10)²⁴³

And then he follows it with the first of his many examples:

I dressed in selinea and shady angelica,
and twined autumn orchids to make a garland.

²⁴⁰ The association is particularly prominent in early Chinese philosophical texts. For relevant studies on senses and morality in early China, see Sterckx 2012. See also Avital Rom’s dissertation of 2019 for the relation between music and virtue, Geaney 2002, *passim*, for connections between senses, knowledge, and moral transformation.

²⁴¹ *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 13.591.

²⁴² 人不博覽者，不聞古今，不見事類，不知然否，猶目盲、耳聾、鼻癰者也。Ibid.

²⁴³ The translations of the *Li sao* follow those by David Hawkes, 1985.

扈江離與闕芷兮，紉秋蘭以為佩。(vv. 11–12)

As Pauline Yu has observed, the poet then spent much of the poem providing suitable external counterparts to this inner, moral beauty bestowed on him from birth: ‘planting, plucking, plaiting, weaving, donning, and ingesting a profusion of exotic herbs and flowers.’²⁴⁴ The word ‘fragrant/fragrance’ (*fang* 芳) also appears repeatedly in the poem. Wang Yi 王逸 (fl. 110–120), the first major annotator to the text, comments that fragrance is ‘the scent of virtue’ (芳，德之臭也), citing a passage from the *Yijing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*).²⁴⁵ Commentators over the centuries debated about how literal these images should be taken, but that the fragrant plants symbolised Qu Yuan’s unwavering devotion and worth was generally accepted.²⁴⁶

This association established a tradition: fragrant plants and flowers became concrete symbols of one’s inner purity. Qu Yuan also established the tradition of the opposite: mire, muck, and venomous animals became images of foulness and moral corruption. This is already seen in Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (145–86 BCE) biography for Qu Yuan in the *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), which the historian filled with similar images to celebrate the poet’s lofty virtue: ‘Because his mind was pure, his subjects breathe a natural sweetness. [...] He withdrew himself from the muck and mire. He sloughed off the impurities of life to soar away out of reach of the dust and turmoil. Refusing to accept the foulness of the world, he emerged shining and unspotted from its mud.’²⁴⁷

Pure mind was thus associated with the natural sweet breath of the flowers and plants evoked in Qu Yuan’s poetry: orchids (*lan* 蘭), melilotus (*hui* 蕙), cassia (*gui* 桂), angelica (*zhi* 芷), and so on. These expressions find recurrent echo in later texts as symbols for virtue, especially in eulogies

²⁴⁴ Yu 1987, 93. See 84–110 for an analysis of the herbarium in the poem as well as the exegetic tradition over the centuries.

²⁴⁵ *Chuci buzhu*, 1.17. The sentence in the *Book of Changes* reads ‘its fragrance is like orchid’ (其臭如蘭), *Zhouyi zhengyi*, 7.79. Cf. *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 84–110. Wang Yi, for instance, provided concrete botanical explanations for some of these to justify the association between aroma and virtue, indicating the characteristics of these plants. Wang Chong 王充 (27–c.97) also makes a connection between the poet’s empirical experience with his poetic imageries by suggesting that Qu Yuan’s predilection for fragrant words resulted from his own predicament in the ‘reeking swamps of Chu.’ *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 14.638. Cf. Sterckx 2011, 171.

²⁴⁷ *Shiji*, 84.2482. Trans. in Hawkes 1985, 56.

and tomb inscriptions. The most cited above all were orchids. The image of orchids that ‘bloom unseen in solitary sweetness’²⁴⁸ was embraced by early medieval poets such as Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303), echoed by Tang poets like Chen Zi’ang 陳子昂 and Li Bai 李白 (701–762).²⁴⁹ Fragrant but not overpowering, orchids grow in seclusion and emanate their sweet scent spontaneously without the intention of attracting fame or favour. The qualities of orchids epitomise the moral ideals that Confucian scholars admire. Orchids also appear in paintings as the symbol of virtue. In fact, while the plethora of floral *topoi* evoked by Qu Yuan became increasingly associated with women in Tang literature, orchids remained beyond any gender demarcation. Fragrance, too, became increasingly associated with the female space in the Tang, but the sweet scent of virtue continued to be assigned to men. For instance, we find expressions such as ‘the fragrance diffusing far and wide’ (*fangxin yuanbo* 芳馨遠播) and ‘passing the fragrance on for generations’ (*chuanfang leidai* 傳芳累代) in tomb inscriptions for male officials.²⁵⁰

Li Bai used the expression ‘pure fragrance’ (*qingfen* 清芬) in several of his poems as a metaphor for lofty virtue. For instance, in a poem he dedicated to another Tang poet, Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (d. 740) whom he greatly admired, he wrote

The highest mountain – how can I look to climb it?
I can do no more than bow to his pure fragrance.

高山安可仰，徒此揖清芬。²⁵¹

Echoing two of the classic anthologies, the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) and the *Songs from the South*, Li Bai aligns himself and the one he admires with the paragon of virtue envisioned in the classical antiquity.

²⁴⁸ Qu Yuan, ‘Grieving at the Eddying Wind’ (*Bei hui Feng* 悲回風), the last of the ‘Nine Pieces’ (*Jiu Zhang* 九章). Trans. in Hawkes 1985, 180.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Owen 1977, 218; Yu 1987, 168–77.

²⁵⁰ *Quan Tangwen buyi*, 59. *Tangdai muzhiming huibian xuji*, 127.

²⁵¹ QTS, 168.1731, ‘To Meng Haoran’ (*Zeng Meng Haoran* 贈孟浩然). Trans. in Owen 1981, 71 (with modifications). Li Bai uses this expression a few other times in the poems he dedicated to other figures he admired, including a Daoist hermit and another Tang poet, Gao Shi 高適 (d. 765). See *Li Bai quanji biannian qianzhu*, 2.191, 3.266, 13.1309–10.

Virtuous conducts and moral integrity were associated with scent; corruption and indulgence, conversely, were also perceived as emanating smells. A well-known phrase from the classics was ‘the stench was smelled on high’ (*xing wen zai shang* 腥聞在上), which condemned the house of Shang’s indulgence in alcohol and sensual pleasures.²⁵² This famous quote is associated with the important role the sense of smell played in early sacrifice: smell was the major conduit for communicating with the world of gods and spirits, as the most reverent force was thought to appreciate the offerings because the smell of their *qi* instead of their taste.²⁵³ In addition, the moral integrity of the officiant was thought to influence the quality of this offering, ultimately heaven on high perceived and judged human morality through the smell of his offerings. Another famous quote reads: ‘The perfect order/government is like a wafting fragrance that moves the spirit luminensces. It is not the case that the grains and millet produce the fragrance, only bright virtue brings forth fragrance.’²⁵⁴ This conflation between knowledge and smell is in fact encapsulated already in one of the characters used to describe the act of smelling: to smell, to know, and to hear are expressed with the same word *wen* 聞.²⁵⁵

The ideas deriving from the sacrificial tradition loomed large in medieval cosmology and dovetail with concepts promoted by Buddhist and Daoist thoughts. That gods in the heavens would be informed by human conducts, especially deceit, violence, and corruption, through the ‘smell’ the human actions produced was present also in medieval accounts. Therefore, war and killings in one account were said to produce an unbearable blood-like stench that reached all heavenly beings (*zhutian* 諸天).²⁵⁶ In another story, the interaction between human action, smell, and divine response became more concrete. It is said that when a filial oil-vendor suddenly died in a thunderstorm, his mother could not understand the reason and complained every day at the shrine of the Messenger of the Nine Heavens (*jiutian shizhe* 九天使者). One night, a person revealed in her

²⁵² *Shangshu zhengyi*, 14.440.

²⁵³ *Liji jijie*, 25.671.

²⁵⁴ 至治馨香，感于神明。黍稷非馨，明德惟馨。 *Shangshu zhengyi*, 18.503–4. Trans. in Sterckx 2011, 169–70. See 92–95, 167–74 of the same book for smell, virtue, and sacrifice in early China.

²⁵⁵ See the discussion in the introduction.

²⁵⁶ ‘Suzong chao babao’ 肅宗朝八寶, TPGJ, 404.3254.

dreams that his son deserved it because he had been adulterating the fragrant oil for liturgies with fish oil in order to gain substantial profit. The steam of the pungent smell produced by this oil went up, and the gods no longer descended to the shrine. After learning this, the mother stopped lamenting. The stench that turned the gods away, presumably derived both from the adulterated oil and the person's immoral deed.

It is also worth noting that, though the repertoire of aromatic materials greatly increased between the Han and the Tang, exotic materials such as camphor, frankincense, sandalwood, and aloeswood were virtually never used to indicate the moral quality of a person. The scent of the virtuous was obstinately associated with the delicate, fragrant plants evoked in Classical texts: orchids, melilotus, cassia. Even though more intensive scents began prevailing in both the secular and the religious life in the medieval period, to be virtuous was still an alignment with the classical ideals. The scent of virtue, furthermore, should be delicate and never too overpowering. A related preference was the use of *fen* 芬 and *fang* 芳 over *xiang* 香 for 'fragrant/fragrance' in epigraphic texts. Probably because the latter came to be used in a more colloquial context while *fen* and *fang* suggest archaic flavour and connection with the classical canon. *Xiang*, instead, was more often used in popular narratives as well as in Buddhist and Daoist texts, in which case the fragrance no longer denoted sagehood, but sainthood. For the scent of virtue in the sense of spiritual achievement, the character *xiang* was used in almost all the cases except for a few occasions of deliberate archaism.

The only case in which imported aromatics were cited as metaphors for moral quality is found in the preface that the famous historian of the Liu Song 劉宋 dynasty (420–479) and compiler of the *Book of the Later Han* (*Hou Han shu* 後漢書, completed in 445), Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445), wrote for his 'Formulae for Blending Aromatics' (*hexiang fang* 和香方). The formula book is now lost, but the preface is recorded in the *Book of Song* (*Song shu* 宋書, compiled by Shen Yue 沈約 et al. under an imperial decree of the year 487) with the commentary of the compilers. The preface reads:

There are many taboos when it comes to the usage of musk, an excessive use of it causes harm. Aloeswood, instead, is solid and easy to blend; even over a *jin* of it would not do any harm.

Patchouli?²⁵⁷ is weak and dry, while elemi²⁵⁸ is viscous and wet. The kinds such as spikenard, storax, styrax benzoin, curcuma, *nadiśaileya*?²⁵⁹ are all treasures from abroad, they cannot be found in the central land. As for jujube paste, it is fuddled and blunt, while onycha is shallow and vulgar, neither will help make [the blends'] fragrance more intense. They will only exaggerate the defects.

麝本多忌，過分必害；沈實易和，盈斤無傷。零藿虛燥，詹唐黏濕。甘松、蘇合、安息、鬱金、棗多和羅之屬，並被珍於外國，無取於中土。又棗膏昏鈍，甲煎淺俗，非唯無助於馨烈，乃當彌增於尤疾也。²⁶⁰

On the surface, Fan Ye describes the principles and techniques for making a good aromatic blend. However, qualities such as fuddled, blunt, shallow, and vulgar were anthropomorphic ones, suggesting that they might have been allegories. This did not escape the moralising eyes of the compilers of the *Song shu*. They devised that these aromatics alluded to some of the officials at Fan's time, among which, the foreign aromatics referred to Master Huilin 慧琳 (fl. 421–445), a Buddhist monk who published a very controversial treatise titled *Baihei lun* 白黑論 (*On Black and White*), which was a fierce castigation of Buddhism.²⁶¹ It is interesting that Huilin was originally born in Qinjun 秦郡 (in modern-day Shaanxi), but the compilers cited him as a representative for foreign aromatics, perhaps because of his religious affiliation. In fact, in the

²⁵⁷ *Linghuo* 零藿 as a term does not appear anywhere else. It might have been a combination between *lingling xiang* 零陵香 (*tagaraka*) and *huoxiang* 藿香 (patchouli?).

²⁵⁸ Schafer identifies *zhantang* 詹唐, sometimes written as 詹糖, as a type of the oleoresin yielded by tropical trees of genus *Canarium* called elemis, whose name came from the Annamese word for the *Canarium* tree, *trâm*. By this, he considers the *zhantang* is the same as an aromatic called *lanxiang* 欖香 (olive aromatic). 1985 (1963), 165–66. A recent chemical analysis of the aromatics found in the Famen Monastery underground palace identifies elemi as one of them, demonstrating its significance in Tang Buddhist context (Ren et al. 2022, see chapter 4 for more detail).

²⁵⁹ *Naiduo heluo* 棗多和羅 does not seem to appear anywhere else, it is not clear whether the four characters refer to one aromatic called *naiduo heluo* or to two – *naiduo* and *heluo* – as understood by the Japanese scholar Ochiai Toshinori in his study of a manuscript copying the 6th-century translation of Nāgārjuna's aromatic blending formula which had been thought to be long lost (2021, 1–21). Together, the word might be a transcription of the Sanskrit word *nadiśaileya*, which literally means 'river (*nadī*) bitumen (*śaileya*)' and was mentioned as an example of something that has a unique essence nature due to its specific component. However, the word could also be a mistaken transliteration. I am grateful to Vincenzo Vergiani for Sanskrit suggestions.

²⁶⁰ *Song shu* 宋書 (Book of Song, compiled by Shen Yue 沈約 et al. in 487) 69.1829; *Nanshi* 南史 (History of the Southern Dynasties, compiled by Li Yanshou 李延壽 et al. in 659) 33.854.

²⁶¹ GSZ 7.268. Cf. Yu 2012, 211.

same *Book*, his biography is located under the heading ‘Tianzhu’ 天竺 (India).²⁶² Musk was thought to refer to Yu Bingzhi 庾炳之 (388–450), an official later dismissed from office for corruption, while aloeswood, which is ‘solid and easy to blend,’ according to the compilers, refers to Fan himself. Fan’s aromatic metaphors are an exception, which is closely related to the type of text that he was composing. Although the aroma of aloeswood, musk, and storax were all greatly appreciated in medieval times, they were rarely invested with a moral significance.²⁶³

Two sets of objects having opposite olfactory qualities have become metaphors for the virtuous and the vile. The first set is two types of plants mentioned in the *Zhuozhuan* 左傳, *xun* 薰,²⁶⁴ and *you* 藹 (*Caryopteris divaricata*), a type of odorous plant. The pair is first originally cited in the *Zuozhuan*, which reads ‘One plant fragrant, one foul, /Ten years hence the stench will linger still.’²⁶⁵

The other more famous set of opposites is ‘orchids chamber – fish shop.’ Fermented fish (*bao* 鮑²⁶⁶) was often cited as the paradigm of unbearable stench. The *Shiji* mentions that when Emperor Shihuangdi of Qin 秦 died in a journey during hot summer, the minister Zhao Gao 趙高 (258–207 BCE), in order to momentarily conceal the information, ordered a cart filled with one *dan* 石 of fermented fish to follow the one carrying the body. This way, the stench of the fermented fish would cover the rotting putridity of the deceased emperor’s corpse.²⁶⁷

The set of opposites of orchids and fish shop appeared in the *Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記 compiled by Dai De 戴德 (fl. 43–33 BCE), in which the author illustrates the transformative power of the

²⁶² *Song shu* 97.2388–91.

²⁶³ Some imported aromatics were associated to another type of virtue, that of holiness. We will further explore this aspect in Chapter 4.

²⁶⁴ This might refer to basil, which is today known as *luole* 羅勒 in Chinese, which is first described in the *Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要術 of the sixth century. See Laufer 1919, 586–90.

²⁶⁵ 一薰一藹，十年尚猶有臭。 *Zuozhuan* 12.3893. Trans. in Durrant et al. 2020, 41–2.

²⁶⁶ The character *bao* 鮑 refers to abalone fish today, but in early China it referred to fermented fish, while abalone fish was called *fuyu* 鰓魚.

²⁶⁷ *Shiji* 6.264.

moral environment by saying that ‘roaming with a virtuous gentleman sparks a fragrant atmosphere as if one enters a chamber full of orchids and angelica. If after a while one no longer senses this special air, it means that one has transformed oneself with him. Reversely, a petty person is surrounded by a stench of dejected materiality as if one enters a shop of fermented fish. If after a while one no longer smells it, one has also transformed with it.’²⁶⁸ The image of transformation is powerful.

The passage is quoted in a slightly different form in the *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語 and picked up by Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591) in his family admonitions. Interestingly, Yan slightly tweaked the original. Instead of saying that one could no longer tell the foul from the fragrant because of the influence, Yan simply states that one naturally becomes sweet-scented after a while, pointing at risks of more radical change.²⁶⁹ The sense of being ‘invaded’ by the encounter like a whiff of fragrant or foul smell is more strongly felt in this expression. In front of cultural and moral influences, the sentiment was generally more defensive in the medieval period. The early Tang scholar official Fu Yi 傅奕 (555–639) famous remonstrated against Buddhism, echoing this trope:

Within the gates of official households, there are those who receive the perverse ordination from the bald-headed men; among the Confucian scholars, there are those who speak the dissolute language of the demonic barbarians. Their music is like the singing of frogs, in listening to it one loses his roots. They reek like a shop of fermented fish, in passing through it one loses his fragrance.

搢紳門裏，翻受禿丁邪戒；儒士學中，倒說妖胡浪語。曲類蛙歌，聽之喪本；臭同鮑肆，過者失香。²⁷⁰

In both sets of metaphors, interestingly, the malodorous objects always seem to prevail and therefore the separation of the good and the bad is normally envisioned as an effort to preserve the fragrant – the virtuous one.

²⁶⁸ *Da Dai Liji huijiao jijie*, 5.576, 583. Cited and translated in Sterckx 2011, 173.

²⁶⁹ Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–595), ‘Admiring the worthy’ (*muxian* 慕賢), 394–5.

²⁷⁰ QTW, 133.1345–56, Fu Yi, ‘Memorial Requesting the Abolishment of the Buddhist Teaching’ (*Qing fei fofa biao* 請廢佛法表).

Scents of Art and Poetry

Not only the virtue of human conducts has a scent, but also that of artistic creations. Poetry, painting, calligraphy have all been described to emanate smells in medieval texts. The formal style (*zhengti* 正體) of the famed calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), according to the Tang art critic Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (fl. 9th century), had ‘an intense fragrance, similar to the misty scent of orchids and musk.’²⁷¹ This is an interesting comparison, as the pair of orchids and musk, as we have seen, are commonly used to refer to the perfume of the elite’s clothing, especially that of women. Wang’s cursive style (*cao xing zati* 草行雜體), in contrast, is like ‘a whiff of pure wind flowing out one’s sleeves,’ or ‘a bright moon that falls into one’s bosom.’²⁷² The images of nature seem to mirror the spirit of spontaneity of the style.

Poetry, likewise, was described to have various scents. One particular trend that came about in the eleventh century was to debate the value of Buddhist monks’ poetry as smelling like ‘a whiff of vegetables’ (*cai qi* 菜氣), or even like the smell of ‘cabbage and bamboo shoots’ (*shusun qi* 蔬筍氣) or ‘pickled stuffing’ (*suanxian qi* 酸餡氣).²⁷³ The word *qi* here goes beyond the narrow sense of smell itself, and implies also flavour, aura, and literary style, but such descriptions would have evoked olfactory associations in their readers’ mind. The poetic styles that Song scholars hold in high esteem, in fact, was usually ‘odourless.’ Wei Yingwu’s 韋應物 (c. 737–791) poetry, for instance, was lauded for its ‘absence of sound, visual appearance, smell, and taste.’²⁷⁴ Similarly, Du Fu’s verses were also praised for their absence of sound or smell (*wusheng wuxiu* 無聲無臭).²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ *Fashu yaolu*, 3.84.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ See Protass 2021, 125–50 for a study on Song literati’s criticism on the flavour of monks’ poetry.

²⁷⁴ *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, 140.3327. Cf. Owen 1981, 303.

²⁷⁵ *Tang caizi zhuan qianzheng*, 7.1773. The absence of sound or smell was originally used to describe the workings of the High Heaven, which transcend the human sensorium (See Sterckx 2011, 171). The expression is often taken literally in medieval texts. Duan Chengshi, for instance, commented that a bland dish without fragrance or smell (*wuxin wuxiu* 無馨無臭) was not different from tiles and debris (YYZZ, 7.572). This idea of the smell of poetry was picked up by late imperial literati such as Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664) who wrote two poetic theories to argue that one should read

Poetry did not only have smells but could also change one's scent. Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502–549), the famous Buddhist monarch, allegedly claimed that if he did not read Xie Tiao's 謝朓 (464–499) poetry for three days, he would feel a foul smell in his mouth.²⁷⁶ That words and verses could change one's smell – either this was merely rhetoric or not – might have been a Buddhist influence. Buddha's dharma is sometimes envisioned as the wafting of sweet fragrance that transforms those who are touched by it.²⁷⁷ The *Lotus Sutra* also indicates that the one who rejoices and praises the 'Chapter on the former affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King' will 'exhale from his mouth the fragrance of pure lotus, from his pores the scent of ox-head sandalwood; and the merits he obtains shall be as just stated.'²⁷⁸ The logic of this, the sutra continues to state, is that the blessing of the Medicine King takes the form of a scattering of powdered incense on top of the believer, which frees him from all illness and suffering. His sweet breath, therefore, is both a proof of his merit and dedication, and a reflection of his good physique granted by the divine grace. Therefore, just as virtuous deeds, also virtuous words emanated fragrant scent.

The smells of things, too, were attributed to their virtue. In a debate between two Song scholars, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) and Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), for instance, Sima Guang pointed out that tea and ink had the opposite natures – while tea is valued for being clear, intense, and new, ink is valued for being black, light, and old. Su Shi then replied that they both emanate fragrance, because they had the same virtue (*de tong* 德同).²⁷⁹

We are faced with a similar conundrum that Qu Yuan's commentators had: how much were these metaphors taken literally? In other words, was the fragrance of virtue perceived merely as a figure of speech, in the medieval period that we are concerned about, or did people actually try to act

poetry with the nose instead of the eyes. See Liao 2019, 239–73.

²⁷⁶ 'Xie Tiao' 謝朓, *Tanshu* 談纂, TPGJ, 198.1483.

²⁷⁷ See, for instance, the passage in the *Mahāsāṃnipāta Sūtra* (*Dafang deng Dajijing* 大方等大集經) that we will read closely in Chapter 4. T.13, no. 397, 14a5-10.

²⁷⁸ *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮花經, trans. in Hurvitz 2009, 275–76.

²⁷⁹ *Gaozhai manlu*, 9.

virtuously in order to smell good? And if so, what did it mean to smell good? Was the reverse also the case – did people assign moral judgment to the smells that they perceived? The problem complicates when issues of ethnicity, sanctity, and the world of spirits are involved, which we will further explore in the following chapters. Here we will try to address the questions above by examining the values assigned to the smell of the physical body: those ascribed to the odour of the body as a physiological attribute and the attitudes toward what was added to or deducted from the body to alter its scent, i.e., practices such as washing, bathing, and perfuming.

Physical Cleanliness and Moral Purity

While today body odour is mainly considered as an aesthetic issue, in medieval China, it was of great medical concern. The *Arcane Essentials from the Imperial Library* (*Waitai miyao* 外臺秘要, compiled by Wang Tao et al. in 752), a court commissioned medical treatise which records many previously circulating formulae, indicates thirty-seven formulae for eliminating armpit odour, three for axillary abscess, three for the foul odours coming out of the seven orifices (*qikong* 七孔) and four for rendering the body fragrant.²⁸⁰ According to the Sui dynasty court physician, Chao Yuanfang, problems with body odour are all part of the diseases caused by excessive moisture (*shibing* 濕病). The etiology of foul smells was the disorder in one's bodily *qi* (*tiqu* 體氣) resulting in a mixture of his essential fluids, or a disharmony of his blood and *qi* (*xueqi buhe* 血氣不和).²⁸¹ Armpit odour can be innate or contracted from someone else. Getting in contact with a corpse with empty stomach was also indicated as a cause for bad body odours, in particular a bad breath, as the foul *qi* of the dead body could enter one's spleen.²⁸²

The formulae, however, do not claim to regulate blood or *qi*. They seem to be based more on empirical experience. Some formulae are for external use, including the majority for curing armpit odour; others purport to change one's body odour by working from the inside. One formula provided

²⁸⁰ *Waitai biyao*, juan 23.

²⁸¹ *Zhubing yuanhou lun*, juan 31, 13, 14.

²⁸² *Yangxing yanming lu jiaozhu*, 125–6.

by the early Tang physician Sun Simiao promises to make a person's body exude sweet scent in ten days, render his flesh and bones fragrant in twenty days, and if he ingests such concoction for fifty days, his pleasant smell could be sensed from afar. Such a magical concoction consists in seemingly simple ingredients such as seeds of white gourd, young root of red pine, bark of euonymus (*baipi* 白皮) and jujube.²⁸³ Another one called the 'Ten Aromatics Pellet' (*shixiang yuan* 十香圓), or alternatively, a 'Formula for making the hundred places of a person's body fragrant,' uses more complex ingredients, including expensive exotic aromatics such as aloeswood, musk, clove, and white sandalwood.²⁸⁴

Sun Simiao lists his formulae for scenting the body under the section of medicine for women, but when Wang Tao collected these in his compendium, there was no longer any gender association with these prescriptions. Nevertheless, smell did appear to be a more pressing issue for women. Some of them were praised for the fragrance of their body. Two dancers from eastern Zhejiang are said to be very fragrant as they fed themselves with lychees, torreya seeds, gold scrap, and camphor.²⁸⁵ In a poem, the Tang poetess Zhao Luanluan 趙鸞鸞 (fl. 8th century) praised the fragrance of jasmine on the breath of a courtesan.²⁸⁶ These cases were probably recorded to show how the art of scent was employed to enhance the sensual aura, however, how a woman smelled could also have consequence in her marriage.

