Introduction

Scents, Sensory Colonialism, and Social Worlds in Asia

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The transformation of global olfactory experience is one of the less remarked-upon effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that spread rapidly across the globe from its first identification in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. By May 2020, the medical condition of *anosmia*, or loss of a sense of smell, was recognized as a key clinical indicator of infection with COVID-19 (the SARS-CoV-2 virus), sometimes independent of other symptoms. The condition is estimated to affect nearly half of all diagnosed patients.[1] Although most patients regain their sense of smell within a month, for some, a condition of anosmia, or even paranosmia (phantom smells), lingers. Walker et al. quote one patient with this condition: "Anosmia is like experiencing the world in two dimensions. I dearly miss the energising aroma of strong morning coffee and the soothing effect of spring scents. Appetite has dampened and fine wines which I loved have lost their depth and complexity. There are no smells to evoke good memories and I have lost an important coping mechanism. . . . Friends

trivialise this condition and show no empathy."[2] This testimony speaks to the tricky nature of olfaction: its profound impact in shaping one's everyday experience of the world and the popular dismissal of its significance. Western cultural hierarchies and intellectual traditions tend to elevate the reliability and importance of vision and hearing while dismissing other senses like smell, taste, or touch.[3] Philosophers from Plato to Descartes have aligned vision with rationality, and Immanuel Kant once bemoaned smell as the most ignoble of the senses; he described it as "animalistic," "fleeting," and thus unworthy of cultivation.[4]

Beyond an acute condition of anosmia, COVID-19 has more fundamentally shifted how people imagine and experience the air around them. As breath is expelled from somebody's lungs, aerosolized particles travel through the air and can enter another's nose, mouth, and lungs. The confirmed airborne transmission of COVID-19 thus reconfigures the visible boundaries between bodies, such that the air becomes enlivened with a potentially threatening force. In efforts to mitigate transmission, face masks have become a common feature of everyday olfactory experience around the world. Of course, for many communities across Asia, masking is a relatively common practice, for reasons of fashion or courtesy, or due to past experiences with H1N1 and SARS.

Strong-smelling miasmas, or drifting clouds of