Marriage was a complex social and cultural process in medieval times, however, the physical also played a role in it, even the smell. The Sui-dynasty physiognomic text, *Canon on Reproduction* (*Chanjing* 產經²⁸⁷), lists 'bad breath' as one of the signs that indicate a woman as unmarriageable.²⁸⁸ According to the text, a woman's bad breath, together with other traits, is a sign that she would be

²⁸³ *Qianjin yifang* 千金翼方, 5.226–27. All the translations of Chinese medicinal materials are based on the explanations of the *Zhongyao da cidian* 中藥大辭典 (1977 and 1979).

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.216–18.

²⁸⁵ 'Zhedong wunü' 浙東舞女 from *Duyang zabian* 杜陽雜編, in TPGJ, 272.2142–43.

²⁸⁶ QTS, 802.9032.

²⁸⁷ The *Chanjing* is generally considered to have been compiled during the Sui dynasty. The original text is now lost; part of its contents has been included in *Ishinpō* 醫心方 by Tana Yasuyori 丹波康賴 (912–95).

²⁸⁸ See *Ishinpō* 25, 8b-9a; 24, 31b-33b. Lee 1997, 452.

licentious and unfaithful. Jen-der Lee has noted that similar criteria were laid out for the selection of wet nurses.²⁸⁹ In fact, requirements for the selection of wet nurses were even more strict: bad breath, armpit odour, or strong body odour were all reasons for exclusion. This is perhaps of little surprise, as the milk of the wet nurses was considered to be a conduit through which pathogens could be passed on to the infant.²⁹⁰ Moreover, body smell was perceived as a symptom of one's general health condition. Foul odour, therefore, reflects problems with their blood and *qi*. No similar text indicates that odour played an important role in a male person's life, career, or marriage in the medieval times, unless he wanted to be a bearer of the imperial palanquin.²⁹¹ Gender mattered in olfactory perceptions.

So far, we have considered the opinions regarding the biological scents, but rather different attention was paid to people's social smells. It has been noted that bodily cleanliness and moral purity were closely related according to the Confucian classics, in particular the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記).²⁹² The focus here was no longer health or prognostic concerns, but decorum, order, and decency. The way a person smells speaks of their gender, class, education, and social status. We have noted that detergents, aromatic medicines, and hot water for bathing and washing might all have been expensive; on top of this, leisure time would have been required for the purifying practices. In fact, the physical cleanliness and wellbeing of the scholar official class appeared to be a state matter. In the Han dynasty, officials were entitled by law to have a 'relaxation and hair-washing' day (*xiumu* 休沐) every five days.²⁹³ This interval became every ten days in the Tang.²⁹⁴ Keeping officials clean was not only a problem of creating pleasant environment or court etiquette, but it was also an indication of the order of the state. During the turmoil and chaos of the later part of the Tang, for instance, the ten-day lustrum was practically abandoned. Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–849)

²⁸⁹ Lee 1997, 452.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ An edict of 1142 indicates that men with armpit odour and other impairments are not considered for such role. *Quan Song wen* 4515.32.

²⁹² Schafer 1956, 59. Heirmann and Torck (2012) have observed that the same was emphasised in Chinese Buddhism.

²⁹³ *Shiwu jiyuan* 1, 36a-b. Cit. in Schafer 1956, 60.

²⁹⁴ THY, 82.1518.

was said to always return home and wash his hair on the tenth day, no matter how pressing the emergency.²⁹⁵ For a minister like him, cleanliness, personal decorum, and the dignity of the court were all related.

Taking care of the subjects' physical well-being was deemed part of the emperor's responsibility. Hence, every year on the winter solstice day, the emperor would impart facial creams, lip balms, aromatic medicines, soap beans, and later tooth aromatics (*yaxiang* 牙香) to the officials.²⁹⁶ Numerous memorials on thanking the emperor for these gifts can be found in the *Quan Tang wen*. Receiving such gifts were also a privilege. Thus, when this happened to Du Fu, it marked one of the high points of his bureaucratic career. Overjoyed, he composed a poem to express his delight and gratitude:

To have ale as I please I will plan a good night to get drunk,
I return home, having just concluded dawn court at Zichen Palace.
a chap-balm for lips and face cream came with imperial grace,
in an azure tube and silver ewer descending from the nine-tiered heavens.

縱酒欲謀良夜醉，還家初散紫宸朝。口脂面藥隨恩澤，翠管銀罍下九霄。²⁹⁷

Besides literati, monks, physicians, respectable women were also expected to observe good etiquette and maintain a clean and orderly appearance. Not conforming to this ideal, however, did not always invite criticism. Instead, eclectic behaviours were often commended because they suggest that other values such as filial piety, devotion to study, modesty, and chastity were placed above decorum. In this context, moral purity was separated from and even contended with physical cleanliness. The *Jiu Tang shu* recounts that when the early Tang scholar and calligrapher Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558–638) studied with Gu Yewang 顧野王 (519–581) in his youth, he was so dedicated to learning and meditation that he often did not wash or groom (*guanjie* 盥櫛) for several tendays.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ XTS, 180.5342. Cit. in Schafer 1956, 60.

²⁹⁶ *Suishu guangji* 39.

²⁹⁷ 'Winter Solstice Day' (*lari* 臘日), *Dushi xiangzhu* 5.426. Trans. in Owen 2016, 361. For the occurrence of *lari* during the year, see Cullen 2017, 70; Lagerwey and Kalinowski 2009, 893-894.

²⁹⁸ JTS, 72.2565.

Not only assiduous scholars, but also benevolent carers could be praised for neglecting their care of self for the sake of others. An eastern Jin Xie Shu 謝述 (390–435) was commended for taking care of his uncle for several tendays without ever loosening his own belts, cleansing or grooming himself.²⁹⁹ ‘Not loosening one’s belts’ (*yibu jiedai* 衣不解帶) came to be an expression to indicate one’s assiduousness. Even if no particular virtue is associated with the neglect with one’s outer appearance, such behaviour was viewed sometimes as a reflection of an unorthodox spirit. An Eastern Han minister Liu Kuan 劉寬 (120–185) reportedly had a penchant for drinking and was rather unfond of washing himself. People in the capital thus ridiculed him for this. But the historians who recorded his life did not place moral judgment on his apparent unhygienic conduct; instead, they portrayed him as a virtuous, sympathetic, and generous man.³⁰⁰

There is, however, another side to this expectation. When the figure of the unkempt scholar became so prominent, those who did groom and wash became the abnormal and received disapproval. One such person defended their position. Feng Gui 封軌 (fl. late fifth century), a northern Wei official, was asked: ‘The men of learning (*xueshi* 學士) do not occupy themselves with grooming, how come you do this?’ He replied laughing: ‘A gentleman should straighten out his robe and headdress and keep a decorous appearance. Why must one wear messy hair and dirty face and then claim to be worthy?’³⁰¹ To be clean, or not to be clean, therefore, could both have been a case against virtue. Again, the scent of high morality should be spontaneous, not intentional.

The discrepancy between outer appearance and inner quality also relates to another classic parable which warrants the risk of superficial judgments. Medieval narratives record various stories of an apparently lowly and squalid person that turns out to possess extraordinary abilities, especially those associated with the unseen realms. Buddhist and Daoist priests but also folk heroes were often depicted in this light. For them, overlooking their outer experience could have been a sign of their ascetic self-cultivation or their transcendence of worldly concerns, and for the beholders, recognising

²⁹⁹ *Song shu*, 52.1496.

³⁰⁰ HHS, 25.888.

³⁰¹ *Wei shu* 魏書 (compiled by Wei Shou 魏收 from 551 to 554), 32. 764.

a master under a lowly disguise was a test of faith and wisdom. The *Youyang zazu* describes a beggar named Yan Qishi 嚴七師 living in the Sickers' Ward (called *Beitian fang* 悲田坊 in this story) of Chengdu who appeared lowly, stinking, and appalling. But later people discovered that he was able to foretell future events with extraordinary accuracy.³⁰²

In another story, the moral is explicitly spelled out. A late Tang anecdote recounts a scholar who went to visit a friend. Seeing the friend sitting with a poor monk wearing a ragged robe made of scraps (*nayi* 衲衣), the scholar left displeased. Another day he asked the friend why he associated with a person who wore that kind of coarse furry robe and complained that 'I do not know whether he is wise or stupid, all I perceived was his foul smell!' The friend replied:

The foul smell of the coarse fur robe is only external. How can it compare to the stench of copper³⁰³? The stench of copper encroaches and follows you if you stand next to it. You find yourself in the middle of [the stench of copper] and yet never felt ashamed about it. Instead, you ridicule me for roaming with a man of the Way from mountain and wilds. The noble-minded men from the Southern Dynasties deemed the croaking of frogs and wild grass higher than [the sound of] drums and trumpets. [In the same manner,] I regard coarse monastic clothes much better than vermilion and purple [robes]³⁰⁴!

毳褐之臭，外也。豈甚銅乳？銅乳之臭，並肩而立，接跡而趨。公處其間，曾不嫌恥，反譏余與山野有道之士遊。南朝高人，以蛙鳴蒿萊勝鼓吹。吾視毳褐，愈於今之朱紫遠矣！³⁰⁵

With stories like this circulating as admonitions, it is then understandable why very little complaint against the foulness of the poor is recorded in medieval writings. Besides a sentiment of compassion, there was also the idea that physical lowliness does not always correspond to inner quality. As the author of the 'Inscription on My Humble Home' stated: 'my hut may be mean, but the fragrance of Virtue is diffused around.'

Physical appearance was not only important in one's relationship with other people, but also their connection with the gods. There the requirements became less flexible. Mencius famously

³⁰² *Youyang zazu xubian*, 1565.

³⁰³ Referring to money and wealth.

³⁰⁴ Referring to the attire of high-ranking officials.

³⁰⁵ Zhao Ling 趙璘 (*jinshi* 834), *Yinhua lu* 因話錄, *juan* 5. Siku quanshu edition.

said: ‘If Lady Xi³⁰⁶ had been covered in filth, people would all have held their noses as they passed her. But, although a person is ugly, it is possible, through fasting and purification, to become fit to perform sacrifices to the Lord-on-High.’³⁰⁷ The physical cleanliness of the officiant was required for the communication with the world of gods and spirits. Ritual purification, including fasting, washing, and bathing, was regularly prescribed before important ritual ceremonies.³⁰⁸ Following the ritual classics, the *Da Tang Kaiyuan li* prescribes that the liturgical officials (*zhaiguan* 齋官) in charge of welcoming the gods should avoid dealing with any defiling matters such as attending funerals or signing criminal sentences. In addition, the day before the sacrificial rite, they should wash their hair and bathe.³⁰⁹

Purification did not only mean washing off dirt but also fending off obnoxious air. Emperor Xuanzong 宣宗 (r. 846–859) announced in a decree that he would wash hands and burn incense before perusing memorials and petitions from his subjects. As Schafer has suggested, this gesture not only denotes his desire to restore the court etiquette to a more strict and seemly condition, but also indicates that the scent of incense was perceived as the ‘purifying breath of the gods on the affairs in which the emperor acted as their proxy.’³¹⁰

The sentiment towards the usage of fragrance and incense (as Schafer has noted, there was little distinction between the scent used to please the gods and that to attract humans), however, was conflicted. Nowhere is this dissonance felt more strongly than in the texts instructing the usage of aromatic materials, the repertoires of aromatics (*xiangpu* 香譜) that emerged towards the beginning of the Song dynasty.

The earliest extant repertoire of aromatics is that by Hong Chu 洪芻 (1066–ca.1127), who was the nephew of the famous Northern Song literatus Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105). In his

³⁰⁶ Referring to the legendary beauty Xi Shi 西施.

³⁰⁷ *Mencius*, 4b.25, ‘Li lou’ 離婁. Trans. in Bloom 2009, 91.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Schafer 1956, 59–60.

³⁰⁹ *Da Tang Kaiyuan li* 3.7b, *Tongdian*, 108.2807–08.

³¹⁰ Schafer 1985, 156.

preface, Hong Chu explains the purpose for the compilation of his repertoire. He takes pains to elevate the use of aromatics above mere vanity by associating the practice with classical texts and its moral implications. He wrote:

The *Shangshu* states that ‘the perfect government is like a wafting fragrance’ and that ‘it was only bright virtue that was fragrant.’ Conversely, then there was ‘stench smelled on high.’ The *Zuozhuan* uses a room of cassia and orchids and the shop of fermented fish as symbols of virtue and vice respectively. The ‘Li sao’ uses orchid, melilotus, and wild ginger (*duheng* 杜衡) to stand for gentlemen, and muck and mugworts for petty men. The gentleman should wash and purify his body and fumigate it with virtue and righteousness. Herein lies infinite knowledge. [To illustrate some of this knowledge] is the intention of my repertoire.

「書」稱：至治馨香，明德惟馨。反是，則曰腥聞在上。「傳」以芝蘭之室、鮑魚之肆為善惡之辨。「離騷」以蘭、蕙、杜衡為君子，冀壤、蕭艾為小人。君子澡雪其身，熏衲以道義。有無窮之聞。予之譜亦是意云。³¹¹

Even though his repertoire mainly introduced the provenance, botanic features, and medicinal attributes of the exotic materials such as camphor, aloeswood, storax, and benzoin, in the preface where he states his purposes, he only made reference to these fragrant herbs talked about in classical texts. Instead, the quality of these aromatics was intensively fragrant, new, exotic, perhaps efficacious in expelling evil influences and curing diseases, or communicating with the divine, but they were not virtuous.

A later preface for Chen Jing’s 陳敬 (d.u.) repertoire written by a Confucian scholar named Xiong Penglai 熊朋來 (*jinshi* 1274), who called himself the ‘Fisherman of Pengli’ (*Pengli diaotu* 彭蠡釣徒), was more explicitly dismissive of the use of aromatics. Xiong relates that he was asked to write this preface, but he thinks there are many other people more suitable than him to take up this task, such as ‘one of those scholar-transcendents (*xianru* 仙儒) who harbour fragrance and hold orchids in the Jade Bureau on the Penglai 蓬萊 Islands,’ or ‘the dignitaries who live in residences redolent of angelica and orchid,’ or ‘the supervisors of maritime trade (*boguan* 舶官) who boast of

³¹¹ The preface is included in Chen Jing 陳敬 and Chen Haoqing’s 陳浩卿 Repertoire of the thirteenth century. The text derives from a Yuan dynasty imperial library manuscript, now in the collection of Taipei National Library (Shang 2019, 33, fig. 5).

their aromatics and treasures while wearing Islanders' clothes and speaking barbarian languages.' Or perhaps, Xiong suggests, they could have asked the junior treasurers (*shaofu* 少府) of the various provinces who have garnered titles by offering precious incenses to the court,' or even those gātha chanting Buddhist practitioners or silk donning and perfume wearing ladies.³¹²

Xiong lists a series of people who were associated with the usage of incense at his time – Daoists, Buddhists, dignitaries, and women – and carefully distanced himself from these. In particular, he differentiated himself from the two groups of local officials – the supervisors of maritime trade and junior treasurers – who seem to have been making a great profit from aromatics, either in the form of wealth or that of career. This also shows how the trade and consumption of aromatics had become an important social, cultural, and economic matter. In fact, Xiong states his reluctance, but also admits that such a repertoire was a useful didactic medium for instructing the proper use of incense in scholars' zither rooms and studios. Again, however, he demonstrates his disapproval for gentlemen to use aromatics on themselves. He notes that

Fragrance is one of the five odours, which people wear to please (*mei* 媚) others. [...] According to the *Classic of Rituals*, aromatic bags are what children wear, and angelica and orchid are what women pluck. As for the gentlemen, the fragrance (of their virtue) should be sufficient to waft and linger on for hundreds of generations.

香者，五臭之一，而人服媚之。[...] 按「禮經」，容臭者，童孺所佩；茝蘭者，婦輩所採。大丈夫則自流芳百世者。³¹³

Xiong interestingly reverberated the idea of fragrance as an outward display of one's inner virtue. However, in contrast to Qu Yuan's tradition, outer adornment was no longer considered a way to enhance or display one's inner virtue, but rather the opposite. From the early medieval period to the Tang, we observe a general trend of the increasing use of aromatics, but decreasing value assigned to such practice among the literati. The relationship with incense, however, changed quite radically towards the late Tang and early Song period with the popularity of a Buddhist sutra, the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (*Lengyang jing* 楞嚴經).

³¹² *Chenshi xiangpu*, 1b.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 2a.

In the early medieval period, scenting oneself was popular among the social elite. It was not only a way to mark their pedigree, but also a means by which they express their alignment with the aesthetic tendency of refinement and elegance. Xun Yu 荀彧 (163–212) was famous for his passion for scent. It is said that where he sat, the seat remained fragrant for three days.³¹⁴ Xun Yu continued to be cited in Tang court poetry to describe elegant male figures,³¹⁵ but Confucian scholars did not all approve of such care for appearance and indulgence in sensory pleasure. Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–590s), for instance, did not hide his criticism against the noble scions of the Liang 梁 dynasty (502–557) who went around in town exhibiting sumptuous accessories with ‘their clothes perfumed, faces shaved and covered with balm and powder.’³¹⁶ According to Yan, at the time they looked like immortals from a distance, but when the situation changed and fortune and wealth were no longer with them, they could do nothing but wander ‘aimlessly in the midst of military horses and eventually die off in a ditch.’³¹⁷ This is because they had no talent of their own to rely on. Yan’s standing is clear: perfume and other physical decorations may make one attractive for a while, but it is learning and knowledge that sustains one’s standing in the world eventually.

While perfuming the clothes seemed a common practice among the noble and the wealthy in the Tang, no such figure as Xun Yu was mentioned. In the contrary, those who avoided using perfume were commended. The *Xin Tang shu* praises a mid-Tang official, Liu Zhongying 柳仲郢 (*jinshi* 818) for keeping a simple lifestyle: even though he presided over three garrisons, he never kept famous horses in his stable, or perfumed his clothes. Instead, Liu devoted himself to the study of Confucian classics and Buddhist scriptures.³¹⁸ Liu Zhongying’s biography parallels Yan Zhitui’s criticism of the Liang aristocrats. The cultivation of inner fragrance once again was placed above the scenting of outer appearance.

³¹⁴ *Jiaobu Xiangyang shejiu ji* 5.105. A contemporary of Xun reportedly imitated him and was compared to the ugly neighbour of the legendary beauty Xi Shi 西施, who made a fool of herself trying to emulate Xi Shi’s gestures.

³¹⁵ See, for instance, Li Duan’s 李端 (743–782) poem presented to the imperial son-in-law, Guo Ai 郭曖 (752–800). QTS, 268.3269.

³¹⁶ *Yanshi jiaxun jijie*, 3.148 (‘Encouraging Study’ *quanxue* 勸學). Translation of Tian 2021, 117.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ JTS, 165.4307. See Deng 2000, 75–76 for the place of Liu family ritual tradition in Tang-Song history.

Moreover, perfuming probably became a more gendered practice in the Tang. A Liang 梁 dynasty (502–557) account tells of a man who tried to please a beautiful woman by applying rare perfume on himself, but unfortunately the woman suffered from anosmia. His attempt thus resulted futile.³¹⁹ In Tang and later accounts, we usually see women use scent to enhance their sexual allure. Anecdotes and poems often refer to the scent of princesses, courtesans, dancers, and bartenders. Scent was a symbol of status, but also an essential part of her art of seduction. In a poem that Bai Juyi composed in a female voice (as an allegory of the estrangement between the ruler and the subject), the protagonist laments melancholily that

I scent my robe for you,
you smell orchid and musk and yet no longer find them fragrant.
為君熏衣裳，君聞蘭麝不馨香。³²⁰

In this sense, when a woman transits to a status that requires her to become ‘desexualised,’ such as in widowhood, she is then expected to become odourless. The *Xin Tang shu* applauded a Madame Li who became widow at the age of 17 or 18. She dreamed of being pursued by a man for several nights. Suspecting that she attracted the ghost because her appearance had not become old and ugly, she cut her hair, wore coarse clothes, and stopped perfuming and decorating herself. As she became dirty and dusty, the dreams stopped. The local governor highly commended her conduct.³²¹ The scent of a woman, therefore, should be commensurate with her status. Virtue, in this case, resides in the absence of smell.

Scenting became acceptable when it was not used for adornment, but for aiding self-cultivation. The poet Wei Yingwu, according to the *Biographies of the Talented Men of the Tang* (*Tang caizi zhuan* 唐才子傳, compiled by Xin Wenfang 辛文房 in 1304), led a very Buddhist lifestyle: he ate little and had few worldly desires. He often swept the grounds of where he lived and burned

³¹⁹ *Xiangxue huidian* 11.551, citing the *Jin louzi* 金樓子.

³²⁰ QTS, 426.4694.

³²¹ XTS, 250.5821–22.

incense.³²² His contemporaries commented that he had lofty and pure nature. Wang Wei had a similar reputation. It is said that at an old age, Wang kept nothing at home but a tea pot, a medicine mortar, a sutra desk, and a cord bed. After coming back from the court, he would sit alone, burn incense, dedicate himself to chanting Chan scriptures.³²³ However, smell is almost absent from the centre of attention in this case. It was the act of burning incense, the ritualisation of learning and meditation that mattered.

The relationship between scenting culture and the literati class would change again during the early Song period when the idea of ‘nose-contemplation’ (*biguan* 鼻觀) was proposed under the influence of *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*.³²⁴ In the sutra, the Fragrance Adorned Boy (*Xiangyan tongzi* 香嚴童子) relates how he attained the Perfect Understanding through the contemplation of fragrance. He observed that the fragrance of lit aloeswood silently entered his nostrils, and, in his contemplation, he understood that the source of the fragrance was ‘neither wood, nor space, nor smoke, nor fire’ and that ‘it came from no place and went to no place.’ As a result of this contemplation, his ‘distinction-making consciousness disappeared’ and he gained freedom from outflows. In other words, he became an arhat.³²⁵ The Fragrance Adorned Boy argued for the efficacy of odours as objects of contemplation, and this was embraced by Northern Song literati such as Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105).³²⁶ Huang reflects how burning a stick of incense behind a low desk allowed his ‘numinous estrade’ (*lingtai* 靈台) to become ‘clear, empty, and bright.’³²⁷ And Su Shi responded that

Your four-line *gāthās* on burning incense
Go with the fragrance and spread all over the southeast.

³²² *Tang caizi zhuan qianzheng*, 4.791, 794.

³²³ XTS, 190.5052.

³²⁴ See Grant 1994 for the importance of the sutra on Song poets. Cf. Shang 2018, 73–111; Cao 2020, 71–80.

³²⁵ 見諸比丘燒沈水香，香氣寂然來入鼻中，我觀此氣非木、非空、非煙、非火，去無所著來無所從，由是意銷發明無漏。T. 945, 125c24-28.

³²⁶ See Sargent 2001, 60–71; Shang 2018, 73–111; and Cao 2020, 71–80 for the influence of incense culture in Su and Huang’s poetry.

³²⁷ 隱几香一炷，靈臺湛空明。Huang Tingjian *shi jizhu* 5.204.

They are not something hearing or thinking can penetrate,
Just have the nose-contemplation meditate first.

四句燒香偈子，隨香遍滿東南。不是聞思所及，且令鼻觀先參。³²⁸

Scenting, sensing, and making sense of scents became a part of their intellectual life.

Even in the religious context, however, incense as an object of devotion but at the same time an expensive expenditure could be a moral conundrum. A Buddhist monk (perhaps a lay practitioner) refused to spend on incense despite its prominent role in Buddhist meditation and rituals. The tenth-century collection of anecdotes, *Qingyi lu* 清異錄 (compiled by Tao Gu 陶穀, 903–970), tells about a monk named Shi Zhizu 釋知足 who said: ‘My body is a furnace and my heart is fire. The Five Precepts (*wujie* 五戒³²⁹) and the Ten Kinds of Wholesome Behaviour (*shishan* 十善³³⁰) are my incense. Why must I use aloeswood, sandalwood, or frankincense for a play in a dream (*mengzhong xi* 夢中戲)?’ When he was forced to burn incense sometimes, he would pick seeds from the cypress tree in front of his window and call them ‘Frugal and Expedient Pearls’ (*shengbian zhu* 省便珠).³³¹ The metaphor of the Five Precepts and Ten Wholesome Courses of Action as incense brings us back to the idea of the fragrance of virtue: it is not precious perfume, but good intent and virtuous conducts that produce sweet scent.

Overcoming Sensory Judgments

Smelling good or not caring about smelling good, therefore, could both have mirrored one’s loftiness. But virtue also lies in suspending the immediate moral value that one places on a sensory

³²⁸ *Sushi wenji biannian qianzhu* 16.290. Trans. in Sargent 2001, 67.

³²⁹ *Pañcaśīla*, five rules of conduct that form the foundation for Buddhist morality for both lay and monastic followers. These include to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming intoxicants. Cf. Buswell and Lopez 2014, 616.

³³⁰ *Kuśāla-karmapatha*, which include the avoidance of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slander, offensive speech, prattle and the promotion of unselfishness, good will, and right views. Cf. Ibid., 456–57.

³³¹ *Qing yi lu*, 55.

perception. For some groups of people, especially, this would be imperative for their advance in achieving a higher spiritual or humanistic level. One of such groups is physicians.

Sun Simiao embodies the epitome of a virtuous physician. Aside from leaving us a rich collection of medical formulae, Sun also proposed a medieval Chinese version of the Hippocratic Oath. He laid out the ethical principles that an ideal physician should adhere to and he himself strived to follow. In his preface to the *Qianjin yaofang* 千金要方, he wrote that a physician should be upright, compassionate, impartial, and free of self-benefitting thoughts. He should be committed to rescuing ‘all sentient beings indiscriminately from their suffering’ and treating his patients regardless of their class, wealth, age, physical appearance, personal sentiment, ethnicity (*hua yi* 華夷), or intelligence.³³² The physician should have a pure spirit and a decorous but not ostentatious appearance. On the other hand, he should suspend his sensory judgments and transcend the biological, gut human reaction of disgust:

When dealing with those who are suffering from sores, boils, and diarrhoea that are unbearably stinky and foul, which other people loathe to look at, [the physician] must harbour the sense of humility, pity, and compassion rather than holding any thought of displeasure. This is my commitment.

其有患瘡瘍、下痢，臭穢不可瞻視，人所惡見者，但發慚愧淒憐憂恤之意，不得起一念蒂芥之心，是吾之志也。³³³

Sun draws on a medley of Confucian and Buddhist language, with which he points out the major moral requirements for an ideal physician, ranging from moral integrity, decorum, to humility, compassion, and impartiality. But he also asks the overcoming of the nauseating reaction caused by visual and olfactory foulness presented by the patient’s body, which is in fact essential in the medical professions. The potential reward for this self-denial and self-discipline is also stated at the end. This time, Sun explicitly declares his alliance with Daoism by attributing the authority to Laozi 老子, the legendary founder of the religion:

³³² *Qianjin yaofang*, 2. Cit. in Chen 2013, 57–64.

³³³ Ibid.

Lord Lao said: ‘When one carries out visible acts of virtue, people will naturally repay him; when one carries out hidden acts of virtue, spirits and gods will repay him. When one carries out visible acts of vice, people will naturally reciprocate him; when one carries out hidden acts of vice, spirits and gods will harm him.’ If one follows [one of] these two paths, he will receive requital and retribution [for his deeds] from both the Yin and the Yang realms. This is no deception!

老君曰：人行陽德，人自報之；人行陰德，鬼神報之；人行陽惡，人自報之，人行陰惡，鬼神害之。尋此貳途，陰陽報施，豈誣也哉？³³⁴

Then Sun went on to reassure that physicians abiding to the proper ethical principles and resolving their heart to saving those suffering will feel multiple blessings from the unseen realms.³³⁵

For the Buddhist monastic community, the moral reward of self-sacrifice would have been ingrained in their minds through the numerous teachings about merits and compassion. Buddhist hagiographies portray several figures who exemplify this kind of virtue by subduing their nature. An eminent monk who lived at the end of the Northern Zhou 北周 (557–581) and early Sui dynasty, Fachun 法純, was known for his acts of humility and asceticism. The *Biographies of Eminent Monks Continued* (*Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳, compiled by Daoxuan 道宣 in 645) reads that Fachun used to

walk incognito in the city, work on behalf of others and leave quietly after the work was done. If he was paid, he would give the money to the poor. When he saw that someone’s clothes were tattered or soiled, no matter they belonged to a monastic or a layperson, he would secretly wash and repair them and return them [to their owners] kneeling with respect. If their towels became ragged, filthy, and foul-smelling, he would also repair and wash them to render them clean and complete. Examples such as these are many. Sometimes he also cleaned privies and delivered excrement during the night.

微行市里，或代人庸作，事訖私去。有與作價，反乞貧人。或見道俗衣服破壞塵垢，皆密為洗補，跪而復處。及巾屨替藉，穢污臭處，皆縫洗鮮全。其例甚眾。或於靜時，撻廁擔糞。³³⁶

³³⁴ Ibid. The quotation is actually not from Laozi, but Tao Hongjing’s *Yangxing yanming lu*, 59. It is also not found in any other Daoist scriptures (Ibid., 60, fn 1).

³³⁵ *Qianjin yaofang*, 2.

³³⁶ XGSZ 18.675–76.

Some were touched by his deeds and joined him. Fachun's fame grew so high that he was revered by Emperor Wendi 文帝 (r. 581–604) of Sui and his wife, both devout Buddhists. He was even invited to ordain the empress.³³⁷ Fachun's conduct shows great selflessness and humility, but none of the things he did appears invasive to his person or could menace his dignity. In other words, they are still within the limits of the acceptable. That is why others followed him and emulated his acts. Some other monks, however, took this ascetic self-denial to the next level.

We have briefly seen instances of Buddhist monks taking care of lepers in the previous chapter. The career of these monks could have been more challenging. One such figure, Daoshun 道舜, devoted himself to caring for the patients in the leper villages (*licun* 癘村). He reportedly sucked pus from patients' broken boils without any aversion, washed their clothes and purified their mental karma (*xinye* 心業) with pleasure and willingness. He took tending to the patients as his responsibility and never felt any displeasure in doing so.³³⁸ The Tang monk Zhiyan, whom we have encountered in the first chapter, is also described of doing similar things for the lepers: preaching, teaching, sucking their pus, cleaning their body and hands.³³⁹

While Fachun's deeds were commended by the populace, Zhiyan and Daoshun's career were perhaps considered gone a bit too far. They were highly commended, but they did not achieve as much this-worldly honour as Fachun. Both Zhiyan and Daoshun lived and died in relative solitude. But in Zhiyan's case, he was rewarded with divine approval: when he reached the end of life, his body remained soft and unchanged after his death. There was, moreover, a flood of extraordinary fragrance that lingered in the room where the body was placed for several tendays – very similar to the 'odour of sanctity' associated with some Christian saints in the Middle Ages.³⁴⁰

We will look at the fragrance appearing upon a person's death more in detail in Chapter 4, but the signs unmistakably marked Zhiyan's spiritual achievement. Zhiyan and Daoshun's endeavour also parallels the careers of some medieval Christian saints, in particular that of Catherine of Siena (c.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ XGSZ 18.681–82.

³³⁹ XGSZ 21.792–94. Cit. in Needham 2000, 55.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

1370), who dedicated herself to attending to a sick nun with breast cancer at one point. William Miller has expertly presented how Catherine actively sought to overcome her squeamishness in front of the foulness of the sick woman's body by inhaling intensively her stench and drinking the washing of her sores. Senses, humility, and sanctity constantly negotiate with one another.³⁴¹ A key difference between Catherine's story and the Buddhist monks' biographies mentioned above is that, while Catherine's behaviour was so overtly shocking that invited suspicions of 'self-dramatisation' even in her own time,³⁴² the Buddhist monks' conduct was always portrayed as modest and inconspicuous. Whether intentional or not, this portrayal mirrors the ideal lauded in the wider medieval Chinese culture: the scent of virtue should be spontaneous and delicate that wafts in solitude and not for the 'nose' of any beholder.

Subduing the biological reaction in front of foulness could also be perceived as a test of commitment: how much a subject was ready to defy his body in order to advance in a spiritual pursuit. A case in point is a failed attempt by the famous Daoist thaumaturge Fei Changfang 費長房, who, according to the Eastern Jin 晉 (317–420) polymath, Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) achieved deliverance by means of a [simulated] corpse (*shijie* 尸解)³⁴³ not long before his time. Fei was also considered to be the originator of the custom of wearing mugwort plant (*zhuyu* 茱萸) on the Double Nine Festival.³⁴⁴ Here we will explore the beginning of his endeavour in pursuit of the Way following an encounter with a man that later accounts referred to as Sire Gourd (*hugong* 壺公). The story of their encounter and the tests was recorded in various texts from the *Hou Hanshu* to the *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (compiled by Gan Bao 干寶 in 3rd to 4th centuries) and in the later *Taiping guangji*.³⁴⁵ The basic plot, as Campany has pointed out, follows a conventional pattern of Daoist

³⁴¹ Miller 157–61.

³⁴² Ibid., 160.

³⁴³ Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian* 15.267. Campany 2002, 75–6. *Shijie* was considered a lower-level means of transcendence. There is no consensus how to translate the word, here I follow Paul Kroll's translation in his dictionary of 2017.

³⁴⁴ *Jing Chu suishiji*, 53.

³⁴⁵ *Hou han shu* 82.2743–44; *Shenxian zhuan jiaoshi*, 9.307–9; TPGJ, 12.80–2.

hagiography. It starts with Fei Changfang as an unremarkable person in the world – a guard in the marketplace. There, he encountered an old medicine vendor with a large gourd. After witnessing a magic trick that the old man performed unintentionally, Fei approached and requested to seek the Way with him. Sire Gourd did not accept at once, he prepared three tests. First, when Fei followed him to the mountains, he left Fei alone in the middle of the forest with a pack of tigers. Fei passed the test – he did not show any fear. Then Sire Gourd asked Fei to lie down with a ten-ton boulder over his chest, suspended only by a rotten piece of rope, while a horde of snakes crawled over each other for a chance to gnaw the rope in half. Fei was not afraid. However, the third test exceeded his limits. At the third time, Sire Gourd asked Fei to eat excrement, which was especially fetid and foul with maggots wriggling in them. In front of such nauseating filthiness, Fei showed hesitance. Sire Gourd then decided that he was not fit for pursuing the way of the immortals, making him an Agent above the Earth (*dishang zhuzhe* 地上主者).³⁴⁶

These were tests of Fei's courage and determination, but above all, his faith. Fei probably was aware that a test was in place for him. With the potential reward in mind, he could externalise an emotion such as fear as he could convince himself that the tigers, snakes, and the boulder were likely illusory. However, even if he could try persuading himself that faeces, too, were but a magical trick from the part of the Sire Gourd, the fetid odour and foul look of them challenged his deepest held bodily inviolability.

Fei Changfang's failed test revealed the role of the human body in the pursuit for transcendence. It is no surprise then taming one's sensory instinct became an important effort in the minds of the faithful. The prominent late Tang general and Daoist devotee, Gao Pian 高駢 (821–887), who governed in different periods the Protectorate of Annan (North Vietnam) and Western Sichuan, was the protagonist of an anecdote in which this kind of conviction seems to have made him tricked. Gao was introduced to a Daoist priest, Zhuge Yin 諸葛殷, who he soon revered. Zhuge was suffering from a form of dermatitis, so he could not stop scratching himself. As a result, pus and blood covered both his hands. Gao Pian was known to be very attentive to cleanliness, even his nephews could not sit next to him. And yet now he sat close to this priest and the two passed food vessels between them.

³⁴⁶ *Shenxian zhuan* 9.307–9; TPGJ, 12.80–2. See Campany 161–64 for a translation of the story.

To people's remonstrations, Gao replied: 'This was how the transcendents test humans!'³⁴⁷ Zhuge Yin turned out to be a malicious charlatan in the story, which suggests that both sensory perceptions and the idea of transcending them could be manipulated. Interestingly, in the story, Gao Pian's dog often approached Zhuge Yin following the smell of blood and filth. As we will further observe in the next chapter, animals with a sharper sense of smell as well as people with higher perception such as Daoist priests were often depicted as capable of penetrating the truth, while an ordinary person remained in obscurity. The sense of smell was noted as an essential conduit to knowledge.

Conclusions

The discussions of this chapter demonstrate that the moral association with fragrant and foul smells have a long history in China, which is rooted both in a lasting literary tradition and religious underpinnings. Virtuous conducts and good governance were considered to emanate fragrance, and so vile behaviours and corruption gave off an unbearable stench. In the same manner, human creativity also produced scent: poetry and calligraphy were all characterised with their specific smells. A recurrent theme that lies within the several strands of thought is the commendation for a spontaneous, inconspicuous, orchid-like type of virtue.

Examining the values assigned to one's physical odours as well as practices related to smell – cleaning and perfuming – we uncover that one's physiological, moral, and social scent were all thought to be closely intertwined. Medieval people no longer embraced Qu Yuan's outward adornment as a display of inner beauty. Decorating and scenting seems to have become more gendered from the end of the Southern Dynasties, thus increasingly associated with sexual attraction and superficiality. However, at the same time, pleasant scent as a reflection of moral purity and decorum also appeared desirable. Virtue lies in self-cultivation, but also in the suspension of judging the sensory instincts in front of the others. The attitudes toward scent and morality were complex.

Nonetheless, that virtue and vice were associated with smells and olfactory sensations had moral significance was a widely shared belief that forms what Susan Harvey calls a 'cultural habit.'³⁴⁸ In

³⁴⁷ ZZTJ, 254.8265. The story is recorded in *Guangling yaoluan zhi* 廣陵妖亂志 (An account of chaos by sorcerers in Guangling), composed by Luo Yin 羅隱 (833–910).

³⁴⁸ Harvey 2006, 2.

the next chapters, we will explore how new olfactory patterns developed on the basis of this habit, when medieval Chinese encountered the foreign, the strange, and the divine.

Chapter 3. Sensing the Other

When we see we remain who we are;
but when we smell we are taken over by otherness.

Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

In her book on hygiene and the modernising process in China, Ruth Rogaski recounts an anecdote about odour perceptions in a mid-nineteenth century Sino-British encounter. She relates what a British colonel stationed in Tianjin, G.J. Wolseley, wrote in his diary:

In what seems to have been a fairly jovial conversation, Wolseley somehow conveyed to his Chinese audience that he found their country olfactorily offensive. The Chinese responded in kind, informing Wolseley that they found the British to be a particularly odoriferous race. Wolseley was willing to admit that the British might have ‘a national odor’ easily distinguishable to the Chinese, but he claimed that his Han Chinese informants found his British smell less objectionable than the boiled-mutton smell they attributed to the Manchus and Mongols.¹

This mutual olfactory offence from the other will be what we discuss in this chapter, especially the last one mentioned in the account. In China, the idea that frontier people possessed a distinctive mutton-like smell, as Wolseley’s Han Chinese informants related, goes back for centuries. A consistent labelling of nomads and semi-nomads as the ‘mutton-reeking ones’ (*xingshan* 腥膻/羶, or simply *shan* 膻/羶) began in the eighth century, around the time of the famous rebellion led by the Turko-Sogdian general, An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757), which irreversibly weakened the Tang empire. A self-conscious, cohesive identity of belonging to an ethnic group later called the Han, as scholars tend to agree today, would only gradually form in the Northern Song dynasty.² The

¹ Rogaski 2004, 84, quoting Colonel G. J. Wolseley’s diary. A similar Chinese observation was made about the British and French soldiers. See Ibid., 74

² For some recent discussions, see Ge 2011, 41–65; Elliot 2012, 173–90; Tackett 2017; Yang 2019.

‘mutton-reeking ones’ then also did not refer to Manchus and Mongols, but to other groups living on the northern and western borders of the Tang. The discourse, however, is an enduring one.

The ascription of characteristic odours to different races and social groups, as Constance Classen notes, is a universal behaviour.³ Smells have been employed to effectively divide groups and used as an excuse for antipathy, avoidance, and repression. In Europe, the putative Jewish stench (the so-called *foetor judaicus*, ‘Jewish stench’) lasted for many centuries in people’s imagination, adding fuel to anti-Semitic sentiments and actions.⁴ Similarly, proponents of slavery defined African bodies as noxious and pungent and deserving of enslavement.⁵ Cultural historians and anthropologists have reflected upon the symbolic meaning behind the association between smell and the ethno-racial discourse. Some have drawn our attention to smell’s boundary-transgressing propensities, its emotional potency, and radical interiority; others have pointed out its elusiveness, which made the odour perception easy to manipulate.⁶ Furthermore, it has also been noted that when we inhale the odour of the other, we are literally ‘invaded.’⁷

All these frameworks are insightful for our understanding of the olfactory perception of the other in medieval China, but the idea of invasion is a particularly powerful one. It dovetails with one of the most important concepts in early and medieval cosmological and medical thought, that the human body is connected to the physio-moral cosmos through *qi*, a term incorporating numerous conceptual layers but at its basic level, it denoted vapour or breath. This concept was essential for our understanding of both the extra-human and the cultural other.

This chapter then seeks to historicise the olfactory perception of the cultural other in China by examining its early developments in medieval times. Culturally, this discourse is rooted in the long tradition of assigning moral and cosmological values to smells that we have seen in the previous

³ Classen 1992, 134. See also Corbin 1986, Classen et al. 1994, Shiner 2020, 23–24.

⁴ The Jewish odour has been described as variously as ‘goatlike’ (according to Guido Bonatti), akin to excrement and menstrual blood (Miller 1988, 155–6), or revealing the Devil’s breath (Trachtenberg, 1961, 47–49). It is believed that this association might have started as a simple scribal mistake, which then became appropriated for anti-Semitic discourse. In some periods, this odour was believed to disappear with conversion to Christianity, but in others it became an intrinsic mark of the Jewish people. Cf. Trachtenberg 1961, Zafran 1979, Classen et al 1994, chapter X; and Rindisbacher 1992 for smell in the memory of the Holocaust survivors.

⁵ For smell, race, and slavery, see Smith 2006, Tullet 2016, 307–322, and Kettler 2020.

⁶ Classen et al. 1994, 5; Barwich 2020, 4.

⁷ Wurgaft 2006, 57–60; Shiner 2020, 23.

chapter. In fact, in the medieval Chinese perception (based on transmitted texts), the odour of the cultural other had much in common with that of another type of other: the animals, spirits, ghosts, and demons that populated the seen and unseen worlds in and around the human lives. This chapter shows that these perceived smells were not inherent attributes but cultural conditioned perceptions. The foul smells of both the human and the extra-human other signalled a menace to the existing boundaries and order; it also indicated their perverse *qi* that were both a major pathogenic agent and a corrupting force to the prevailing morality.

Historically, this idea was concomitant with and actively contributed to the forging of a ‘Han’ identity against the nomadic polities with which the central kingdom contended for power. The addition of odour to this millennium-old Chinese-barbarian dichotomy invests the discourse with emotive potency and moral value, but also entails an appeal for action: like dirt, foul smells were to be avoided or purified. As such, the smell of the other was part of the rhetoric that the dominant group – Chinese literati who produced most of the written records – consciously mobilised to underline differences and sustain the existing order. Just as the Manchu Qing 清 court (1636/1644–1911) would later consciously purge the mutton reek from the texts when they edited them for the *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書, The Complete Book of the Four Treasuries. Therefore, the sense of smell was not at all marginal in this sense. It was not only essential for sensing the other, but also for the making of the other.

The ‘barbarian odour’ in a fifth-century account

We will start by examining an early reference to a ‘barbarian odour’ (*hu xiu* 胡臭) in a fifth-century text, which has been cited sometimes to demonstrate that such concept, or ‘knowledge,’ existed for a long time in China. The barbarian in this case was a Central Asian Hu 胡.⁸ It appears

⁸ Hu 胡 is one of the ethnonyms that the Chinese elite ascribed to the groups surrounding the central land. Its semantic field was not well defined. In general, scholars believe that it has passed from a broader designation of northern nomads, in earlier times, to a more specific association with eastern Iranians, including Khotanese, Bactrians, Khorezmians, and Sogdians in the Tang times. Cf. Laufer 2018, 14; Xiang 1933, 42–43; Schafer 1963, 4–5; Rong 2003, 740. The term is often, but not always, used in a pejorative sense. I will translate the term as ‘barbarian’ when it is used as a generic pejorative term referring to China’s northern and north-western neighbours; but when it is used to refer to a certain ethno-cultural group in a neutral sense, I will simply transliterate it as Hu.

in a story recorded in the *Records of the Hidden and Visible Realms* (*Youming lu* 幽明錄) compiled by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403-444), a scion of the Liu Song 劉宋 (420–479) court in southern China. The story tells of a Scholar X (*shi ren* 士人⁹) who died suddenly, so he was summoned to the Court of Heaven. There the Judge of Destiny (*siming* 司命) discovered that a mistake had been made – it was not Scholar X’s time yet, thus he ordered to release the scholar. But Scholar X complained that he could not walk back as his legs ached. At the same time, a foreigner (*Hu ren* 胡人) named Mr. Kang 康, likely a Sogdian from Samarkand judging from his surname¹⁰, was waiting in line outside the Court of Heaven. He was due to die then, and he had healthy legs. Therefore, the Judge of Destiny ordered to exchange the scholar’s legs with those of the Sogdian’s. When the scholar miraculously came back to life, he related to his family what happened in detail.

They lifted [his clothes] and discovered that those were indeed barbarian legs¹¹ with entangled leg hair. Furthermore, [the legs] emitted a Hu odour.¹² Mr X had originally been a *shi*, and he cared dearly about his hands and feet. Having suddenly got these legs, he could just not bear to see them. Even though he was able to live again, he was often distressed and almost preferred to be dead. [...] For all his life he loathed the foulness [of these legs].

發視，果是胡脚，叢毛連結，且胡臭。甲本土，愛翫手足。而忽得此，了不欲見。雖獲更活，每惆悵，殆欲如死。[...] 終身憎穢。¹³

⁹ The *shi* 士 in early medieval China refers to a group of elites that identified themselves as such variously because of their lineage, class, culture, or lifestyle. Without a better alternative that captures all its complex connotations, I translate the term as ‘scholar’ here. For studies on the political and social history of the *shi* over the dynasties, see, among others, Holcombe 1994, passim; Yan 2015.

¹⁰ One of the so-called ‘nine surnames of Zhaowu’ (*Zhaowu jiuxing* 昭武九姓) adopted by central Asian immigrants in medieval China. They usually adopt a Chinese-style surname based on where they came from. Kang 康 was adopted by immigrants from Samarkand, known as Kangju 康居 in Chinese. Similarly, those from Bukhara, known as the State of An (Anguo 安國), adopted the surname An 安. Zhaowu was a county located in Zhangye 張掖, in today’s Gansu province. For further discussions on the *Zhaowu jiuxing*, see Pulleyblank 1952 and Rong 2015, 229.

¹¹ 腳 (*jiao*) in Classical Chinese could refer to a foot or a leg. In this case, the use of ‘zu 足’ for foot in the following sentence and the description of ‘entangled hair’ suggest that the character probably refers to legs.

¹² While the character 臭 (*xiu/chou*) denotes odour or foul odour in medieval China, in modern China it has come denote bad smells. I translate the compound *huchou* 胡臭 differently according as ‘Hu odour’ or ‘barbarian stench’ according to the context.

¹³ ‘Shiren jia’ 士人甲, *Youming lu*, TPGJ., 447.3656.

This tale is notable for its description of how negatively Scholar X and others perceived his new limbs. Moreover, it is almost as though the Sogdian's limbs were not only 'transplanted' onto Scholar X's body, but also subsumed into his person and identity. Mr Kang's son, for instance, recognised the legs (we are not told how), and on the occasion of important festivals, he would run to Scholar X's residence, embrace his legs, and wail as he missed his father. That a body part could hold such strong emotion-invoking power might have seemed much less strange to us were it the Hu's eyes or even face – organs that we tend to associate with identity – that had been transplanted. But here, the case is unusual: it is legs, a component fulfilling locomotive functions, that arouses repulsion or affection.

This account belongs to a genre that was retrospectively termed as the *zhiguai* 志怪 (lit. 'Recounting the strange') narratives. As numerous scholars have pointed out, these narratives should not be read as fictional creations.¹⁴ They were materials ranging from historical records to oral transmissions that some of the most learned men of the era compiled to provide the court with further understandings of 'the subtle workings of the actual unseen world.'¹⁵ As Robert Campany has noted, the compilers in fact 'saw their enterprise as a branch of history.'¹⁶ Whoever the original narrator of Scholar X's story was, the fact that it was recorded by Liu Yiqing, and subsequently included in the tenth-century court-commissioned compendium, *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* (*Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, compiled by Li Fang 李昉 et al. in 978), suggests that it was considered representative of the ideas and knowledge at the time.

Scholar X's story has been cited to corroborate a theory proposed by Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890–1969).¹⁷ In an article published in 1937, Chen argued that the armpit odour, commonly called 'fox stench' (*huchou* 狐臭) in modern Chinese, was in fact first referred to as 'barbarian stench' (*Huchou* 胡臭) in ancient China, because the condition was first found among the Western Hu people. The term 'fox stench' may have been proposed later as a euphemism as the Hu passed the condition

¹⁴ Cf. Dudbridge 1996, 16–17; 2001, 148; Allen 2006, 108–09; Campany 2002, 102–08; 2015, xxvi–xxxii.

¹⁵ Campany 2015, xxiv.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Huang 1948, 182.

on to the Chinese people.¹⁸ Chen's argument was influential and has since been taken for granted as fact. However, his observation was probably influenced by the nationalist sentiments and racial theories of his own time. He based his observation partially on his own experience, indicating that the fox/barbarian odour must have been familiar for those who travelled to Europe and America at the time he was writing, as the people were recorded as emitting the smell.¹⁹ This, according to Chen, also contradicts the medieval medical theory in one of the texts he cited, which relates that armpit odour was caused by the 'disharmony between blood and *qi*' (*xueqi buhe* 血氣不和).²⁰ In other words, he believed that the offensive body odour was not a curable temporary condition, but an inherent olfactory feature of the Westerners, either the Western Hu in premodern China, or the Europeans of his day. Accounts about the putative smell of the 'White' were not uncommon from the mid nineteenth century onwards in China.²¹

Nowhere in medieval medical treatises, however, did the physicians name any association between the Hu and armpit odour or other strong bodily odours. The association with the fox might have well been based on empirical observations of the compiler of the *Zhubing yuanhou lun*, Chao Yuanfang, one of the texts that Chen cited. A patient suffering from armpit odour might have appeared to the sixth-century physicians to have the smell of a wild fox, or green onion and fermented bean (*cong chi* 蔥豉), which is also mentioned.²² They also cited the fox to describe other diseases, probably to familiarise the reader with the symptoms. Armpit odour, moreover, was also referred to as 'falcon odour' (*hu xiu* 鵠臭) or 'crow odour' (*ya xiu* 鴉臭), labels that further

¹⁸ Chen 2001 (1937), 157–160.

¹⁹ Ibid., 157.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Aside from the account that we have seen in the beginning, another prominent twentieth-century Chinese scholar Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 (1910–1998), who studied at Oxford and Paris in the 1930s, wrote an account in which a person who had been to the West seemed 'attuned' to its olfactory traits. In the *Fortress Besieged* (*Weicheng* 圍城, first published in 1947), Qian narrates that a Mrs Shen, who had come back from France, had a strong goat-like odour about her. Nauseated by this smell 'mingled with the scent of face powder and the fragrance of flowers,' the protagonist, Fang Hongjian, thinks that Mrs Shen has brought back to China 'a whole "symphony of foul odours" from the Paris marketplace.' Qian (1947) 1991, 61. Trans. by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan Mao (1979, 60).

²² *Zhubing yunhou lun* 31.4a.

demonstrate that the equivalence of a foreigner's smell and a fox's odour was not widely accepted in medieval times.²³

Nonetheless, the 'fox hu – barbarian Hu' paradigm that Chen suggested is insightful. Chen did not suggest a blanket correspondence between the fox *hu* and the barbarian Hu in his article, but several later scholars provided further evidence to corroborate the close link between them.²⁴ In one oft-cited example by Dai Fu 戴孚 (fl. ca. 8th century), a fox-man revealed to another one that foxes one thousand years old are surnamed Zhao 趙 or Zhang 張 (typical Chinese surnames), while those five hundred years old are surnamed Bai 白 (a typical sinicised surname adopted by those of Kucha) and Kang 康 (a typical surname adopted by Sogdians from Samarkand). This is consistent with the immigration history of Central Asians in medieval China.²⁵ Another account cited by scholars makes a more explicit correspondence, in which the wife of a Hu person turned out to be a fox.²⁶ It is therefore plausible that some Tang fox tales were meant to be allusions to the Hu people. Read as such, these narratives disclose a continuous negotiation between prejudice-marginalisation and attraction-acceptance vis-à-vis Central Asian immigrants.²⁷

²³ At first glance, the denomination 'falcon odour' (*hu xiu* 鵞鼻) seems to refer to the Uyghurs, who were referred to as the Huihu 回鶻 or Huihe 回紇 in Tang texts. However, the term seems to be found only in Chan Buddhist texts. It is first found in eleventh-century Chan texts describing the physical appearance of travelling monks (e.g., *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄, 23.1743, *Xu qingliang zhuan* 續清涼傳, 11–12). The term must have been a familiar and accepted one for Song-dynasty monks. 'Crow odour' (*ya xiu* 鴉鼻) was a regional term used in the Shu 蜀 area (modern-day Sichuan). See the annotations of two Song monks, Huibao 慧寶 and Degui 德珪, to the ninth-century *Beishan lu* 北山錄. In *Beishan lu jiaozhu*, 7.573.

²⁴ Huang 1948, 181–89; Wang 2003, 91–97; Kang 2006, 32–38. The examples that follow have been cited in these three articles.

²⁵ Dai Fu, *Guangyi ji* 廣異記, in TPGJ, 450.3678. For the immigration history and the practice of surname changing, see Xiang 13–15; Feng and Xiang 1931, 1223–1239; Kang 2006, 34. Other clues include foxes' extraordinary astronomical and medical skills – fields that Persians and Indians had shown great capability to the point that a few of them were appointed in imperial bureaus. In addition, they know a type of language that is similar to the Brahmi script but differs from it. Cf. 'Lin Jingxuan' 林景玄, in *Xuanshi zhi* (TPGJ, 449.3675), 'Wang sheng' 王生, in *Lingguai lu* 靈怪錄 (TPGJ, 453.3699).

²⁶ 'Li Nun' 李瞞, *Guangyi ji* 廣異記, in TPGJ, 451.3689–90.

²⁷ See Kang 2006, 21–46 for an excellent study on the image of fox in early and medieval China as well as how fox stories mirrored Tang literati's various layers of social anxiety. See also Wang 2003, 91–97.

A classical trope is a man of good socio-cultural standing who has a relationship with a beautiful woman (love was seldom mentioned at the time). Blinded by the sexual attraction, he is unable to tell her real identity. However, a creature with sharper sense of smell like a dog, a person with higher perceptive capability, such as a Daoist priest, or simply a suspicious family member, would raise some doubts and bring the fox-woman's deceit to an end. Smell, either explicitly pointed out or implied with the agency of a dog, was often cited as the key clue to the discovery of the fox spirit's true identity.

Was there, then, a continuous perception that foreigners had distinctive body odour from the fifth century through to the Tang? The answer is an ambivalent one. Scholar X's story remains the only case we have where a 'barbarian' odour is mentioned explicitly.²⁸ Whether we interpret the Tang fox tales allegorically or not, their references to the Hu – mainly used to refer to the Central Asians in this period – are implicit. Reading Scholar X's story in the light of Chinese/foreigner dichotomy would be overly simplistic. In fact, the boundaries of Scholar X's self-identity encircle a much smaller area. The compiler highlighted twice that Scholar X was a *shi* and specified that he was from a 'garb-donning and headdress-wearing aristocratic clan' (*yiguan zuxing* 衣冠族姓), belonging to the big families that migrated from the Central Plains to southern China in the early fourth century, following the Xiongnu 匈奴 invasion. The members of these clans considered themselves bearers of civilisation (the people living in the Southeast reportedly emulated their etiquette).²⁹ Hence, not only Sogdian legs would appear stinking to them, but also those of basically anyone else. They

²⁸ Another story recorded in the *Yiyuan* is sometimes cited as a proof that there was a perception or 'knowledge' of the 'barbarian odour' in medieval times. The story regards a man named Hu Daoqia 胡道洽, who claims to come from Guangling 廣陵 (in modern-day Yangzhou), which was a port city where foreigners were known to gather. Hu was skilled in music and medicine. As he had strong body odour, he always covered himself with precious perfume. He also feared fierce dogs, so people at the time then all said he was a fox. (TPGJ, 447.3656) Music and medicine were indeed skills associated with people from the Western Regions, however there is no explicit indication about his identity. This figure is sometimes associated with a physician that historically existed named Hu Qia 胡洽, whose medical formulae are partially quoted in important medical treatises like the *Qianjin yaofang* and the *Ishinpō*. There does not seem to be any real evidence that the historical Hu Qia corresponds the Hu Daoqia in the story. Moreover, Hu was not a typical surname adopted by Central Asian immigrants. Instead, early Song scholars claim that this was one of the eight large aristocratic clans that migrated to southern China during the Yongjia 永嘉 era (307–313). See Lu Zhen 路振 (fl. ca. late 10th–early 11th century), *Jiuguo zhi* 九國志, cit. in *Qianlong Fuzhou fuzhi* 乾隆福州府志 (Qianlong Gazetteer of Fuzhou), *juan* 75. Cf. Zhang and Du 2012, 30–32.

²⁹ *Baopuzi*, *juan* 3, cit. in Chen 2007, 129–32.

called people from the Southeast foxes and racoon dogs (*hu he* 狐貉), while considering those in the Southwest in perennial fight against miasma, venomous vapour, and pests of all sorts.³⁰ In addition, these aristocrats were known for the attention they paid to their appearance: they applied powder to their face and scented their clothes with profuse perfume. The perception and assertion of the barbarian odour, thus, was a way for Scholar X to mark his own distinctiveness as a member of a particular elite group of the society. Smell signified more a class distinction than an ethnic one.

Foxes, Otters, Ghosts, and other Smelly Beings: The Extra-human Other

The fox tales are part of a category of narratives which regard a different type of Other: the perilous spirits, demons, and ghosts that inhabit the unseen world. Here the sense of smell comes into play as an essential means of survival by which medieval subjects navigate a world populated by miscellaneous beings. The vocabularies employed to represent foul odours are most commonly *xing* 腥 (fishy/bloody), *hui* 穢 (rank/foul), *sao* 臊 (originally meant dog fat but later denoting an animal-like smell), or binomes based on the characters above, *xinghui* and *xingsao*.

The perception of the foul odour of the extra-human other mainly fulfils these two functions: revealing the real identity of a creature and detecting danger. These often work concomitantly. The revelatory function of smell is particularly useful in the stories of ‘shapeshifters,’ when both the visual and the auditory senses are of little use to the protagonist. In a story that we have already looked at, the nostrils of scholar Cheng Zixu barely register the pile of manure he passes when out roaming in a village near Weinan. In contrast, Cheng recalls that a whiff of foul odour assailed his nose during the night when a group of people suddenly disappeared upon hearing the bells of the temple announcing daybreak. We know, as the story progresses, that the people who disappeared were in fact animals that had assumed human forms. The protagonist was not able to possess that information cognitively, and yet his nose probed, inspected, and then provided the knowledge to which he had no other means of access.

³⁰ *Wei shu*, 96.2093.

The fox was the shapeshifter par excellence in medieval tales, but other animals also had this skill of confounding people by hiding their true identities.³¹ Otters were early characters in this type of story. There are, in fact, seven stories in which otters feature as shapeshifters in the pre-Tang period, all recorded in southern China. Two of them mention the revelatory function of smell. The first appeared in the *Zhenyi zhi* 甄異志 (compiled by Dai Zuo 戴祚, fl. ca. 5th century) and was then adapted by Liu Jingshu and Liu Yiqing, a process which attests to the popularity of the tale.³² Here, the male protagonist meets a beautiful woman by the lake and the two spend a romantic evening together. But as soon as Yang extinguishes the light, he smells an ‘animal odour’ (*saoqi* 臊氣) about the woman’s person and immediately becomes suspicious. The woman then suddenly transforms back into an otter and jumps into water.³³

The second story follows a similar plot, but the male protagonist does not realise the woman’s non-human identity until a dog spots her and kills her. A piece of clove that the woman had gifted him earlier – which he had been holding in the mouth as a breath freshener – subsequently turns out to be the otter’s dung.³⁴

This plot of mistaking the foul for the fragrant is represented in a different manner in a snake-demon story from the ninth century, which may have been an inspiration for the popular late imperial drama, the *Legend of the White Snake* (*Baishe zhuan* 白蛇傳).³⁵ Here, the protagonist Li Huang 李黃 is similarly attracted to an uncommonly beautiful woman, but this time, he is not only enchanted by her appearance, but also her unusual fragrance. In contrast, his groom, who does not meet the woman, senses a nauseating and foul snake odour on Li when he returns from the rendezvous. Qian Zhongshu quoted this story in his notes and compared it to a Latin expression in Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): *Immo nec ipsum amicae stercus foetet* (Indeed, not even his lover’s

³¹ See Kang 2006, for the figure of fox in early and medieval Chinese beliefs.

³² Wen 2017, 63–81.

³³ ‘Yang chounu’ 楊醜奴, *Zhenyi zhi*, TPGJ, 468.3861.

³⁴ ‘Zhong Dao’ 鐘道, *Youming lu*, TPGJ, 469.3862–63.

³⁵ There are two versions of the story about Li Huang, both recorded in the *Boyi lu* 博異錄, subsequently included in the *Taiping guangji* (458.3750–52). The earliest full-length version of the legend is included in Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) *Stories to Caution the World* (*Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言) of 1624. See Idema 2009, xii–xvi.

dung stinks).³⁶ Love ‘blinds’ not only the eyes, but also the nostrils. However, the mention of an unusual fragrance has another significance: sweet scent was a key symbol for recognising the virtuous and the divine. Li’s confusion suggests that smells give away the real identity of beings, but the access to this knowledge is not always granted.

While foxes and snakes have been well-known mythological creatures since ancient times, the reason why otters joined this group of shapeshifters does not seem obvious. This is perhaps related to their image as ferocious hunters. An early Chinese agricultural treatise, the ‘Monthly ordinance’ (*yueling* 月令), advises fishermen to start fishing only when ‘the otters “sacrifice” fish.’³⁷ Otter stories mainly appeared in the south where they were familiar animals for the people living around the water margins. During the Tang, otters became partially tamed and trained to catch fish for fishermen, this is perhaps why stories of bewitching otters diminished during that period.³⁸ In addition, otters appear in several Buddhist scriptures. In one of the *jātaka* stories translated into Chinese by the famous monk Kang Senghui 康僧會 (d. 280) in the third century, the otter is the reincarnation of one of the Buddha’s closest disciples, Maudgalyāyana.³⁹ In a fourth-century translation of a scripture depicting hell, the *Nili jing* 泥犁經⁴⁰, otters, together with snakes, raccoon dogs (which were often confused with foxes in medieval times), as well as rats, are described to be in a state of constant suffering because they are born, grow and live in darkness.⁴¹ Either as an animal with exceptional intelligence or as living a liminal existence by dwelling in murkiness, the appearance of otters in Buddhist texts might have contributed to their image as creatures with supernatural power. Could the otter also stand as an allegorical image? A Xianbei politician, Yuwen Tai 宇文泰 (507–556), who was the pro-founder of the Northern Zhou 周 dynasty (557–581) and

³⁶ Qian 2003, 86, 243.

³⁷ *Liji jijie*, 12.335. The word ‘sacrifice’ depicts an interesting image. The commentator annotates that the catch was so abundant that the remains of prey were scattered around on the riverbanks as if the otters were sacrificing to the four directions. Cit. in Sterckx 2002, 146.

³⁸ TPGJ, 466.3840, 3843, quoting from *Chaoye qianzai* and *Youyang zazu*.

³⁹ *Liudu jijing* 六度集經, translated by Kang Senghui in 251 (T. 152, 13c1-23).

⁴⁰ Costantino Moretti suggest that the first part of this scripture corresponds roughly to the *Bālapaṇḍitasūtra* (Moretti 2019, 8).

⁴¹ T. 86, 908c3-7.

honoured as an emperor posthumously, was called ‘Black Otter’ in childhood. A southern official that he tried to recruit reported to a colleague: ‘the Black Otter tried to lure me.’⁴² The fifth-century otter stories predate Yuwen Tai’s time, nonetheless, Yuwen’s nickname suggests that this animal might have had a different significance in the Xianbei culture. This, however, remains only a hypothesis due to a lack of sources to support it.

In any case, as Xiaofei Kang has observed for the case of foxes, all three animals live in the vicinity of humans and were thus probably perceived as constantly transgressing between the natural and human worlds. This liminality probably contributed to their association with the world of darkness, occult, and their perceived uncleanness.⁴³ This brings us to the second function of smell in relation to the extra-human other, which is the revelation of menace.

Potentially malignant beings that are not necessarily foul-smelling in our modern perception or imagination, such as pests, snakes, and ghosts, were often mentioned to be mephitic in medieval narratives. This was not only because they posed danger, but also because smell indicates what constituted them: the perverse or evil *qi*.

Described in various texts as fearful pests, locusts were said to have a fishy/bloody smell. One late Tang account explains that this was because they were born out of miasma (*liqi* 沴氣), or from fish eggs. Locusts were also said to create disgusting spectacles: they entered people’s houses, blocked wells and toilets, soiled beds and curtains, and ate books and clothes.⁴⁴ Although this account attributes the locusts’ smell to their birth⁴⁵, their image as destroyers probably also contributed to this perception: they transgress the boundaries, invade human homes, disrupt cultivations and patterns of life, and bring chaos and calamity. Besides this, they were also considered a symptom of moral decadence. Corrupted governance caused perverse *qi*, which in turn gave rise to insects and pests.⁴⁶ This morally mediated olfactory perception shows much similarity

⁴² *Beiqi shu* 北齊書 (Compiled by Li Baiyao 李百藥, completed in 636), 24.347.

⁴³ Kang 2006, 15. See Douglas 1975, 51; Howes 1987, 398–416 for the relationship between liminal state, dirt, and smell.

⁴⁴ *Yutang xianhua* 玉堂閒話 (9th to 10th centuries), TPGJ, 479.3949. The *Youyang zazu* also mentions a recent belief that locusts were transformed from fish eggs (*Youyang zazu*, 17.1269, TPGJ, 477.3926).

⁴⁵ The early Chinese belief that fireflies were born from rotten grass in the summer (*Liji zhengyi*, 16.2967) may also contributed to the association of insects with putridity.

⁴⁶ JTS, 89.2890.

to that associated with military conflicts that we will examine later in this chapter. Snakes were likewise depicted as associated with fetid smells. In some cases, the smell of a snake was indicated poison and carrier of contagion itself. The venomous vapour emitted by the snake was considered lethal for anyone who found themselves inside this poisoning cloud.⁴⁷

This association of smell with contagion is even more in evidence when ghosts and demons are discussed.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, ghosts and demons are supernatural beings generally considered inodorate because of their inorganic nature⁴⁹, but in medieval Chinese account, they announce their presence with perceivable foul odours.⁵⁰ Connected with the dead and the unseen realm of the occult, ghosts were consistently perceived as a source of disease and misfortune for the living. A visitation could cause specific diseases such as demonic infestation (*guizhu* 鬼疰)⁵¹, but the perverse *qi* of which ghosts were constituted (noted sometimes simply as ‘demonic *qi*’ *guiqi* 鬼氣) and by whose power they were transformed, also gave rise to general epidemics.⁵²

As the perilous perverse *qi* – sometimes perceivable via the sense of smell – was considered the main pathogen, to expel these was fundamental in the realm of healing. This explains the use of aromatic medicines and how accounts on miraculous aromatics such as the ‘soul-returning incense’ (*fanhun xiang* 返魂香) could prove convincing. Aromatics were noted for their ability to expel evil influences in medieval pharmacological texts. The first court-commissioned pharmacopoeia, the *Newly Revised Materia Medica* (*Xinxiu bencao* 新修本草), notes that musk could dispel a variety of

⁴⁷ *Bowu zhi jiaozheng* 博物志校證, 10.111; ‘Xuanxian chang’ 選仙場, *Yutang xianhua*, TPGJ, 458.3749–50; Yuan Zhen, ‘Seeing off the Imperial Advisor Cui to Lingnan’ (*Song Cui yushi zhi Lingnan* 送崔侍御之嶺南), QTS, 406.4525.

⁴⁸ Michel Strickmann has noted that the distinction between ghosts and demons in premodern China was hazy, which suggests the highly permeable and elastic nature of the spirit world’s frontiers. Strickmann 2002, 73.

⁴⁹ Classen 1992, 149.

⁵⁰ For a couple of examples on this theme, see the Buddhist monk Seng Fachang’s 僧法長 encounter with a powerful monster emitting white vapour (*Xuanshi zhi*, TPGJ, 364.2894) and the story of a ghost-woman with eyes on four sides of her head (*Tongyou ji*, TPGJ, 338.2681–82).

⁵¹ See Liu 2021, 62–69.

⁵² Accounts of the demonic *qi* as cause of various diseases can be found throughout the *Waitai biyao*. Cf. Strickmann 2002, 72.

inauspicious, perverse, and demonic *qi* and kill demonic essences.⁵³ Similarly, the storax benzoin could deal with the evil *qi* that attack the heart and abdomen, as well as demonic infestation.⁵⁴ Medical fumigation has a long history in China and was already mentioned in the Mawangdui 馬王堆 medical manuscripts dating from the second century BCE.⁵⁵ The Tang imperially-commissioned medical compendium, the *Arcane Essentials from the Imperial Library* (*Waitai biyao* 外臺祕要, compiled by Wang Tao et al. in 752) includes rich sources on anti-demonic fumigations. Musk, bezoar, and vermilion were the most prescribed ingredients. The medicinal compounds made in basis of aromatics and other substances could be taken internally, or burnt to fumigate the body, the clothes, or the residence. Put into a silk bag and tied to one's left arm, they could also be used as an amulet for warding off tigers, poisonous snakes, and the various spirits, ghosts and other bewitching creatures.⁵⁶ Smell was therefore both essential in detecting the contagion and fighting it.

Whether the putative smell of the extra-human other was related to those of the cultural other is debatable. Foreigners – especially the Hu and the Persians – also appeared in other Tang narratives as humans. There they display exceptional medical or musical skills, the ability to discern treasure, and sometimes they are portrayed as deceptive monks.⁵⁷ But there is no mention of a distinctive smell about them. Perhaps because they were known to be wealthy and apparently kept to themselves, therefore not perceived as boundary transgressors. Most Sogdians lived in their community. Persians and Arabs in the port cities of Yangzhou and Guangzhou sojourned in the 'foreigners' quarters' (*fanfang* 蕃坊) which enjoyed a certain level of juridical autonomy. An explicit reference to a barbarian odour, therefore, has remained just that of the fifth-century tale of Scholar X that we encountered above.

⁵³ *Xinxiu bencao*, 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13. See Laufer 2018, 280–83; Kotyk 2021, 519–28 for the identification of the *anxi xiang*.

⁵⁵ Harper 1982, recipes 146–49, 154, cit. in Strickmann 2002, 248.

⁵⁶ *Waitai biyao*, 13.368, cit. in Strickmann 2002, 249.

⁵⁷ For the images of the Hu in Tang narratives, see, among others, Mikinosuke, 1967, 210–281; Seo 2009, 107–34; Wang 2003, 91–97.

In a different context, however, smell became a potent symbol that marked differences of groups. The smell of the Other became a rhetorical instrument which the dominant group mobilised to demarcate, assert, and police socio-cultural boundaries.

The Mutton-Reeking Ones: Trauma, Propaganda, and the Politics of Olfaction

From the mid-eighth century, the nomads and the semi-nomadic peoples in the north and west, who engaged in military and political contests with the central state, started to reek of mutton in a variety of Chinese texts. This idea has had a very long-lasting legacy. Even today, the smell and the consumption of mutton is closely related to north-west China and the steppe. The Han Chinese, in contrast, often find mutton as something they need to learn to appreciate by overcoming the immediate dislike of its rank smell.⁵⁸ A closer look at history, however, reveals that both mutton and its odour had very different meaning to early and medieval Chinese. In the eighth century, when the denunciation of the ‘mutton-reeking ones’ began, this sentiment of disgust was probably more asserted by the few Confucian literati than shared.⁵⁹

There had been occasional references to the smell of nomads in early medieval period. In the fourth century, a southern dynasty referred to the soldiers of the northern Later Zhao 趙 dynasty (319–351) the ‘Smelly Jie’ 臭羯.⁶⁰ However, a consistent use of the description started from the period following the An Lushan Rebellion and became reinforced in the dynasties that followed when the central state continued to contend with its northern neighbours. The association between power dynamic and olfactory perception is evident, as much less attention was given to the smell of

⁵⁸ See two stories that record their authors’ experience of encountering the mutton smell. In one story, the author recalled how he went from repulsion to appreciation. He also quoted a story in the *Yuefei zhuan* 岳飛傳, which tells about a Song general that discovered the real identity of a Jurchen spy by detecting the mutton smell on him. (Deng 2016, 75–79) Another semi-autobiographic account mentions a distinctive smell that people in Xinjiang have, which, according to the author, is a medley of the fragrance of the land of the Western Regions, the pungent smell of onion, and the gamey odour of mutton (Zhang 2017, 21–22).

⁵⁹ This of course excludes those who reject mutton for religious purposes, as in that case, the target was all the meats.

⁶⁰ *Jin shu* 晉書 (Compiled by Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 et al. in 648), 63.1707. The Jie was a people descending from one of the Xiongnu clans.

the other groups of people that were considered Other during the Tang, such as those from the South. Besides the *xing* and *xingsao* that we have seen in the accounts on the extra-human Other, *shan* 膻/羶 (a goat-like smell) or *xingshan* 腥膻/羶 were also used. While these olfactory terms were already mentioned in Classical texts such as the *Zhouli* and the *Xunzi*, *xingshan* as a binome was first used in Daoist and Buddhist texts to refer to a diet that involves the consumption of meat. By extension, it also referred to sensory pleasures and the mundane world.⁶¹

Du Fu was the first Tang poet to use this olfactory motif consistently. He mentioned these offensive smells in at least ten of his extant poems, six relating to the An Lushan Rebellion.⁶² In the first of these, he describes the fall of the capital into the rebels' hands while Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) escapes to Chengdu and is forced to abdicate in favour of his son, who would be later known as Suzong 肅宗 (r. 756–762).⁶³ During this affair, Du Fu wrote, the '*Odes and Documents* were walled up' (v. 3) as the 'slaves and servants' waved their banners claiming victory – the barbarians had no respect for learning and the classics.⁶⁴ But he concluded with hope:

There is only gossip about the temporary court,

in this life I follow what I encounter.

This former realm of the Sage-king Yao,

Will see the time when we will dispel this stench. (vv. 5–8)

行在僅聞信，此生隨所遭。

神堯舊天下，會見出腥臊 (*xingsao*)。⁶⁵

⁶¹ In pre-Tang Buddhist texts, the term *xingshan* does not seem to be mentioned, instead, the dietary taboo was normally *hunxin* 葷辛. Hui Lin's *Yiqie jing yinyi* explains *hun* 葷 as odorous vegetables and notes that it was used to expel evil. He further indicates that *hunxin* are things like green onion, garlic, chive, and allium (*xie* 薤).

⁶² The others refer to the stench of meat as a symbol of corruption and social injustice.

⁶³ QTS, 234.2589, 'Bidi' 避地, written in the year 756. All the dates for Du Fu's poems follow those indicated in Qiu Zhao'ao's 仇兆鰲 (1638–1717) *Dushi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳註. See Li 2022, 47–55 for a recent study on Du Fu's experience during the An Lushan Rebellion. Trans. in Owen 2016, 255, modified.

⁶⁴ QTS, 234.2589, v. 3. Trans. in Owen 2016, 255.

⁶⁵ Ibid., vv. 5–8. Modified from Owen 2016, 255.

‘Sage-king Yao’ (*shenyao* 神堯) was the posthumous epithet bestowed on Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618–626),⁶⁶ the founder of the Tang dynasty, but it also makes a clear reference to the legendary sage king of antiquity, Yao 堯 (c. 24 century BCE), who served as an eternal model of virtue, righteousness, and devotion.

The use of the word *xingsao* for stench, aside from evoking the traumatic experience of the sanguinary violence, also recalls a passage that the Warring States philosopher, Han Fei 韓非 (c. 280–233 BCE), wrote about the civilising process in remote antiquity:

In the most ancient times, when men were few and creatures numerous, human beings could not overcome the birds, beasts, insects, and reptiles. [...] The people lived on fruits, berries, mussels, and clams—things rank and evil-smelling that hurt their bellies, so that many of them fell ill. Then a sage appeared who drilled with sticks and produced fire with which to transform the rank and putrid foods.

上古之世，人民少而禽獸眾。人民不勝禽獸蟲蛇。[...] 民食果蓏蚌蛤，腥臊惡臭而傷害腹胃，民多疾病。有聖人作，鑽燧取火以化腥臊 (*xingsao*)。⁶⁷

Here, civilisational progress is described as a process of conquering nature and taming the stench by turning the raw into the cooked.⁶⁸ If Du Fu complains in line 3 about endangered destiny of culture and learning, with the word *xingsao* he expresses a visceral anxiety about the potential reversal in the course of civilisation: a return to a primitive time enveloped in a shroud of miasma.

In another poem composed after the recapture of Chang’an, Du Fu puts the social, cultural, and cosmological significance of olfaction more clearly by juxtaposing the stench of cultural and military confusion with fragrance brought about by order restored. Like in the previous example, he starts by

⁶⁶ The first posthumous title for Emperor Gaozu was Taiwu 太武 Huangdi. It was changed to Shenyao Huangdi under Gaozong 高宗 (674) and later Shenyao dasheng daguang xiaohuangdi 神堯大聖大光孝皇帝 under Xuanzong, just two years before this poem was composed. This means that the veneration of Gaozu continued till Xuanzong’s reign and the memory of a glorious empire was fresh in most people’s mind. Posthumous epithets were thought to impart moral characteristics and administrative accomplishments. The lengthening of posthumous titles of previous emperors and empresses was not unusual, nor was the practice of changing them.

⁶⁷ *Han Feizi xin jiaozhu* 19.1085. Trans. in Watson 2003, 97.

⁶⁸ The binary opposition between uncivilised rawness and the cultivated or cooked is a subject which has been much studied in anthropology ever since the publication of the classic work *Le Cru et le cuit* by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1965). Cf. Milburn 2016, 449–50.

talking about the fate of the canons: ‘The *Great Odes* are lost in the distance’ (v. 1) and then proceeds with the blurring of ethno-cultural boundary:

Chinese and barbarians were mixed together,
the whole universe was in one mutton stench. (vv. 23–24)
華夷相混合，宇宙一羶腥⁶⁹

But luckily, the poet recalls, ‘Heaven’s majesty’ was able to unite the state and restore the ritual order by bringing back the ‘Triple Concordance’ (v. 25–26).⁷⁰ Suzong, with the help of the Uyghurs, recovered the capital in 758. The imperial palace was purified to wait for the return of the emperor: incense was burnt in Pure Light Palace and brimming waters were prepared in the Cloud-gazing Pavilion. The next year (in the year of this poem’s composition), the emperor made offerings at the Imperial Ancestral Temple. Finally, ‘the pure ancestral temple was solemn and fragrant’ (v. 28), symbolising a re-establishment of imperial order with the legitimising blessings of the ancestors. The recovery of imperial power took place concomitantly with the ritual purification and the freshening of the air.

If in Du Fu’s poetry the olfactory motifs are still related to an anxiety about disruptions in the social, cultural, and moral order caused by conflicts with the non-Han generals (*fanjiang* 蕃將), the term soon developed into a synecdoche referring to various groups of people antagonistic toward the Tang. Literati from the eighth century onwards used the label ‘mutton-reeking’ to describe the frontier spaces and a variety of peoples, including An Lushan’s army, the Tuyuhun, the Tibetans, the Uyghurs, and, later, the Khitans, Jurchens, Mongols and Manchus.⁷¹ Such language even features in imperial decrees and official histories. Emperor Xuanzong’s 宣宗 (r. 846–859) decree of the year 849 explicitly called the Tibetans – who then occupied the regions of the Hehuang 河湟 which the Tang sought to regain – as the ‘mutton-reeking ones’ (*xingshan* 腥羶). In an argument between two

⁶⁹ *Dushi xiangzhu* 8.633.

⁷⁰ The Triple Concordance system (*santong li* 三統曆) was a calendrical system presented by Liu Xin 劉歆 in 10 CE, which symbolised imperial authority. See Cullen 2017.

⁷¹ For some late Tang examples, see, for instance, Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), ‘Tuyuhun’ (Tuyuhn 吐谷渾, QTS, 17.178), Huangfu Song 皇甫松 (fl. c. 9th century), ‘A Song of Resenting the Uyghurs’ (*Yuan Huihe ge* 怨回紇歌, QTS, 250.2835), and Yuan Zhen’s various *yuefu* poems.

Han officials in the tenth-century, a loyalist of the Later Jin 晉 (936–947) dynasty – which was in fact led by the Shatuo 沙陀, a Turkic tribe –, Shen Yun 沈贇 (d. 945), accused an official who surrendered to the Khitans of being ‘willing to use the hordes from the mutton-reeking tents to violate the land of [your] father and mother without feeling ashamed of yourself.’⁷² The term seems to have entered everyday vocabulary by the tenth century and became part of the language for showing political allegiance.

Racial, ritual, or moral?

We have now established that an intensified olfactory perception of the other was closely associated with the changing power dynamics over the Tang period. In times of animosity, the smells of the people that Tang subjects might have been accustomed to earlier, now were a mark of their alterity and an alarming sign of danger – just like that associated with the extra-human other. But what was thought to make the barbarians so bad? Was it something inherent in the barbarian body or external elements such as hygiene and diet as commonly perceived today?

A set of poems composed by the mid-Tang poet Liu Shang 劉商 (fl. ca. 773) provides some information. Entitled the ‘Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute’ (*Hujia shibapai* 胡笳十八拍), the collection is said to have circulated widely both among literati and commoners alike. The poems were inspired by the story of Cai Yan 蔡琰 (ca. 178–post 206, also known by her courtesy name Wenji 文姬), daughter of the famous Eastern Han writer Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132/133–192). Cai Yan was abducted by a band of nomads and ended up becoming the wife of a Xiongnu chieftain, with whom she lived for about twelve years and bore two children. She was later ransomed and remarried a man from central China.⁷³ She was a poet herself and wrote several poems recounting the story of

⁷² *Jiu Wudai shi* 舊五代史 (compiled by Xue Juzheng 薛居正 et al., completed in 974), 95.1266–67, cit. in Standen 2007, 135.

⁷³ HHS, 82.2800–1, Cf. Knechtges and Chang 2010, 52–54.

her abduction, one of which is also titled ‘Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute.’ But Cai Yan’s text is first seen in an eleventh-century anthology and its authenticity has long been disputed.⁷⁴

Liu Shang’s own ‘Eighteen Songs’ is a historical drama with contemporary sentiments and details. The description of the nomads being ‘mutton-reeking’ appeared three times in the songs. The first appeared in the Second Song. As soon as Wenji was taken by the nomads on a horseback, she immediately abhorred how they smelled:

The barbarians stink so. How can they be considered human?
Their pleasures and angers are like the jackal’s and the wolf’s – unbearable indeed!

戎羯腥膻豈是人？豺狼喜怒難姑息。⁷⁵

Here we are not told exactly what offended Wenji’s nose, but in any case, this odour renders them closer to animal than human. She echoes the classic cliché by comparing them to jackals and wolves, which referred to their unruly temper and manners. The mention of the mutton stink makes vivid and graspable Wenji’s visceral fear and repulsion. In the ‘Fifth Song,’ however, she provides some more details by describing her life in the nomad land:

I sleep by water and sit on grass;
The wind that blows from the land of Han tears my clothing to pieces.
I clean my hair with mutton fat, but it is seldom combed.
The collar of my lambskin robe is buttoned on the left;
The fox lapels and raccoon sleeves are rank-smelling.
By day I wear these clothes, by night I sleep in them.
The felt screens are constantly being moved, since there is no fixed abode;
How long my days and nights are – they never seem to pass.
水頭宿兮草頭坐，風吹漢地衣裳破。
羊脂沐髮長不梳，羔子皮裘領仍左。
狐襟貉袖腥復膻，晝披行兮夜披臥。
氈帳時移無定居，日月長兮不可過。⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Frankel 1983, 146, Knechtges and Chang 2010, 54–55.

⁷⁵ Second Song, vv. 3–4. The text of the ‘Eighteen Songs’ follows that in the *Yuefu shiji*, 59.866–69. Trans. in Rorex and Fong 1975. Modified.

⁷⁶ QTS, 303.3451, ‘Song Five.’

She talks about the harsh habitat, the simple living conditions, and the stinking clothes made of animal pelt. A series of animal-related motifs – mutton fat, lambskin robe, fox and raccoon fur, and a felt tent – create a distinctive smellscape of nomadic life. The mutton fat that she applies to her hair would seem repulsive to us, but a glance at the cosmetic formulae contained in Sun Simiao's medical treatises reveals that animal fats such as suet, dog fat, and lard were commonly prescribed.⁷⁷ Liu Shang may not, therefore, have been drawing on a substance that was considered repugnant by his audience, instead, he may have been trying to persuade them to become loathe to it.

Wenji does not mention anything about dirt or filth; however, that she had to wear the same clothes for days on end suggests a lack of cleaning facilities. Notably, in the last song, when Wenji returns home, she rejoices in the fact that she can finally wash and groom herself, as well as 'rediscover the good rituals and etiquette.'⁷⁸ The perceived barbarian odour was, therefore, closely related to the ritual propriety of an ordered society.

These songs of Liu Shang were very influential at the time. Being 'music bureau' (*yuefu* 樂府) songs, they were probably performed. We are told that they were so popular that all the women and children in Chang'an learned to sing them.⁷⁹ The poems were also circulated in Dunhuang, the town in northwest that was under Tibetan rule from 786 to the mid-ninth century.⁸⁰ Among the extant Dunhuang manuscripts, there are three that contain copies of the poem.⁸¹ On one of them, a person named Mao Yaya 毛押牙 who claimed to be a person fallen into the Tibetan's hands (*luo fan ren* 落蕃人) added a nineteenth song after copying the eighteen songs.⁸² Another one, P. 3812, has been

⁷⁷ Cf. *Qianjin yifang*, *juan* 5. Nonetheless, a formula collected in a Song Aromatic Repertoire consists entirely of vegan ingredients, where sesame oil was indicated as the fatty substance. It is also possible that there was a turn towards plant-based ingredients in personal care among the elite (*Xinzuan xiangpu*, 192).

⁷⁸ QTS, 303.3451, 'Song Eighteen.'

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ See Galambos 2020 for a succinct history of Dunhuang till the tenth century and its manuscript culture. See Galambos 2020, 7–11.

⁸¹ The manuscripts are Pelliot chinois 2555, 3812, and 2845. Two of these have been discussed by Ojima Sukema (1960, 69–75). Cf. Rorex and Fong 1975, Knechtges and Chang 2010, 52–60, Chai 2000, 23, Ma 2013, 17–18.

⁸² Pelliot chinois 2555+Jx.3871. Cf. Xu 2000, 378, 686–92, 719–30, Chai 1984, 54. For some reason, scholars have indicated that the name should be 毛押衙, though the last character is written as 牙.

dated to around the year 895, suggesting that the poem was still copied roughly a century after its composition, when Dunhuang had become much more a multicultural Silk Road town than ‘Chinese.’ The Dunhuang manuscripts show how the idea of the barbarian odour could have been propagated to a wide range of audience, but they do not provide any further detail about what made the barbarians smell. A pictorial interpretation of the ‘Eighteen Songs,’ in the Song dynasty, in contrast, added some new elements.

The poems, unsurprisingly, were very well received in the Song dynasty. Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 1127–1162) of the Song commissioned a handscroll with the songs accompanied by eighteen painted scenes. It seems likely he did so as a reminder of the capture of his kinfolk by the Jurchens, the nomadic people from the northeast that founded the Song’s rival polity, the Jin 金 dynasty (1115–1234).⁸³ Reading a fifteenth-century copy of this Song painting,⁸⁴ we notice that the element of diet is clearly highlighted. The two images accompanying the two songs in which Wenji, now living with the nomads, laments about the goat-like smell have similar compositions. In both images, felt tents and simple furniture are set in contrast with the exquisitely lacquered Chinese-style accessories that Wenji possesses. Food is also being prepared in both images: we can clearly see joints of meat belonging to a large animal sticking out from boiling cauldrons, probably representing a sheep (Figs. 1–4). One may also imagine the cooking fires being fueled in part by mutton fat or animal dung.⁸⁵

⁸³ Rorex and Fong 1974, 10–11.

⁸⁴ The Museum of Fine Art, Boston keeps four album leaves which are considered to be fragments of the original scroll. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a fifteenth-century copy by an anonymous painter that is believed to be an almost exact copy of the twelfth-century scroll based on the comparisons with its extant fragments. The nomad details have been identified as those of the Khitan people, who established the Liao 遼 dynasty (907–1125) in northeastern China. (Ibid., 11–12)

⁸⁵ Rorex and Fong, 1974, 33.



Fig. 2 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute' (Fifth Song'), Metropolitan Museum of Art

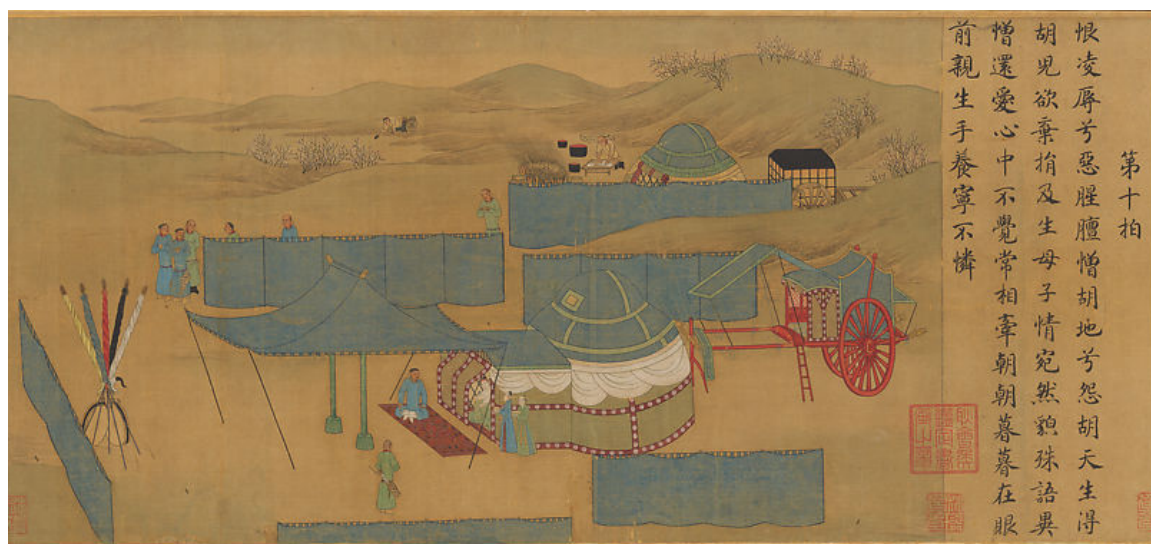


Fig. 3 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute' ('Tenth Song'), Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 4 'Fifth Song' (detail)



Fig. 5 'Tenth Song' (detail)

The main themes that the ‘Eighteen Songs’ and its later pictorial interpretations touch upon are therefore cleanliness, understood in the context of rituals and etiquettes, as well as diet – these are also the most cited reasons for justifying olfactory stereotyping elsewhere. However, looking at the values assigned to these two notions during the Tang, once again we find that the distaste for the putative mutton smell was likely not a natural response, but a sentiment aroused and promoted by ‘propaganda’ created by literati like Liu Shang.

Modern scholars sometimes cite the northerners’ consumption of mutton and dairy as the factor that attributes to them their barbarian smell.¹ Usually, reference is made to the *Hou Han shu*’s 後漢書 (compiled by Fan Ye 范曄 et al. in 445) description of the Wuhuan 烏桓, a nomadic people that inhabited northern China who ‘ate meat and drank fermented milk.’² Mutton was not automatically perceived as emitting an inherently disgusting odour in Chinese culture. An early account attributed to Zhuangzi 莊子 (c. 3rd century BCE) indicates that the badness of mutton lies in its overly attractive smell. In Zhuangzi’s account, the mythical sage-king Shun 舜 is compared to mutton, because he had been showing his worth like mutton emitting intense smell. Thus the people went after him for profit like ants chasing after mutton because of its alluring odour (*shan* 羶), eventually leading to Shun being bent by his increased burden.³ While the motif of ants as profit-seekers was cited in Tang texts negatively, the first part of the story above came to be interpreted positively, probably because of the association with Shun. Bai Juyi, for instance, praised a deceased official for having ‘profuse virtue and doing odorous deeds (*shanxing* 羶行)’ in his eulogy to the man.⁴

Lamb or mutton also remained an important food for the gods and ancestors. Sheep have been considered among the most prestigious sacrificial animals since high antiquity, and rank only second to the ox. Following the ritual classics, the Tang state ritual programme also prescribed the offering

¹ See, e.g., the annotations to Yuan Zhen’s 元稹 ‘Dharma Melody’ (Faqu 法曲). *Xinbian Yuanzhen ji*, 1141, n.10.

² HHS, 90.2979.

³ *Zhuangzi jishi*, 6.221. Cf. Wang Shumin, 974–75 for the commentaries.

⁴ *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 3.148.

of *tailao* 太牢 (beef, mutton, and pork) in the most important sacrifices, including those to the ancestral temple (*zongmiao* 宗廟) and those to the altars of the spirits of land and grain (*sheji* 社稷).⁵ Beef and mutton were also used in popular sacrifices, demonstrating that they were considered ‘food’ dignified enough for the ancestors.

Mutton is listed as an ingredient in four of the eight delicacies in early China.⁶ In fact, the Chinese character for ‘beautiful’ and ‘delicious,’ *mei* 美, is composed of a big sheep (*da yang* 大羊); another character for ‘tasty,’ *xian* 鮮, also contains the mutton radical. This meat also dominated the dining table in central China for most of the medieval period, especially after what Francesca Bray called the ‘pastoral turn’ under the influence of the northern dynasties.⁷ In the sixth-century agricultural text, *Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要術, mutton and dairy products feature prominently. Although there were anecdotes of gastronomical rifts between the North and South (especially with those who hailed from the Southeast), even the southerners expressed a high regard for mutton even though they did not appreciate it themselves. A case in point is Wang Su’s 王肅 (464–501) response to the Northern Wei 魏 (386–584) ruler who asked him why he did not eat mutton and dairy like everyone else in the state. Wang expressed his predilection for fish, but also acknowledged that

Mutton is the best that the land produces, while fish is the best among the water-dwellers. It is just we have different preferences, but they can both be called delicacies.

羊者是陸產之最，魚者乃水族之長。所好不同，並各稱珍。⁸

⁵ *Da Tang Kaiyuan li* 大唐開元禮, *juan* 1. Cf. Huang 2000, 57–58, Sterckx 2002, 59–61 and 2011, 89, Cook 2005, 18–19 for the use of sheep as a sacrificial animal in early China. Goossaert notes that this set of ‘three sacrificial viands’ (*sansheng* 三牲) gradually changed into pork, poultry, and fish (2005, 242–43).

⁶ Huang 2000, 57,

⁷ Bray 2019, 121, Knapp 2019, 86.

⁸ *Luoyang qielan ji*, 3.110.

Mutton was, then, still a meat commonly consumed by the imperial family, the elite, and those who could afford it among the ordinary people during the Tang.⁹ Even in the Song dynasty, it was a food item served to the emperor and considered an orthodox food (in contrast with exotic meats) to be prepared in the imperial kitchen – just as ancestral family laws required.¹⁰

Similarly, dairy also enjoyed a more mainstream status. In the third century, an aristocrat of the Western Jin dynasty, Wang Ji 王濟, proudly presented fermented sheep milk to a southern scholar as the most exquisite delicacy.¹¹ A Tang anecdote recounts that four types of dairy product – yoghurt, butter, ghee, and curdled dairy – were used as metaphor for virtue, probably under Buddhist influence.¹²

What caused the demise of mutton and dairy in the mainstream Chinese culinary culture deserves a separate study. There, geographical, economic, and cultural factors may all have played a role. Considering that both the Sui and Tang imperial families were from the north, the revulsion people later displayed towards the smell of mutton or the people who consumed mutton and dairy was probably more asserted than actually felt.

Instead of targeting any specific food product, this rhetoric might have simply built on the oft-cited ‘nomad–farmer’ divide. Meat consumption had become regularly associated with indulgence and moral decadence. Du Fu’s famous verses include the lines ‘Crimson gates reek with meat and ale, while on the streets are bones of the frozen dead.’¹³ The influence of Daoism and Buddhism was also a great factor. In fact, as we have already noted, the vocabulary for ‘mutton-reeking’ was derived from Daoist texts. Learning to cultivate, prepare, and appreciate the ‘five grains’ (*wugu* 五穀), on the other hand, was regarded by some as an essential part of the civilising process.¹⁴ In fact,

⁹ Cf. Huang 1998, 15.

¹⁰ *Song shi* 12.250; *Xu zizhi tongjian* 480.11417. See Xu et al., 2001, 22–23 for a brief account on the consumption of mutton in the Song. They further note that pork, in contrast, was mainly consumed by the poor.

¹¹ *Shishuo xinyu*. See Pearce et al. 2001, 22, Knapp 2019, 97 for the consumption of mutton and dairy products in northern China in the early medieval period.

¹² JTS, 155.4116–17. See Brown 2019, 29–42 and Kotyk 2019, 1–11 for the history of dairy in premodern China.

¹³ Du Fu, cit. in Chapter 1.

¹⁴ Chang 1997, 42; Campany 2005, 98. H. T. Huang 2000, 7–28 summarises the groupings of grains in Classical texts

we see the ethnographic accounts included in *Tongdian*, the degree of a group's knowledge of grains was often used as a measure of culture.¹⁵ Thus the new dichotomy created was 'meat eater vs grain eater,' which in turn represents the polarities of the foul and the fragrant (grains are described to have sweet scent in Classical texts), indulgence and moral restraint, predator and defender, barbarism and civilisation. To smell strongly, then, signalled a person's proximity to the animal world, uncivilised manners, and unbounded desire and violence.

The role of hygiene as a marker of the level of civilisation was much less significant during the Tang when compared with modern times.¹⁶ This is not to say that it did not matter to premodern people, but it was much less valued when evaluating cultural differences or degree of civility compared to, for instance, how a group of people covered their body, buried their dead, or cooked their food. There was moreover a tendency to conflate moral purity with physical cleanliness. In the accounts on the various countries recorded in the *Tongdian*, for instance, a group of people who reportedly washed their face and hands with urine were labelled stinky, foul, and unclean, but so were those accused of promiscuity, incest, and lack of respect for social hierarchy in marriage practices.¹⁷ The *Tongdian* also mentions that some groups of people washed frequently and applied perfumes to themselves, but this was seen more as a necessity determined by their living environment rather than a sign of civilisation.¹⁸

One group of people that have received a particularly vehement attack were the Yilou 挹婁, who lived in the northeast, in the area known later as Manchuria.¹⁹ The medieval description of the habits

and discusses their relation to the idea of Chinese civilisation. Campany argued that the central value that grains embodied in early Chinese culture prompted the Daoists to make 'grain avoidance' one of the key techniques for the search of transcendence. (2005, 116)

¹⁵ The Tangut (Dangxiang 党項) were said to not know how to cultivate crops and that their lands had no five grains. Samarkand (Kangju 康居), Sri Lanka (Shiziguo 獅子國), and Persia (Bosi 波斯) were said to all have the five grains (*Tongdian*, 193.5256, 5263, 5269).

¹⁶ See Corbin 1986 and Rogaski 2004 for connections between hygiene and modernity in France and China respectively.

¹⁷ See the account on the 'Wuji' 勿吉, or sometimes called 'Mohe' 靺鞨, a people in the northeast for the former (*Beishi*, 94.3124; *Sui shu*, 81.1821, *Tongdian*, 186, 5022–24, *Cefu yuangui*, 959.11112), and the accounts on Persia and Tangut about the latter.

¹⁸ See the accounts on India and Champa. For Buddhist travellers' attitudes to the bathing and cleaning habits in these countries, see Heirman and Torck 2012.

¹⁹ See Elliot 2001, 47–52 for the connection between the Manchus, the Yilou, the Wuji mentioned above, and the Jurchens.

of the Yilou had an impact on later periods. The *Tongdian* cites the *Hou Han shu*'s account on the Yilou verbatim, it reads:

[The Yilou] live in mountains and forests, where the *qi* of the land is extremely cold. They often live in caves [...] They like keeping pigs, they eat pork and wear its skin. In winter they smear their bodies with pig fat to a few inches' thick in order to defend themselves from the wind and the cold. In summer they bare their bodies, only covering their front and rear with a piece of cloth. Their people are stinky, foul, and unclean. They build their privy in the middle [of their settlement] and live around it.

處於山林之間，土氣極寒，常爲穴居 [...] 好養豕，食其肉，衣其皮。冬以豕膏塗身，厚數分，以禦風寒。夏則裸袒，以尺布蔽其前後。其人臭穢不潔，作廁於中，圜之而居。²⁰

A Ming loyalist quoted most of the text for the description of another group related to the Yilou, the Nüzhi 女直 (the Jurchens) and added the people's dietary habits by noting that they only eat meat (*xingshan* 腥膻).²¹ This Ming account was then quoted by a late Qing Han nationalist, Liu Shipai 劉師培 (1884–1919), to demonstrate that the Manchus were not legitimate people and subjects of the Central Kingdom (*zhongguo* 中國). The idea of stinky and filthy nomads continued to develop; the same materials were quoted over the centuries as if these people remained still in that timeless remote past.

Were the 'barbarians' aware of their smell? An account included in an eleventh-century *Repertoire of Aromatics* (*Xiangpu* 香譜) suggests they were. The text mentions a perfume blend called the 'Jindi Perfume' (*jindi xiang* 金日磾香), named after Jin Midi 金日磾 (134–86 BCE), a Xiongnu royal descendent who came to serve at Emperor Wudi's 武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) court.²²

²⁰ *Tongdian*, 186.5021–22. Here Du You follows almost verbatim the description of the people in the *Hou Hanshu* (85.2812).

²¹ Mo Dan 莫旦 (1429–?), 'Da Ming yitong fu' 大明一統賦, quoted by the late Qing classicist Liu Shipai 劉師培 (1884–1919) in an article titled 'Recognising the Manchu who are not the subjects and people of the Central Kingdom' (Bian Manren fei Zhongguo zhi chenmin 辨滿人非中國之臣民), originally published on the *Minbao* 民報 (8 June 1907). Liu 2008, 604.

²² *Book of Han* (*Han shu* 漢書, compiled by Ban Gu 班固 et al. in 82) 68.2959–63.

The story reads that Jin invented the blend as he wanted to change his odour from that of a barbarian captive (*hulu zhi qi* 胡虜之氣).²³ And he succeeded! The blend not only pleased the emperor, but also many others in the court, and became a bit of a fashion phenomenon. The compiler attributes the source to a third-century Daoist text, the *Account of Delving into Arcana* (*Dongming ji* 洞冥記), however the extant version of that text mentions a perfume of the same name but makes no reference to such anecdote. It is therefore unclear whether this was an authentic early account or a fabrication by Song literati out of the anxiety to reclaim the superiority of the centre.

But the ‘barbarians’ were certainly aware that they were accused of having foul smells. In the version of the story above found in a Mongol Yuan-dynasty manuscript, the ‘odour of a barbarian captive’ became the ‘smell of mutton and dairy’ (*shan lao zhi qi* 羶酪之氣).²⁴ The same is found in the *Siku quanshu* version of the text. The ‘barbarian odour’ was thus carefully washed out from the writing. According to the Qing scholar Kong Jihan 孔繼涵 (1739–1784), in fact, when the Manchu Qing court reprinted the official histories of the Five Dynasties and Song in the *Wuyingdian* 武英殿 edition and then collected them in the *Siku quanshu*, they censored offensive languages like ‘mutton-reeking’ and ‘barbarian captives,’ as well as offensive exonyms such as Di 狄 and Yi 夷.²⁵ Smell continued to be a realm in which power was demonstrated and contested.

Conclusions

The examples described in this chapter show that the olfactory stereotyping of northern nomads in medieval China was mainly rooted in the cultural and political order. Both the smell of the human other and the supernatural other may have been partially based on some real experiences, but as one of the most elusive and elastic senses, smell was also easy to manipulate in the imaginary. The perceived foul odour of both the human and the extra-human other was imbued with moral and

²³ Hong Chu, *Xiangpu*, 1921 reprint after a Song *Baichuan xuehai* 百川學海 edition carved in 1273. For a textual history of Hong Chu’s *xiangpu*, see Liu 192–97.

²⁴ National library *shanben* no. 06873, available online at: http://read.nlc.cn/allSearch/searchDetail?searchType=1002&showType=1&indexName=data_892&fid=411999013137.

²⁵ See Kong’s postscript in *Jiu Wudai shi*, 2034.

cosmological values. Therefore, efforts such as purification and avoidance were made to mark the boundaries and prevent physical as well as moral pollution. But the perception was not immune to cultural influence. On the contrary, the centre mobilised the sense of smell to sustain existing social order and hierarchies by drawing attention to the deeply held physical and visceral differences. The fact that a certain object or group of people would sometimes smell much stronger to ‘us,’ while nearly imperceptible to ‘others,’ further demonstrates that the ways in which we make sense of odour is not merely sensory, but also cultural. Elusive, uncontainable, and highly evocative, smell was an ideal conduit for sensing the other, but also the making of the other.

Chapter 4. The Fragrance of the Divine

Gloucester: O, let me kiss that hand!

Lear: Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality.

King Lear, Act 4, Scene 6, 125-6

This chapter explores medieval Chinese olfactory perception of another type of Other: the saintly and the divine. In medieval hagiographic narratives, miracle tales, and even in institutional histories, the encounter with the divine is often signalled with a trail of sweet scent. The most common expression is *yixiang* 異香 (unusual fragrance), but we also see synonyms such as *qixiang* 奇香 (special fragrance) or *shuxiang* 殊香 (peculiar fragrance).

Scholars have noted how scent as part of auspicious signs played a role in the human encounter with the divine and in the establishment of sainthood in medieval China.¹ However, the significance of the olfactory symbolism remains unexamined. Inscrutable, invisible, and uncontainable – these salient traits made smells ‘especially effective “messengers” across the boundary lines’ separating the realm of the human and that of the divine.²

The role of smell becomes more complex when the scent of the divine is also associated with the body of a deceased person of exceptional spiritual attainment. This type of narrative is very similar to one of the most potent olfactory concepts in medieval Christianity the ‘odour of sanctity,’ which has been studied in depth.³ Drawing on the insights and methodologies of these studies, this chapter explores how the scent of the divine negotiated with the putridity of death in the construction of sainthood in medieval China and how a changing olfactory culture reshaped the medieval conception of death and afterlife. We will examine the sources and meanings of the olfactory motifs, the ways in

¹ Verellen 1998, 363–384; Cahill 1999, 171–86; and Campany’s commentaries in his translations of Buddhist miracle tales (2012).

² Harvey 2006, 224.

³ Major studies on the topic include Caseau, 1994; Harvey 2006; Classen et al. 1994, 52–54; Roch 2009.

which medieval narratives imparted new sensory notions building on a long tradition of moral association with smells, and how multisensory rituals contributed to enhancing the reception of such narrative. Finally, we will also explore what kind of smell this association with the divine evoked. In other words, what the divine smelled like in the medieval mind.

The Departure of a Female Daoist Practitioner

Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933), a court Daoist in the service first of the Tang dynasty and later of the Former Shu 蜀 kingdom (907–925), recorded one of the most spectacular death scenes in medieval Chinese literature. As the last entry of his *Yongcheng jixian lu* 壙城集仙錄 (Record of the Assembled Immortals of the Fortified City), a collection of hagiographies dedicated to female adepts,⁴ Du recounts the life and death of a Daoist female devotee, Xue Xuanton 薛玄同 (c. 828–882).

Xue was the wife of a Tang local official named Feng Hui 馮徽. Having been married for twenty years, she decided to live chastely and dedicated herself to burning incense and chanting the *Huangting jing* 黃庭經 (Scripture of the Yellow Court), a classic of the *Shangqing* 上清 tradition. Because of her exceptional dedication, the goddess Purple Void Primal Lord (*Zixu yuanjun* 紫虛元君, i.e. Wei Huacun 魏華存) sent messengers to visit her. The goddess herself also paid a visit. The descent of these divine beings was announced and accompanied by a sensory-rich scenography: bright radiance, harmonious music, and wondrous scent permeated the room. Yet the heavenly light, sound, and smell were only perceivable by the chosen one, as the rest of the household, including Xue's husband, was not aware of any of this.⁵ And when the moment of Xue's end came, her departure is depicted in an almost theatrical manner:

⁴ The subjects were believed to have succeeded in becoming transcendent and filling official posts in the heavenly court of the foremost Daoist goddess, Queen Mother of the West. The name 'Fortified City,' in fact, refers to the residence of the Queen Mother of the West on Mount Kunlun 崑崙 (Cf. *Shizhou ji* 11a. Cit. in Schipper and Verellen, 431).

⁵ YCJXL 8.698. See Cahill 2006, 186–193.

Thirty-six heavenly cranes gathered atop her room. Xuantong's body was soft and warm, as if she were still alive. A bright spot of white light [appeared] in the centre of her forehead, which after a good while transformed into purple vapour. When she had gone through the ritual ablution (*mu*yu 沐浴), her black hair miraculously grew again and became several feet in length.

有仙鶴三十六隻，翔集室宇之上。玄同形質柔煖，狀若生人，額中炁然白光一點，良久化爲紫氣。沐浴之際，玄髮重生，立長數尺。

Then on the next evening,

Multicoloured clouds filled her room, and suddenly, people heard sounds of thunder and lightning shaking and crashing. Her coffin lid flew off to the courtyard. Her corpse had disappeared, leaving behind only her burial garments. Wondrous fragrance and cloud cranes lingered for several ten days.

雲彩滿室，忽聞雷電震霹之聲，棺蓋飛起在庭中，失尸所在，空衣衾而已。異香雲鶴，浹旬不去。⁶

A series of familiar auspicious signs are juxtaposed here to create an awe-inspiring spectacle – heavenly cranes, multicoloured clouds, purple vapour, unusual fragrance –, all suggesting that something out of ordinary was taking place. While cranes, clouds, and the purple vapour were also cited as auspicious signs in political omens, the mention of fragrance was unusual.

Du Guangting was an influential courtier who wrote and edited extensively, including an annotation of Xuanzong's commentary on the *Daodejing* 道德經. His writings played an important role in supplying divine sanction for the succession of the Shu kingdom to Tang.⁷ With Du's background and position in mind, we should understand that his narratives were not written to entertain but aimed at persuading the audience of the authenticity of the miracles and the legitimacy of the 'sanctification' of the subjects, thereby promoting the efficacy of the Daoist teachings. His authority and the engaging language style meant that many of these stories were probably circulated widely and read with seriousness. Many of them, in fact, were later included in the early Song state-commissioned collection of stories, the *Taiping guangji*.

⁶ YCJXL, 697–9. Trans. in Cahill 2006, 191–12, modified.

⁷ Verellen 1989; 1998, 213–54.

Suzanne E. Cahill has cited Xue's story among others to argue that, since medieval China lacked the legal structures through which medieval Catholic Church granted legitimacy (the process of canonisation), signs such as the body's remaining intact after death as well as inclusion in the religious lineage and celestial bureaucracy were used to authenticate sainthood.⁸ Her observation is insightful, but this chapter also argues that the inclusion of fragrance was not simply part of a choreography of auspicious signs. Instead, smell was the key information signifying the subject's religious accomplishment and sanctity. In fact, Du Guangting already made this clear through the words of an official who would report Xue's spectacular departure to the emperor: upon hearing about the event, the Military Commissioner of the Zhexi 浙西 area (around current-day Yangzhou), Zhou Bao 周寶 (814–888), reported it to Emperor Xizong who was in exile at the time in Chengdu due to the turmoil of the Huangchao 黃巢 Rebellion (875–884). Zhou first praised that this was a good omen for the destiny of the empire, her ascent testified to the glory of the region and to the 'firm possession of the Mandate of Heaven' by the Tang imperial line. Then he argued that Xue should be added to the Register of Transcendents and she qualified because her death scene mirrored that of two famous Daoist immortals – Lady Zhao 趙,⁹ whose physical body remained as alive when she 'ascended to the remote lands,' and Master Tao 陶,¹⁰ whose departure was accompanied by an ever-lasting wondrous fragrance in the room.¹¹ By making connection with the established transcendents, Du (through the official) asserts the legitimate sainthood of the deceased practitioner. In both parameters mentioned, smell plays a significant role.

Another account included in the same collection further indicates that Du incorporated the olfactory message in his narratives conscious of its connotation. This account regards a more

⁸ Cahill 1999, 171–86.

⁹ Referring to Lady Gouyi 鉤弋, Emperor Wu 武 of Han's concubine.

¹⁰ Referring to the prominent Daoist polymath Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536). Tao Hongjing appears in a variety of depictions. In one version written by the Tang scholar and hermit Li Bo 李渤, who curiously is better known for a discussion that he had with a Chan Buddhist monk, when Tao Hongjing died at the age of 85, his appearance did not change and his hands and legs were not stiffened. There was, in addition, fragrance that filled the room which lasted for several days.

¹¹ This portion is omitted in the *Taiping Guangji* version of the story. The tenth-century compilers of the compendium found the reason why her sainthood was legitimate either irrelevant or obvious.

important female Daoist adept, Huang Lingwei 黃靈微 (c. 640–721), who was also known as the Flower Maiden (Huagu 花姑). Huang rediscovered and restored Wei Huacun’s shrine in the late seventh century and became of some fame. An altar was built for her and her labours were commemorated by the accomplished official and calligrapher Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709–785).¹² Du Guangting probably based his version on Yan’s inscription. Comparing the stele and Du’s account, we find several editorial embellishments, including one significant detail that Du added regarding the Flower Maiden’s departure. The stele states that she predicted her death, gave indications for her burial, and several nights after she was put into a coffin, her body disappeared amid an orchestra of lightning and thunder. Between her encoffining and disappearance, Du described how her body looked: her skin was fragrant and pure, her body remained warm, and there was wondrous fragrance permeating the hall and the courtyard – details that we are now familiar with.

Aside from creating a richer and more spectacular stage effect to the narrative, these additions also suggest that for Du they are key symbols of an exemplary and ritualised death, or more precisely, its transcendence. The ultimate disappearance of the body meant that the protagonist achieved transcendence via deliverance by means of a simulated corpse (*shijie*). The body remaining warm contrasts the natural process of rigor mortis. But while people did not necessarily touch the dead body to test its temperature and texture, smells were an unavoidable participatory experience. Hagiographies recount idealised scenarios, but how was this made persuasive for its audience? How did those who read or hear these stories make sense of such message? Du Guangting did not provide much more information in these accounts. In fact, he may have deliberately left out the details to achieve a more mysterious, awe-inspiring effect. But the motif of the ‘odour of sanctity’ is also found in earlier Daoist and Buddhist literature that we will examine below.

¹² Kirkland 1991, pp. 47–73. The stele is no longer extant, but the text was transmitted and included in the *Quan Tang wen* (340.3444–5). Curiously, in the stele text, her name is written as Huang Linghui 黃令徽. Perhaps Du Guangting embellished the name to make it look like more spiritual.

An Ordinary Death

Before tracing the textual lineage and the meaning of the ‘odour of sanctity’ narratives, let us look at how the alternatives were like, i.e., how ordinary deaths or journeys toward undesirable destinations were like.

There are very few detailed descriptions of death in literati writing – this was likely not considered a decorous topic to engage in, just like pollutions or other types of foulness. The account on the First Emperor’s death in the *Shiji* alludes to the mephitic smell that the deceased emperor’s body emitted, which was covered by a whole carriage of fermented fish.¹³ Wang Chong describes the immense stench that rose all the way up to the heavens when Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE–23CE) sought to rebury Emperor Yuandi’s 元帝 (r. 48 BCE – 33 BCE) consort as a way to demote her to the status of a civilian.¹⁴ There are in addition mentions of the stench of the dead in the battlefields, in which the moral smell and the physical smell converge. The anecdotes, however, provide more materials.¹⁵

Tang dynasty anecdotes reveal that it was clear how an ordinary death was expected to be like. Accomplished Daoist thaumaturges sometimes would feign their death to eschew unwanted invitations. Zhang Guo 張果, who would later be revered as one of the Eighth Immortals, for instance, allegedly turned himself into a corpse to avoid Wu Zetian’s recruitment. He transformed himself on a hot day, and his body soon began rotting as well as producing worms and putrid smell. Wu Zetian thus left convinced about his death; Guo returned to life and started roaming riding a donkey.¹⁶ In another story, an eclectic Daoist thaumaturge performed this trick twice, once to drive away a band of uninvited perspective disciples, and once to escape from a prison after being arrested for drunkenness.¹⁷ After witnessing his magical tricks, people started to revere him more. Stories

¹³ *Shiji* 6.264.

¹⁴ *Lunheng* 21.906–7.

¹⁵ See Campany 2012, 128–30; 145–48; 174–80.

¹⁶ TPGJ, 30.192, citing the *Minghuang zalu* 明皇雜錄 (by Zheng Chuhui 鄭處誨, fl. mid-ninth century), *Xuanshi zhi* 宣室志 (by Zhang Du 張讀, fl. mid-ninth century), and *Xu shenxian zhuan* 續神仙傳 (by Shen Fen 沈汾, fl. 10th century).

¹⁷ TPGJ, 52.319–20, citing the *Xianzhuan shiyi* 仙傳拾遺 by Du Guangting.

like this suggest that decomposition and putridity were expected at a person's death, but it was also widely believed that people with special power could miraculously escape or even manipulate death.

For Buddhists, afterlife destinies were multiple. Hells were imagined as full of burning fire, boiling cauldrons, sword trees, as well as smells of burnt flesh and sulphureous vapour,¹⁸ yet rebirths in undesirable paths could also lead to endless sufferings in filth and putridity. A short scripture that was popular between the Sui and early Song dynasty, the *Zhaifa qingjing jing* 齋法清淨經 (*Scripture on Purity and Fasting Techniques*), describes in detail the consequences of impure conducts in this world. It reads that a person who defiles a monk's robe and food with impure hands or offers impure food to a monk or their parents would fall into the path of hungry ghosts for the next five hundred generations. There, he will feed on impurities such as pus, blood, mucus, saliva, and other undesirable fluids. He will also stay around a pregnant woman waiting to taste the filth and blood from the childbirth. For another five million generations, he will be reborn among pigs and dung beetles, and again he will feed on filth and impure foods.¹⁹

The scripture was labelled apocryphal already in the Sui dynasty. It is not included in any pre-Qing collection. However, there are several Dunhuang manuscripts containing this scripture, including five extant complete ones and numerous fragments. This suggests that the scripture was copied and circulated at a popular level.²⁰ It was probably mainly meant for didactic purposes, but at the same time, it also provided materials for popular imagination. Now the terrors and sufferings of hells of hells as well as rebirth as hungry ghosts are delineated out as deeply appalling prospects. Considering the terrifying and nauseating alternatives of the afterlife depicted in words here, anecdotes such as the following might not have been entirely fabricated. It is said that when the famous painter, Wu Daozi 吳道子 (c. 685–758), realised the transformation tableaux on hells in the Jinggong Monastery (*Jinggong si* 景公寺), the capital residents who had seen the pictures were so terrified that they all tried to repair their sins and accumulate merits. As a result, the butchers and

¹⁸ See, for instance, the depictions of hells in the story of 'Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother from the Underworld' (S.2614, Mair 1983, 87–122).

¹⁹ T. 2900, 1432a7–23.

²⁰ Cao 2011, 230–31; Zhang 2016, 23–24.

fishmongers in the capital all went out of business.²¹ The delight of savouring fish and meat were no longer as appealing considering the consequences.

The Scent of the Extraordinary

Returning to the narratives of the ‘odour of sanctity,’ the first such depiction in the Daoist corpus was associated with Lady Zhao who we have briefly encountered above. Better known as Lady Gouyi 鉤弋, she was a concubine of Emperor Wu and her story was briefly sketched in the *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 (Biographies of Immortals), a text acknowledged as the ancestor of all Daoist hagiographies.²² Lady Zhao’s departure is narrated in a much simpler manner compared to Du Guangting’s quasi theatrical composition. Yet it contains all the elements that would form the paradigm for the Daoist ‘sanctification’: the body remaining warm and fragrant after death as well as its eventual disappearance. However, we also notice that the nature of scent is slightly different here: here the scent is strictly associated with the body. In Xue Xuantong and Flower Maiden’s case, in contrast, the fragrant smell come both from the body and the space where the body is placed. We will examine the meanings of the two different sources later. The motif of the ‘odour of sanctity’ surrounding a Daoist devotee’s death appears also in Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (284–364) *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 and other Daoist tales before Du Guangting’s narratives.²³

In Buddhist literature, by contrast, the motif of ‘odour of sanctity’ figures prominently. All three major extant hagiographic collections till the Tang – the *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of

²¹ ‘Wu Daoxuan’ 吳道玄, *Tanghua duan*, TPGJ, 212.1622. See Moretti 2019, 5-30 for visual representations of hell and damnation in Dunhuang murals.

²² *Liexian zhuan*, 48; YCJXL 5.644. Traditionally attributed to Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE) but probably compiled in the Later Han (25–220), the *Liexian zhuan* offers outlines of information about techniques of physical and spiritual purification through which its subjects attained immortality. Kaltenmark 1987, 2–4. Lady Gouyi was an influential figure in the popular imagination. The *Jing Chu suishiji* describes a popular festival dedicated to commemorating her which was later banned due to its association with the occult.

²³ See Campany 2002, 154, 171. Interestingly, a Yuan-dynasty Daoist biographer Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 described the death scene of Du Guangting in a very similar manner. In his account, Du simply assumed a ritual gesture on the altar and ‘transformed’ (*hua* 化), his body remained warm and fresh, an unusual fragrance permeated the room, which persisted long after his death. Either the author was directly inspired by Du Guangting or this type of motif had become a norm in the depiction of Daoist holy persons. *Guangcheng ji* 廣成集, 244.

Nuns) by Baochang 寶唱 (fl. 6th century), the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks) compiled by Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), and the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks) by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) – contain this olfactory motif. Moreover, we find that the description of ‘unusual fragrance’ increased significantly from the six century collections to the seventh-century *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, even considering the latter’s larger size. While the former contains around 10 such accounts, the latter contains over 60 examples, among which about two thirds are related to a deathbed (*linzhong* 臨終) or a post-mortem scenario. These two scenarios sometimes overlap with each other. The rest describe a scent that appears in response to a prayer or chanting, the manifestation of relics, or, in rare occurrences, the birth of an extraordinary person (one account in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, and two in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*).

In the *Biqiuni zhuan*, Baochang never used the word ‘unusual fragrance’ (*yixiang*), but he mentioned ‘peculiar fragrance’ (*shuxiang* 殊香) in two accounts, all related to a moment of transformation of the protagonist. The one regarding Jingjian 淨檢, the first ordained nun in medieval China,²⁴ is significantly different from the other Buddhist narratives. We will read the relevant passage here. The account relates that when Jingjian was undergoing the ordination, she and all present sensed a flood of intense and unusual fragrance. Everyone rejoiced in the sensation and felt a stronger sense of reverence. This scent appeared again later:

[Jingjian] suddenly perceived that scent from before and saw a red vapour. A woman holding five-coloured flowers descended from the sky. Seeing this, Jian contentedly bid goodbye to everyone [...] and ascended to heaven. The path she walked on was like a rainbow that led all the way to heaven. She was seventy years old.

忽復聞前香，并見赤氣。有一女人手把五色花自空而下。檢見欣然 [...] 執手辭別騰空而上。所行之路有似虹蜺，直屬於天。時年七十矣。²⁵

The account has a remarkably Daoist flavour. Instead of dying, Jingjian ascended to heaven in broad daylight, just as a Daoist transcendent. This suggests a strong influence from Daoist narratives,

²⁴ See Faure 2009, 26–28 for a brief history of the female *samgha* in China.

²⁵ T. 2063, 935a1-5.

although the influence was probably not one-directional. The author of the *Liexian zhuan*, for instance, claims to have compiled the biographies of Daoist transcendents to ‘complete the record of the transcendents in the world at that time, supplementing those already mentioned in Buddhist sutras.’²⁶ Fragrance appears twice in this story, once during Jingjian’s ordination, once announcing and accompanying her departure: both times a moment of transition. The unusual scent signified the divine blessing and approval, which for the beholders, was a validation of Jingjian’s virtue and piety. Though the particular details of Jingjian’s story differ from other Buddhist hagiographic tales, the message of the olfactory sign works in a similar way.

Compared to the Daoist hagiographies, the Buddhist accounts tend to contain more detail and explanation, thus providing us with more information to probe the meanings and associations of smells in these narratives. A common scenario is that a monk predicts his death (sometimes following a vision of the divine through the manifestation of heavenly scent and music), winds up his affairs and dies in deep meditation.²⁷ His body continues to exude fragrant scent and remains flexible after death. A flood of wondrous fragrance permeates the room shortly before his death and sometimes lingers for several days. Scent is sometimes accompanied by sounds of pipe and music or magic light (perceivable only by the dying person), but often smell alone was sufficient to mark the exceptional event.

The source of the scent is explained in some accounts. When Empress Wenxian 文獻 (544–602), a devout Buddhist practitioner died, there was music and wondrous fragrance in the air. To the startled emperor, an eminent monk from Magadha explained that these were signs of the divine: the devas were descending from Amitābha’s Pure Land in the West to welcome her.²⁸ In another account, a monk envisioned the approaching of two sandalwood Buddha images and understood it

²⁶ *Shishuo xinyu qianshu*, 254. This preface has been removed in extant editions of the *Liexian zhuan* from the Song dynasty, as the later editors thought the alleged author Liu Xiang should not have been able to see Buddhist sutras. However, various texts till the early Tang, including the *Shishuo xinyu*, *Yuzhu baodian* 玉燭寶典, and *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集 quote the content of this preface. Recent research maintains that the content of the preface is reliable. See Kaltenmark 1987, 1–3 for a discussion on the dates and authorship of the *Liexian zhuan*. See also Zürcher 1980, 84–147 on Buddhist influence on early Daoist writings.

²⁷ Cf. Jacqueline Stone’s analysis on similar deathbed scenes in medieval Japanese Buddhism (Stone 2017).

²⁸ XGSZ 28.1087–88.

was a divine manifestation. The promise of rebirth in the Pure Land paradise is also mentioned in several other accounts.

The symbolism of the post-mortem scent is also pointed out more clearly in Buddhist accounts. One account included the reaction of the spectators: Zhikai 智錯, a Sui dynasty monk died on a very hot day in the sixth month of the year, but his body remained intact after his death. Even after it was transferred back to his monastery, ‘it did not show signs of decay or alteration. Moreover, there was no stench or putrid smell, instead there was an unusual fragrance. [The people there], monks and laymen alike, no one was unsurprised.’²⁹ Compared to Du Guangting’s awe-inspiring narrative, the didactic function is more explicit in this account. The compiler plainly points out to the audience where they should direct their attention: instead of the reek of decay that a mortal faces at his end, an exceptional event is happening here.

The word ‘unusual’ (*yi* 異) delineates a vast and malleable imaginative space. What was an *unusual* fragrance like? Although the stories usually hint at a connection between this scent and the divine presence, this association was not intelligible to all. We will explore the ambiguity of the scent comparing two stories, both recorded in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* by Daoxuan. The first regards Huiyuan 慧遠 (523–592), an eminent monk from Dunhuang 敦煌 who resided in the Jingying 淨影 Monastery that Emperor Wendi of Sui ordered to build especially for him. The account reads that when Huiyuan died, it looked as if he was in deep meditation. The attendants did not notice his departure until they smelled an unusual fragrance in his room. Only at that point, they started to become suspicious. They put fingers under his nose and found out that he had already breathed his last.³⁰

The second recounts the end of a lay practitioner whose name was Shi Hedan 史呵擔. Shi dedicated himself to reciting the *Lotus Sutra* and when he died, there was an unusual fragrance permeating the village. Startled by this strange event, the relatives and villagers quickly buried him. Only ten years after, when Shi’s wife died, did they reopen Shi’s burial and find that his tongue

²⁹ Ibid., 70.570.

³⁰ XGSZ 17.570.

remained intact (because of the merit of chanting the sutra). People understood that Shi had attained some religious achievement, so they gave him a more significant reburial.³¹

While in the monastic context the meaning of a strange fragrance after a person's death was understood, outside the Buddhist community, further information was needed to instruct the uninitiated about the signs of the divine. This imbalance also reflects one of the potential motives for incorporating smell in these hagiographic accounts: it is a didactic medium through which the audience learn sensory meanings.

The sign of the divine was not always welcomed with joy. We will conclude the readings of the 'odour of sanctity' by a story of rejection. This is no longer a hagiography, but supposedly a biography of a prominent Tang politician, Li Bi 李泌 (722–789), who served as chief minister under several Tang emperors. Li's birth and childhood were surrounded in legends and characterised by prophecies from both Buddhist and Daoist masters. When he was young, he was said to have been so light that he could stand on top of a screen and walk on a censuring basket. A Daoist priest told the family that Li would ascend to the heaven in broad daylight at the age of fifteen. Instead of rejoicing in the future transcendence of the child, the family took the prophecy as an incumbent calamity. Whenever an unusual fragrance or the sound of music appeared in the air, the family would shout cursing words at them. When the predicted year of Li's departure came, the family prepared several hundred litres of dense garlic paste. As soon as the strange sound and scent appeared, they had someone pour large scoops of garlic paste toward the source of the sound and scent and eventually both sensations were no longer perceived. Li continued his mortal life.³² Under suitable preparation (prophecies in this case), even the common people could recognise the signs of the divine. The story is purportedly a biographic account of Li Bi's life written by his son, Li Fan 李繁 (fl. 9th century). The fact that Li Bi also employed the olfactory and auditory motifs means that the association between the sensations and a divine presence was familiar for the general public.

The accounts that we have read so far deal with two types of unusual fragrance relating to an 'odour of sanctity' kind of narrative. One is the scent pertaining to the body itself, the other is an

³¹ XGSZ 29.1188.

³² TPGJ, 38.238–39, citing the *Yehou waizhuan* 鄴侯外傳.

external fragrance that fills the space before, during, or after the event of the person's transition from this world to the afterlife.

As for the first type, the meaning differs in Daoist and Buddhist narratives, which is contingent upon their respective explanation of the liberating process. However, the basic symbolism of the olfactory message is shared. The undecaying body indicates a mastery over the common fate of putrid decomposition; the fragrance symbolises the purity of the body and the spirit, but also stands in contrast with the reek of decay. The underlying idea is a common rejection of human flesh in both religions, held as a hindrance towards deliverance.³³ Ultimately, an ideal end of this life, for a practitioner of either religion, was to liberate oneself from the bounds of the body in a calm and dignified way. The fragrance of the body acts as a mark of distinction, separating the fulfilled from the ordinary.³⁴

The second type of fragrance generally indicates the manifestation of divine presence. This appears sometimes in conjunction with heavenly music. Both senses are invisible, uncontainable, and prone to cross boundaries, rendering them ideal for suggesting a contact with the unseen realms. This fragrance associated with the divine also appears in other contexts, such as the discovery of a sacred place, appearing both in Buddhist and Daoist accounts.³⁵ It could announce the conception or the birth of a person destined to be exceptional. Fragrant signs indicating a prodigy is a much rarer occurrence compared to those associated with deathbed scenes in Daoist and Buddhist

³³ This is not to say that the body was not important, rather the opposite. As Suzanne Mroczek (2007) has pointed out, in Buddhism the ascetic view and the physiomoral view of the body are closely related. In medieval Chinese texts, we find references to practitioners of both religions working their body as part of their cultivation. The fragrance of a deceased saint in some cases could be quite literal. Daoist practitioners were said to ingest frankincense in their 'grain avoidance' (*bigu* 辟穀) practice, one of the Daoist fasting techniques. See *Haiyao bencao* 海藥本草 (compiled by Li Xun 李珣 in the tenth century), 61. Cit. in Wen 2016, 272. The *Gaoseng zhuan* recounts a monk who went through rigorous fasting during which he only ingested aromatic pellets and then burned himself in public, emulating the Medicine King's devotional auto-cremation (GSZ 12, T 2059.50.405a6, cit. in Benn 2007, 48–49). A spectacle like this could have been both an enveloping sensory experience and a didactic process for the audience. However, as aromatic ingestion and self-immolation represent a particular type of behaviour, I will not further explore the issue in this chapter.

³⁴ It is worth noting that there does not seem to be any competition or hierarchy in the depictions of departure within the hagiographic collections. The ones depicted as having the 'odour of sanctity' were not necessarily regarded as more achieved. The feature is more oriented at distinguishing them with the ordinary people.

³⁵ For instance, the Flower Maiden discovered the site of Lady Wei's shrine following a plume of unusual fragrance. Buddhist hagiographies also contain several relevant tales. The Japanese Buddhist traveller, Ennin, also recorded experiences of extraordinary fragrance when he visited the Buddhist sacred mountain, the Mount Wutai 五臺 (Ennin 3.290–95, Second Day of the Seventh Month, 841). See Verellen 1998, 363–384 for the revelation of sacred beings and places in some Daoist accounts.

hagiographies.³⁶ The motif, however, was curiously adopted by the biographers for the founders of two rival dynasties – the Song and the Liao. Both rulers were allegedly born surrounded by amazingly unusual fragrance and other auspicious aura.³⁷ It is not uncommon to depict emperors, especially the founders of a dynasty, with exceptional physiognomic features, to demonstrate that the future ruler had divine protection and the mandate of heaven. The addition of olfactory signs was something new, suggesting that it was a very popular narrative during the tenth century around both rulers' lifetime.

Finally, in the Buddhist context, the extraordinary fragrance sometimes also appears in conjunction with the revelation of a 'Buddha relic and the Buddha's teaching. Symbolically, the fragrance represents the dharma. The *Dhāraṇīśvararāja Bodhisattva Sūtra* (*Tuoluoni zizaiwang pusa pin* 陀羅尼自在王菩薩品) included in one of the major Mahāyāna Buddhist anthologies, the *Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra* (*Dafang deng Dajijing* 大方等大集經), for instance, states that when the World-Honoured One was teaching the correct dharma to the direct disciples, 'from all the pores of his body emanated sweet fragrance, which soon spread and filled the great trichilicosm. [...] All the plants, woods, and rivers were enveloped in the scent of candana sandalwood, and so were the bodies of human beings. All beings abandoned evil deeds, words, and intention. All the Buddha's disciples, upon sensing this scent, achieved instantaneously the four states of meditation.'³⁸

The transformative power of the Buddha's teaching is envisioned as a powerful whiff of sweet scent of sandalwood. Scent was also reported to have healing power in some stories, probably

³⁶ In Daoist hagiographies till the tenth century, only the conception of Laozi and that of Tao Hongjing is depicted with the appearance of auspicious olfactory signs. Buddhist accounts of this type are also rare, moreover, in general in the Buddhist narratives of this kind, the family of the protagonist have an association with Daoism. See, for instance, the account of Huikuan 惠寬 in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, juan 20 (T. 2060, 600b29-601b29).

³⁷ The *Song shi* relates that when Emperor Taizu of the Song 宋太祖 (r. 960–976) was born, 'red light surrounded the room and an unusual fragrance lingered for several nights.' The emperor's body was, in addition, gold, which was a clear reference to the Buddha (1.2). Similarly, in the *Liao shi* 遼史, the birth of Emperor Taizu of the Liao 遼太祖 (r. 916–926) was also characterised by divine light and unusual fragrance in the room (1.1). *Song shi* and *Liao shi* were both compiled in the thirteenth century, under the supervision of the Yuan minister and historian Toqto'a (Tuotuo 脫脫; 1314–1356), but their materials, especially the imperial biographies, came from earlier court-commissioned 'veritable records' (*shilu* 實錄). The narratives were probably formed close to the time of both rulers' death in the tenth century.

³⁸ 時佛身上一毛孔所出香氣，遍滿三千大千世界。[...] 所有草木山河之屬悉梅檀香，眾生身香亦復如是，一切無有身口意惡，諸佛弟子聞此香已即得四禪。T13, no. 397, 14a5-10.

echoing the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*. An eminent monk burnt sandalwood and chanted the *Lotus Sutra* for a dying man upon the request of his son, and the man instantaneously healed through perceiving the sandalwood's scent.³⁹ The fragrance of a relic at Longzang 龍藏 monastery healed a man who had been suffering from anosmia for twenty years.⁴⁰ The second type of fragrance, therefore, marked the sacred from the profane, either it was a place, an object, or teachings.

The Ritual Space

We have now explored the sources and symbolic meanings these olfactory motifs connotated, but the problem of dissonance between what might have actually taken place – the body decayed and emitted a putrescent stench – and a rhetoric that argued this was an unusual fragrance remains. Studies on the 'odour of sanctity' in the medieval Christian world, from where I borrowed this term, provide useful insight. The 'odour of sanctity,' according to Classen, was 'the most potent olfactory concept to arise from the new Christian world order' after centuries of refusal and condemnation against perfume and incense, characteristic of 'pagan sensuality' and frivolous luxury.⁴¹ Scholars have discussed the origin and the appearance of this concept in the fifth century, concomitant with the incorporation of incense usage in Christian rituals.⁴² Muchembled first proposed a direct link between this medieval Christian motif and the Classical world, namely, in Plutarch's depiction of Alexander the Great.⁴³ Harvey has expertly pointed out how Christians built on the cultural habits of

³⁹ See Shi Guanding's 釋灌頂 biography in XGSZ 19.718–19.

⁴⁰ XGSZ 28.1111.

⁴¹ Classen et al. 1994, 51–52. Interestingly, this phenomenon is still held to occur today in Himalayan Buddhism, where it is known as the 'meditation at death' (Tib. *Thugs dam*). The description of the *thugs dam* is very similar to the medieval Buddhist accounts on an eminent monk's death. Some research, including in neuroscience, has attempted to provide some explanation to the phenomenon, but it still appears an enigma. Hopefully more multidisciplinary work will shed further light on the subject. I am grateful to Jacob Fisher for bringing my attention to the contemporary phenomenon of 'odour of sanctity' in Himalayan Buddhism.

⁴² Classen et al. have noted that the association between aromatic scents with gods in the Classical Mediterranean world provided the basis for the persuasion of this discourse. In the Greco-Roman tradition, the ancient gods delighted in aromatics and were fragrant themselves. They particularly enjoyed ambrosia and nectar, but the sweet scent that Greek gods emanate is usually nothing mystical. It is explained by the presence of incense burnt in the environment, perfume added to their garment, or flowers offered in their temples. Ibid.

⁴³ Muchembled 2020, 13. In Plutarch's account, Alexander's body remained pure and fragrant many days after his death (Plutarch, *Alexander*, LXXVII.437). The author maintains this strange phenomenon left unexplained might have been picked up later by Christians in the rhetoric of an odour of sanctity. The association between Alexander the Great and pleasant scent is already made in the description of the young Alexander (IV. 232). This was however explained by

pre-Christian beliefs to ‘realign patterns of the common olfactory legacy and reconfigure their consequences for social meaning.’⁴⁴ She also demonstrates how olfaction aids in the construction of holiness, through exploiting the interplay between ritual practice and religious knowledge.

The ‘odour of sanctity’ in medieval China developed in a similar situation. The long tradition of associating scents with moral values served as a cultural foundation for such belief to take root. At the same time, an increasing emphasis on the use of incense in religious ceremonies enhanced the connection between sweet scent and religious experience. As a case study, we will look at three Dunhuang materials to explore how rituals might have mobilised the human sensorium to impart new sensory meanings in practice.

All three materials are related to mortuary rites: two liturgical texts meant to be read to the participants at different stages of the funerary service, and a painting (presumably) depicting the journey of the deceased’s soul to one of the Buddhist paradises.⁴⁵ We will look at them in context and discuss their potential social functions.

A good portion of the Dunhuang manuscripts is dedicated to rituals, either descriptions of ritual procedures or prayer and liturgical texts to be read out during different ceremonies.⁴⁶ Scholars have attempted to reconstruct a general mode of funerary ceremony in Dunhuang based on manuscripts and a comparison with the official ritual compendium, the *Da Tang Kaiyuan li*.⁴⁷ It is generally agreed that Dunhuang funerary prescriptions demonstrate a confluence of traditional/Confucian, Buddhism, and Daoism elements.

The typical procedure starts with the deathbed ritual, including the drafting of a will and the commissioning of a portrait for the person. Once the person passes away, their body is placed on the

a popular theory proposed by Theophrastus, who associates heat and dryness with fragrance, while coldness and humidity with foul stench. Alexander’s sweet body odour was caused by the warm and fiery temperament of his body. Plutarch gave a physiological rather than moral cause to the signs of prodigy.

⁴⁴ Harvey 2006, 2.

⁴⁵ Schmid notes that a proliferation of options for non-samsaric rebirth emerged in the medieval Chinese Buddhist world. By the eighth century, potential places of rebirth came to include the various Pure Lands, *Tuṣita* and *Trāyastriṃśa* Heavens, the Merit Lodge, the Palace of the Seven Jewels, and even Daoist-like heavenly grottos (Schmid 2008, 293–325).

⁴⁶ For prayer and liturgical texts in Dunhuang, see, among others, Huang and Wu 1995; Hao 1996, 64–71; Teiser 2009, 201–237; Teiser 2017, 295–307. Chen 2013, 83–90 mentions texts describing the funeral procedure.

⁴⁷ Tan 1991, 72–123; Duan 1999, 209–18; Chen 2013, 83–90. See Hao and Chen 2011, 253–62 for the organisational aspects of monastic funerals in Dunhuang.

ground, in the hope that they will come back to life. If this does not happen, then the family wails, washes the hair and body of the deceased, covers their face, and puts some grain or a piece of jade in their mouth. The family then announces the death of the person and receives the condolences. Afterwards, the deceased is put in a coffin, then taken to a previously chosen gravesite. Sometimes offerings are made to the gods and spirits along the way so that the soul of the deceased could pass smoothly. Important ceremonies are carried out at the gravesite, including the burning of incense, offerings, and a reading of a graveside (*linkuang* 臨壙) liturgical text. At the conclusion of the graveside ceremony, there is a ritual of ‘ten recitations’ (*shinian* 十念).

After the burial, the participants return home. Various memorial rituals will be then carried out for the ‘pursuit of post-humous well-being’ (*zhui fu* 追福 or *zhui jian* 追薦) for the sake of the departed.⁴⁸ One of the most well-known ones was the so-called ‘seven seven’ rite (*qiqi zhai* 七七齋), which was performed once every seven days during the first forty-nine days after the person’s death. The rationale behind some of these rituals is explained in an apocryphal scripture that had great impact on medieval Chinese funerary culture, the *Guanding jing* 灌頂經 (*Consecration Sutra*).⁴⁹ The scripture reads:

As a person is about to die but has not yet died, one ought to burn incense and light lamps for him to illuminate [his path]. [In addition,] one must hang an obituary banner on the flagpole of a pagoda, and chant sutras for three times seven days. The reason for doing this is that the deceased in the intermediate existence (*āntarābhavika*) is like an infant with sin or blessedness not yet determined. One ought to cultivate merits on behalf of the deceased so that he may be reborn in the measureless land of the ten directions.

⁴⁸ See Tan 1991, 72–80 for a detailed description of the funerary procedure as well as the corresponding manuscripts. Here I follow Eugene Wang’s translation for the terms *zhui fu* and *zhui jian* (Wang 2007, xxii).

⁴⁹ See Stone 2016, 17 for the significance of the *Consecration Sutra* on Chinese funerary culture.

若人臨終未終之日，當為燒香然燈續明。於塔寺中表刹之上，懸命過幡，轉讀尊經，竟三七日。所以然者，命終之人在中陰中，身如小兒，罪福未定，應為修福。願亡者神使生十方無量刹土。⁵⁰

It describes that the soul of the deceased roams in the limbo during the first forty-nine days during his death and his rebirth. To increase the chance for the deceased to be reborn in a desirable path, it was essential for the living to cultivate merits on behalf of them.⁵¹ Burning incense and lighting lamps, hanging banners, chanting sutra, and organising vegetarian feasts were all possible activities to this end. The ‘seven-seven’ rite was held for the same reason.

There are many references to incense burning in the mortuary rites. Actions such as ‘burning a piece of oxhead sandalwood’ and ‘laying out an incense banquet’ are mentioned in some manuscripts, some express the wish of using the incense to ‘perfume’ the journey of the soul toward one of the paradises.⁵² As they are included in the ritual manuals, they were probably meant to be read while the action was taking place. It can be imagined that the scent of incense appeared in the key stages of the funeral. Then the ritual specialist would also invite the audience to imagine the deceased’s encounter with the heavenly messengers, who were equally characterised by flowery adornment and sweet scent:

The merit from the ten recitations will enrich and benefit the deceased soul, so that it will be miraculously reborn in the Pure Land. We pray that the flower platform and flower canopy will come welcome him from the sky, and that the jewelled seat and gold bed will come to greet him in the void, so that he will listen to the teachings on suffering and emptiness in the Mani Hall and remove the defilements of ignorance in the Pond of Prajñā/Eight Liberations...

向來稱揚十念功德，滋益亡靈神生淨土。惟願花臺花蓋空裏來迎，寶座金床承(乘)空接引，摩尼殿上聽說苦空，八解池中蕩除無明之垢...⁵³

⁵⁰ *Consecration Sutra*, 11 (T. 1331, 529c18-24).

⁵¹ Cf. Teiser 1994, 22–30.

⁵² See, for instance, the text dedicated to a deceased mother in P.2341, which describes that on the day of the ceremony there was ‘rich and intense fragrant smoke that rises up to the pure cloud platform.’ See also S.5639. Cf. Jen 2004, 1–21.

⁵³ S.4474. Cf. Mair 1981, 344. The content mostly corresponds to a text found in the *Compilation of Worship and Repentance Rituals* (*Ji zhujing lichan yi* 集諸經禮懺儀, T. 1982.) compiled by Zhisheng 智昇, a monk based in the capital, in 730, except for the second clause. It is not clear what the ‘bajie chi’ 八解池 (literally, the pond of eight liberations) is, it might be a mistake for *Bore chi* 般若池 as in the text collected by Zhisheng.

This was probably read at the end of a graveside liturgy following the ‘ten recitations.’ It describes for the attendants of the liturgy how an ideal journey toward afterlife was imagined. Flower platform and canopy are mentioned also in hagiographic accounts, creating therefore a direct connection.

The other is a text for ‘ornamenting the departed’ (*wang zhuangyan* 亡莊嚴⁵⁴) included in a famous booklet (S.5639) that was likely used by a ritual specialist in services. This text was perhaps read at the end of a memorial service and it describes the imagined journey the soul of the deceased undertakes in one of the paradises:

We humbly pray that [she/he will] step on fragrant stairs and walk around in the *liuli*⁵⁵ hall, pluck heavenly flowers in the grove of jewelled trees to offer the Buddha. [...] We humbly pray that the five clouds hold [her/his] feet so that she/he can freely return to the Palace of Liberation. May the hundred blessings protect her soul, and shall her soul be liberated from the sufferings of the entanglements desire creates.

伏願琉璃殿內，踏香砌以經行，寶樹林間，摘仙花而奉佛。[...] 伏願五雲捧足，逍遙歸解脫之宮。百福資靈，放曠出愛纏之苦。⁵⁶

The scene described is serene, peaceful, and full of sensory delights. The ideal journey a deceased’s soul undertakes immediately after the person’s death or later were always envisioned with lavish adornment and sweet scent in the prayers.

The verbal depiction of the sensory delights might have been further enhanced by the display of visual representations of the paradises, such as Stein Painting 47 which depicts this journey. (Fig. 8) This painting, dated to the late ninth century, was found in the so-called ‘library cave’ in Dunhuang (Cave 17), now kept at the British Museum. It is one of the group of paintings now commonly termed the ‘Yinlu pusa tu’ 引路菩薩圖 (Paintings of the bodhisattva who leads the way). Paul Pelliot and Roderick Whitfield have examined such paintings in the collections of the British

⁵⁴ I am indebted to a lecture by Stephen Teiser for learning about the two manuscripts above. Cf. Teiser 2009 for a study on the language features in Ornamenting the Departed texts.

⁵⁵ See Yu 2019, 231–268 for *liuli* in medieval Chinese Buddhism.

⁵⁶ Huang and Wu 1995, 215. Cit. in Yu 241.

Museum and the Musée Guimet.⁵⁷ All of the paintings identified as belonging to this theme are from Dunhuang or northwest China dating from the late Tang to early Song periods.



Fig. 6 ‘Bodhisattva Who Leads the Way,’ Stein Painting 47, British Museum

The theme of the painting is quite clear: the bodhisattva leads the deceased to be reborn in paradise, probably the Pure Land Paradise here. At the foot of the cartouche in the right top corner, there are three characters ‘yinlu pu’ 引路菩, indicating its theme. The name of this bodhisattva, however, does not occur in Buddhist scriptures. The bodhisattva in this painting has been thought to

⁵⁷ Pelliot 1974, 274–82; Whitfield 1983, pl. 9. Numerous recent studies have explored the pictorial features, the items to be included in this group, and the *yinlu pusa* paintings’ relationship with the Water Land Painting (*shuilu tu* 水陸圖). See, among others, Sha 2006, 38–42; Wang 2014, 37–45; Bloom 2013, 310–17. The Water Land Painting was displayed during the ‘Water Land Universal Salvation Ritual,’ which Daniel Stevenson called ‘arguably the most spectacular liturgies in the Chinese Buddhist repertoire that spread from the late tenth century to the first half of the twentieth century.’ Stevenson 2001, 30. See also Liu 2020.

be Avalokiteśvara (Ch. Guanyin 觀音), but in other cases, it seems to depict Kṣitigarbha (Ch. Dizang 地藏). Some scholars maintain that we are dealing with a bodhisattva revered in a folk religion in Dunhuang at the time.⁵⁸ Most likely it is not a title assigned to one bodhisattva, but a description of what the bodhisattva does. The hand-censer depicted in this painting is in fact an object very popular, found in various locations along the Silk Road, from Gandhara to the caves in current-day Xinjiang, Dunhuang, and also in later Islamic culture, suggesting a transmission of olfactory culture across regions.⁵⁹

The content of the painting seems like a pictorial illustration of the ritual texts we just read: the clouds holding the feet of both the bodhisattva and the soul of the deceased. The bodhisattva holds a hand-censer in his right hand and a lotus flower in his left, both suggesting the presence of a sweet scent. In addition, in the censer the bodhisattva holds, we see some black substance and dark smoke rising from the censer towards the paradise buildings on another cloud in the upper left corner. The upward wafting of the fragrant smoke connects the wayfarers to the paradisial land above.⁶⁰

Both the texts contained in the liturgical texts above and the images bear a remarkable similarity to the content of the hagiographic accounts we read in the previous sections. They evoke the same kind of image: a heavenly messenger descending to welcome the deceased surrounded by remarkable scent and sound. The three Dunhuang materials we examined probably did not belong to one single liturgy. Nevertheless, they shed light on how participants have been immersed in a multi-sensory liturgical where the wondrous fragrance of the divine was produced by the material, the auditory, and the visual. All their senses were mobilised to gain this participatory knowledge.

The Scents for the Divine

If the audience of the narratives and the rituals had to imagine the scent of the divine, how would that smell have been like? In this section we will survey the materiality of the scents, by

⁵⁸ Cf. Whitfield 1983, pl. 9.

⁵⁹ See Lee 1010, 33–81; Feng 2016, 122–33; Lin and Hao 2017, 63–74.

⁶⁰ The banner that the bodhisattva holds has attracted much research, considered to be a type of ‘soul-summoning banner.’ In the paintings included in the group, the banner in fact seems more important than the censer, which is not always represented (Wang 2014, 37–45).

exploring the materials associated with religious devotion and those thought to emanate ‘unusual’ fragrance in medieval Chinese imagination.

The sense of smell, as noted, was and still is considered to be a fundamental conduit to connect with the world of gods and spirits. Modern scholarship on Chinese incense culture suggests that an enrichment of aromatic materials and sophistication of usage occurred sometime in the Han with the expansion of the empire to the South and the intensification of communications between China and the cultures in the West. From that point, aromatics that produce more intense and complex fragrance, such as storax, camphor, liquidambar were introduced.⁶¹ Scholars in the Song dynasty already made similar observations by marking the distinction between fragrant plants used in ancient times and the incense of their own era. Zhao Xihu 趙希鵠 (fl. late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries) clearly indicates that the reason why an incense burner only developed in the Han with the Hill Censer (*boshan lu* 博山爐) is because the ancients did not have incense. They ‘connected with the gods using artemisia (*xiao'ai* 蕭艾).’⁶²

For Buddhist devotees, the scriptures provide a rich list of aromatic items to use as objects of devotion, ablution, and medicine. Sometimes the influence went beyond the Buddhist community in a narrow sense. The ritual of bathing the Buddha, or also known as the ‘Dragon Flower Gathering’ (*longhua hui* 龍華會), was incorporated in an early medieval compendium of festivities, the *Jing Chu suishi ji*, together with other non-Buddhist folk festivals.⁶³ This compendium notes that the water for bathing the buddha should be prepared with five aromatics, each corresponding to a colour. Lycopi Herba (*duliang xiang* 都梁香) was indicated for the preparation of blue water, curcuma for red water, *qiulong* 丘隆⁶⁴ for white water, aconite for yellow water, and storax benzoin for black water.⁶⁵ The text is cited from Buddhist scripture translated in Chinese in the fourth century, but the aromatics are simplified, and the fivefold structure is stressed. The famous monk and pilgrim Yijing

⁶¹ Cf. Bedini 1994; Milburn 2016, 441–464.

⁶² *Dongtian qinglu* 洞天清錄, 58–59.

⁶³ Chapman 2014, 468–493 for more on the compendium.

⁶⁴ I have not been able to identify this material.

⁶⁵ *Jing Chu suishiji*, 39–40.

義淨 (635–713) probably did not find that good enough so he translated, among other texts, a short scripture called the *Sutra on the Merit of Bathing the Buddha* (*Yufu gongde jing* 浴佛功德經, 710).⁶⁶ It gives a more detailed account of the aromatics required and stressed that the bathing of the Buddha image was the best type of homage, in the words of the Buddha himself.

When you bathe the image, you should [mix] oxhead sandalwood, white sandalwood, red sandalwood, aloeswood, mastic (*xunlu* 熏陸), curcuma, camphor, tagaraka (*lingling* 零陵), and patchouli, grind these on a clean stone to make a scented paste, which is then to be made into scented water and contained in a clean vessel. [...] Pour on the scented hot water, purifying and cleansing [the Buddha image], repeatedly pouring the pure water over it. The water that is used must be completely filtered so as not to cause harm to insects. Drops from two fingers of the water with which you bathed the image should be taken and placed on your own head – this is called ‘auspicious water.’ Drain off the water onto clean ground without allowing your feet to tread upon it. With a fine, soft towel wipe the image, making it clean. Burn the above-named incenses, spreading the aroma all around, and put the image back in its original place.

若浴像時，應以牛頭栴檀、白檀、紫檀、沈水、熏陸、鬱金香、龍腦香、零陵、藿香等，於淨石上磨作香泥，用為香水，置淨器中。[...] 灌以香湯，淨潔洗沐，重澆清水。所用之水，皆須淨濾，勿使損虫。其浴像水，兩指瀝取，安自頂上，名吉祥水。瀉於淨地，莫令足踏。以細軟巾，拭像令淨，燒諸名香。周遍香馥，安置本處。⁶⁷

Emphasis on fragrance and purity is found throughout. All the materials mentioned in this passage were the most famous exotic aromatics imported in the Tang, indicating the impact of Buddhism in shaping the smellscape of medieval China.

Sandalwood occupies an important position in this prescription. It was undoubtedly the most important aromatic material for medieval Chinese Buddhism. This was also backed by theological foundation: the Buddha was closely associated with the scent of sandalwood in various scriptures.

Gregory Schopen has noted that key moments in the biography of the Buddha – his conception, his sojourn in the heaven of the thirty-three, and his death – all involve odours. A common theme is the marked difference between the fragrance of the Buddha and the smell of humans.⁶⁸ In the

⁶⁶ *Yufu gongde jing*, T16, 800b16-24. Boucher 2007, 59. See Ibid. 59–68 for an introduction and translation to this sutra. The authenticity of this sutra as a translation from Sanskrit has been doubted.

⁶⁷ Boucher 2007, 66–67, modified.

⁶⁸ Schopen 2015, 11–30.

narration of the Buddha's descent from the Tuṣita heaven into his mother's womb, the *Lalitavistara Sūtra* (*Puyao jing* 普曜經⁶⁹) describes that the gods belonging to the different realms were all disgusted by the foulness and stench of the abode of humans. When the future Buddha was to descend from Tusita to the foul abode of humans, the god Brahma, to protect the pure bodhisattva from the stink of humans, constructed a series of three 'chambers,' one inside the other, and installed it in his mother's womb during his ten-month stay there. The first two layers of the contrivance was made of precious sandalwood, while the innermost one was made of perfume.⁷⁰

In a related account included in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, the Buddha emanated the scent of oxhead sandalwood, so that the foul odour of humans could be overpowered, which was the only way to enable the gods of the thirty-three to descend with him. In the accounts that we have read above, the presence and the blessing of the Buddha were also imagined as a whiff of scent of sandalwood. In the Buddhist imagination, sandalwood was undoubtedly a scent associated with the divine and considered to please the gods.⁷¹

This material, in particular the ox-head sandalwood, was prescribed in various rituals, including in the funerary practice. After all, it was the aromatic that the World-Honoured One burnt to honour his deceased father.⁷² A variety of ritual and ordinary devotional objects related to Buddhism were made with this material. When Ennin travelled to Yangzhou, he witnessed the carving of a three-foot white sandalwood image of Buddha Sakyamuni in the Kaiyuan 開元 Monastery and opened a scroll of scripture mounted on a sandalwood rod.⁷³ When he departed from Chang'an a few years later, Tang officials gifted him, among other things, one piece of sandalwood, two sandalwood carved statuettes, and a bottle of incense blend.⁷⁴ We have several records of monumental Buddha images made in sandalwood in the medieval period. For a visitor to a temple in the Tang, the smell of sandalwood would anticipate the serenity in the precincts of the temple. The prominent Tang poet

⁶⁹ This sutra was translated into Chinese by the eminent monk from Dunhuang, Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護) in the early fourth century. The text was widely circulating around northern China and became the subject of exegetical studies in the fourth century.

⁷⁰ Schopen 2015, 13.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Zhujing yaoji* (T. 2123, 179b8).

⁷³ Ennin, 1.61. Seventh Day of Eleventh Month, 838.

⁷⁴ Ennin 4.455. Fifteenth Day of the Fifth Month, 845.

Bai Juyi 白居易, for instance, writes following his travel to the Wuzhen 悟真 temple near the capital, an important centre for the Pure Land School of Buddhism:

Then I ascended to the Hall of Avalokiteśvara,
and not yet arrived, I smelled the [fragrance] of sandalwood.

次登觀音堂，未到聞梅檀。⁷⁵

Other aromas were also appreciated in the Buddhist context. A Dunhuang manuscript recording the ‘incense tax’ that monks paid to a local monastery in Dunhuang in the ninth century included curcuma, frankincense, and sandalwood.⁷⁶ We do not know what these aromatics were used for in this context, but they were clearly important materials for the monastery.

Recently, a group of scientists have analysed three incense samples found in three different containers in the underground crypt below the Famen 法門 Monastery in Shaanxi, China, which was opened in 1987 after being sealed for over 1,200 years. The research sheds fresh light on the Buddhist incense culture in medieval China. The first sample analysed was contained in an eight-layered silver box that Emperor Yizong 懿宗 (r. 859–873) donated to the monastery to hold the Buddha relic. The aromatic substance was found in the seventh innermost box. Its proximity to the relic suggests it was deemed precious and worthy. It is, however, not a common substance usually associated with Buddhism in textual sources. Researchers have identified it as elemi (*lanxiang* 欖香), a type of oleoresin yielded by the tropical trees of genus *Canarium*, native in the areas of modern-day Guangzhou and Vietnam.⁷⁷ The second sample consists in scented wood pieces found in a relic container offered by the Tantric monk Prajñācakra (般若斫迦 or 智慧輪, d. 876), who was appointed as the Imperial Preceptor and hosted the last procession for the welcoming of the Buddha relic. This sample has been identified as aloeswood. The last sample is brown powder contained in a begonia-shaped silver container, identified as aloeswood and frankincense.⁷⁸ It is

⁷⁵ QTS, 429.4734.

⁷⁶ Jiang 1994, 131–33; Zheng 2011, 1–12; Liu and Wen 2017, 117–19.

⁷⁷ Ren et al. 2022, 1–10. See Schafer 1985, 165–66 for elemi in Tang China.

⁷⁸ Ren et al. 2022, 1–10.

remarkable that sandalwood is entirely absent in these samples considering its frequent mention in texts. Perhaps it was used as a carving material instead of being contained in the boxes, thus having perished by now. These findings pointed out the role elemi played in the Buddhist context and also the prominent position of frankincense and aloeswood, especially the former, which had not been considered closely associated with Buddhism.

Sandalwood is also indicated in Daoist aromatic preparations, but it does not seem to have any primacy there. A Daoist formula for creating an incense blend capable of ‘penetrating the nine heavens’ (*xiang che jiutian* 香徹九天) indicates the use of aloeswood, frankincense, Aristolochiae Radix (*qingmu xiang*), clove, real sandalwood, and others. Aloeswood and frankincense are prescribed in significantly larger quantity compared to the others, suggesting again the importance of these two materials.⁷⁹

Frankincense, as we have noted, was important in the Daoist ‘grain avoidance’ fasting practice. Called variously as *xunlu xiang* 熏陸香, *ruxiang* 乳香 or *rutou xiang* 乳頭香, frankincense (*Boswellia carterii*) was one of the aromatics imported in largest quantity in Tang-Song China.⁸⁰ The aromatic seems to have been known in southern China in the early Han period. Twenty six grams of frankincense conserved in a small lacca-box have been found in the tomb of Zhao Mo 趙昧 (Viet. Triệu Mạt, r. 137-124 BCE), the second ruler of the kingdom of Nanyue 南越, in current day Guangzhou. Researchers maintain this might have been used as medicine.⁸¹

The northern Song chief minister Ding Wei wrote a eulogy for aloeswood and frankincense which he entitled the ‘Biography of Heavenly Scents’ (*Tianxiang zhuan*). In the text, Ding notes that people in the Tang dynasty thought frankincense was not suitable for liturgies, as the scent was thought to drive spirits and gods away. This misinformation, Ding writes, was still circulated in his day. However, Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 997–1022) cleared the name of frankincense as well as that of aloeswood. He pointed out that the scent of frankincense was meant to venerate the highest

⁷⁹ *Wushang miyao* 無上秘要, 66.

⁸⁰ Schafer 1985, 170–1; Wen 2015, 196–204.

⁸¹ Wen 2016, 6–7.

heaven and the supreme sages (*gaotian shangsheng* 高天上聖), therefore common spirits did not feel worthy of such offering. As such, the author argued that aloeswood and frankincense were legitimate aromatics to be used in the most important liturgies.⁸² The text says that the usage of the two became thus prolific. Historical data also demonstrate that frankincense was the major aromatic traded in the Song. As a tribute, it was offered by diplomats from Champa, Srivijaya, Jiaozhi, southern India, the Arabian countries, and Zanzibar.⁸³

Now let us consider what was considered to be the ‘unusual aromatic.’ As tangible concept, the term ‘yixiang’ first appeared in the *Hou Han shu*, as part of a list of valuable commodities found in the land of Jiaozhi 交趾 (Vietnam), which includes ‘bright irregular pearls, green feathered birds, rhinoceros, elephants, turtles, unusual fragrances, and beautiful woods.’⁸⁴ The lands and islands of the South continued to be a place associated with unnamed, mysterious, yet extraordinarily fragrant aromatics throughout the medieval period. The *Jiu Tang shu* records that ‘unusual aromatics’ arrived to the court of Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805–820) from the kingdom of Heling 訶陵 (probably Java) together with slave boys and colourful parrots.⁸⁵ Some specific aromatics have also been labelled ‘yi’ in textual sources, such as ambergris, a solid, waxy substance produced in the digestive system of sperm whales.⁸⁶ Ambergris was first mentioned in Duan Chengshi’s ninth-century book, in which he indicated that the substance came from East African coast.⁸⁷

Another origin of these uncommon aromatics was the West. Fragrances from the Western regions were also considered ‘extraordinary aromatics’ and, onto them, more legendary colours have been invested. In a story recorded in the *Shishuo xinyu*, an illicit love affair between Han Shou 韓壽 (fl. c. 3rd century) and Jia Chong’s 賈充 (217–282) daughter was detected in the first place because Jia smelled a whiff of ‘special fragrance’ (*qixiang* 奇香) about Han. The scent was powerful and

⁸² *Tianxiang zhuan*, in *Quan Song wen* 208.268–72, collected in *Chenshi xiangpu* and *Xiangcheng*.

⁸³ Wen 2015, 199.

⁸⁴ HHS, 31.1111.

⁸⁵ The *Taiping guangji* (414.3368) mentions a ‘Fragrant Island’ in the Zhuya 朱崖.

⁸⁶ *Lingwai daida*, 7.224; *Zhufan zhi*, 231.

⁸⁷ YZZZ, 445–47. Cf. Schafer 1985, 174–75.

distinct, like the one that a foreign king offered to the emperor as tribute. That foreign fragrance last for months once a person was in contact with it. Considering that the emperor only granted the aromatic to him and another minister, Jia suspects that Han obtained this scent from his daughter. The olfactory message – which could not be contained or hidden – betrayed the secret love encounter.⁸⁸

This aromatic with extraordinarily potent and persistent scent, according to the commentator of the *Shishuo xinyu*, Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標 (462–521), was exactly the famous legendary incense offered to the Han emperor as tribute by the King of Yuezhi 月氏 in the Western Regions. The incense is described in the *Shizhou ji* 十洲記 (Record of the Ten Islands), a book that talks about the paradisiacal regions in the Eastern Sea and in the west where the immortals have their abode, traditionally ascribed to Emperor Wu's 武 courtier Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (154–93 BCE), but probably from a later date. The said aromatic was 'as large as the egg of a sparrow and as black as mulberry. When burnt, its fragrance lasts incessantly for three months.'⁸⁹ This 'strange aromatic' was reported to have miraculous healing power. When in the first year of the Houyuan 後元 era (88 BCE) an epidemic broke out in the capital city and took the life of more than half of its population, the emperor burnt this magic incense in the city. By its effect, those who had not died for longer than three days were all revived, and the fragrance of the aromatic lasted for three months.⁹⁰ Therefore, this aromatic was also called later called 'the divine aromatic of Yuezhi' (*Yuezhi shenxiang* 月支神香) 'soul-returning aromatic' (*fanhun xiang* 返魂香).

The legend of the soul-returning aromatic loomed large. The zealous continued to search for its place of origin, while the literati incorporated the motif in their eulogies and epigraphic

⁸⁸ *Shishuo xinyu* 35. 827.

⁸⁹ Ibid. The period that the fragrance lasts was prolonged to nine months in later Song recounts, see, for instance, the item 'Yuezhi xiang' 月支香 in the *Xiangpu* by Hong Chu and *Mingxiang pu* by Ye Tinggui 葉庭珪. Cf. *Xiangxue huidian*, 21, 72.

⁹⁰ *Shizhou ji*.

compositions.⁹¹ In the tomb inscription dedicated to a certain Lady Wang, wife of Yang Xuanguai 楊玄珪, Wang Wei writes:

Her soul, alas, does not return!
In vain we burn this aromatic from a foreign kingdom.
魂兮不反，空焚外國之香。⁹²

Examples like this abound in the epigraphic records. A foreign aromatic with miraculous healing power and even the capability to bring a dead back to life was clearly a familiar concept in people's mind. In the famous stele which records the history of the promulgation of the Church of the East (known in China as Jingjiao 景教) in Tang China, the 'Da Qin *jingjiao* liuxing Zhongguo bei' 大秦景教流行中國碑 (also known as the 'Xi'an stele', or previously the 'Nestorian stele'), the author indicates that the 'soul-returning aromatic' as a precious commodity found in the Da Qin 大秦 (originally the term refers to the Roman Empire, here probably to the Near East), together with other rare treasures such as asbestos, moon pearls, and the jade that flows in the dark.⁹³

Modern scholars have proposed various theories as regard to what kind of aromatic the 'soul-returning aromatic' refers to. Popular candidates include *suhe xiang* 蘇合香 (*Liquidambar orientalis*)⁹⁴ and styrax benzoin.⁹⁵ Here we are not so concerned about the identification of one specific type of aromatic, but what property made an aromatic unusual for medieval Chinese people.

An unusual aromatic, as the sources reveal, comes from afar. It is rare, mysterious, able to produce exceptionally intense scent. This scent, however, is not easy to classify or describe, like in the case of ambergris. Both Zhou Qufei 周去非 (1135–1189) and Zhao Rukuo 趙汝适 (1170–1231) recorded the disparaging opinions regarding the scent of ambergris:

⁹¹ Du Guangting, for instance, discussed the place of origin of the 'soul-returning' incense. He suggested that this came from the Daoist sacred place of Juku zhou 聚窟洲 in the West Sea.

⁹² Wang Wei *ji jiaozhu* 王維集校註, 977–8; QTW, 327.3317.

⁹³ See Keevak 2008 for a history of the stele and QTW, 916.9546 for the text.

⁹⁴ Luo 2009, 255–7.

⁹⁵ Wen 2012, 117–9.

People say that the ambergris has an unusual fragrance. Others say that its scent is fish-like and that it can stimulate the fragrance of other aromatics. Both are wrong.

人云龍涎有異香，或云龍涎氣腥，能發衆香。皆非也。⁹⁶

Later a Yuan dynasty mariner, Wang Dayuan 汪大淵 (fl. 1311–1350) further develops the knowledge of the material and notes that ‘at first it smells slightly of fish, but when used in a blend, its scent becomes exceptionally pure and far-reaching.’⁹⁷

An unusual aromatic sometimes also had miraculous healing power. It is interesting that elixir was no longer imagined to be found in the eastern islands in medieval times. Moreover, despite the fact that precious incense was introduced into the central lands both from the south and the west, the imagined source of miraculous healing seems to be more associated with the Western Regions and beyond. This might have been related to the route of transmission of medical knowledge as well as the presence of Buddhist physician monks in those areas.⁹⁸ It is also expected that the term ‘unusual fragrance’ does not refer to the same substances all the time – as a substance becomes familiar, the mysterious aura around it would disperse.

Conclusions

An ‘unusual fragrance,’ either associated with a phenomenon, a person, or a tangible object, denotes something alien, exotic, uncanny, extraordinary, beyond the beholder’s knowledge and classifying capacity. As such, it is also particularly easy to manipulate. In fact, the type of scent was often described to inspire awe rather than pleasure and that it was not always comprehensible to the uninitiated.

We have identified two types of fragrant scent associated with the death a person of exceptional spiritual attainment in this chapter. The first is associated with the body itself, which distinguishes the extraordinary from the reek of death that an ordinary person faces at the end of his life. The second type signals the manifestation of the divine, which appears also in other scenarios, such as the discovery of a sacred place, the chanting of sutra, the presence of a relic, and in some cases the birth

⁹⁶ *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答, 7.224; *Zhufan zhi* 諸蕃志, 231.

⁹⁷ *Daoyi zhilue* 島夷志略, cit. in Feng Chengjun’s 馮承鈞 note for the *Zhufan zhi*, 140, fn 1.

⁹⁸ See Despeux 2010; Chen 2002, 2005 for medical exchanges between China and the Western Regions.

of an uncommon person. In the Buddhist context, this fragrant scent was also considered to have healing power and could aid one's the pursuit for enlightenment. The scent of the divine in Buddhism was at least partly associated with that of sandalwood. A twelfth century Daoist liturgical text also indicates the fragrances of aloeswood, sandalwood, lakewood and floral scents as the sign of different deities' descent, these associations, however, do not appear to be consistent.⁹⁹ Rituals, as we have seen, mobilised different senses of their participants to impart and reinforce sensory meanings. For the general audience, different alternatives of afterlives were no longer only told, but also sensed through an embodied ritual experience.

Again, smells' distinctive characteristics of being affective, elusive, and appealing to malleable interpretations render them an effective medium for the construction of sainthood in medieval China. At the same time, this process also contributed to the spread and acceptance of new ideas about the body and death. If fragrance meant virtue, life, and divinity, and if foulness meant corruption, evil, and death, then reshuffling the olfactory categories also meant the possibility of transcending the boundaries between the bodily and the spiritual, life and death, the sacred and the profane.

⁹⁹ *Lingbao lingjiao jidu jinshu* 靈寶領教濟度金書, 46, attributed to Ning Quanzhen 寧全真 (1101–1181).

Conclusions

This dissertation has demonstrated that smell mattered to medieval Chinese people. For them, a smell was not only a physical sensation. It was the conduit through which they connected with the worlds of the gods and the spirits; it was a marker of social status and cultural alignments; it signalled virtue or moral decadence, or a divine manifestation. The conflation of the idea of smell and that of the *qi* in medieval China meant that olfactory encounters had great physiological, moral, and cosmological significance.

Medieval Chinese people did not only perceive smells, they also actively used smells to reveal and assert social and cultural distinctions. Smells separated ‘us’ from ‘the other,’ the poor from the wealthy, the virtuous from the corrupted, the civilised from the barbarians, and the sacred from the profane.

By mapping the smellscape of Chang’an in the eighth and ninth centuries, we have examined samples of lived experience in medieval China and explored how olfaction revealed and contributed to structuring social hierarchies. Smell provided a measure for distinguishing social classes, especially in a world in which both adding fragrances and eliminating foul odours from one’s body and surroundings were costly practices. The degree to which one could control one’s body and environment, therefore, indicated levels of wealth, status, and power.

We have traced a symphony of foul and fragrant odours in this past olfactory time and place, ranging from the stench of sewers to the perfumes wafting from passing carriages, from the scent of incense used in a Buddhist ritual to the foul odours of the sick and poor inhabiting the slums of the capital. However, the smells medieval people commented on were different from what stands out to us as modern observers. Tang literati rarely lamented the effluvium of pollution or excreta (perhaps not because they did not care, but they considered it too indecorous to comment on). They also seldom mentioned the stench of the working people, the beggars, or the leper colonies – all smells that would likely disturb a modern visitor. If anything, the opposite for them was true: to them, power and wealth had the strongest smell. Smells mattered most when they alerted individuals to shifting social dynamics and when they were associated with the unseen realms of gods, ancestors, and spirits.

Zooming into their olfactory concerns, this dissertation has traced the origins of the ideas that consider odours as symptoms and attributes of moral qualities. The moral association of odours did not only apply to humans, but also to other beings, to the works of human creativity, and objects. This concept was rooted in a lasting literary tradition and in the thoughts that articulated the human-divine relationship in early China. It had become a cultural habit by medieval times. Following this habit, virtuous conduct and good governance were considered to emanate fragrance, vile behaviours and corruption gave off an unbearable stench.

This cultural convention had significance in the scenting practice. Examining the views on the relationship between moral purity and outer appearance, we have discovered that the scent of one's body signified at the same time physiological, social, and moral values. The attitudes towards the smell of the body was complex and the values assigned to the act of applying scent to oneself shifted in time. Perfuming and adorning had become practices associated with women and luxury by the end of the sixth century. However, at the same time, a pleasant scent as a reflection of moral purity and decorum also appeared desirable. The sentiment towards cleaning, grooming, and scenting was thus conflicted. Hence, the repertoires of aromatics sought to connect with the classical ruminations of the moral and cosmological significance of smells.

The moral association of smells also became the cultural basis on which further olfactory notions and stereotypes were established. The sense of smell was a fundamental medium through which medieval Chinese people interacted with the other, either the cultural other, the extra human other, or the virtuous other. The smell was noted when it was remarkable and stood out. The centre – the unremarkable, the ordinary – remained odourless.

We have sought to historicise the olfactory perception of the cultural other in China by examining its early developments in medieval times. We traced its cultural roots in the long tradition of assigning moral and cosmological values to smells and ruminated on its similarity with the olfactory perception of the animals, spirits, ghosts, and demons that populated the seen and unseen worlds in and around the human lives. The foul smells of both the human and the extra-human other signalled a menace to the existing boundaries and order; it also indicated their perverse *qi* that were both a major pathogenic agent and a corrupting force to the prevailing morality. Historically, this idea was concomitant with and actively contributed to the forging of a 'Chinese' identity against the nomadic polities with which the central kingdom contended for power. As such, the smell of the

other was a part of the rhetoric that the dominant group – Chinese literati who produced most of the written records – consciously mobilised to underline differences and sustain the existing order.

The usage of olfaction in the construction of sainthood follows a similar pattern. Building on discursive tradition, hagiographic narratives and multisensory ritual practices together imparted new sensory meanings, which in turn contributed to the construction of sainthood. At the same time, this process also contributed to the spread and acceptance of new ideas about the body and death. The passage from life to death, commonly signalled by a whiff of decaying odour, was no longer an insurmountable fate. As the foul odour of death became replaced by the inscrutable divine scent, the end of the human life became associated with the possible transcendence of the mortal destiny and a passage towards the realm of the divine.

This exploration of olfactory culture in medieval China has not only revealed details about how a medieval city might have smelled like, or how medieval people perceived and used smell to structure their social existence and navigate the natural world. It has also demonstrated that, by focusing on the discourse, attitudes, and practices around olfaction, we can in fact discover deeper patterns about how medieval people contemplated cultural identity and cultural boundaries, how they envisioned danger and pollution, and how they communicated with the gods and spirits. Because the nose records experiences and emotions at a deeply human level.

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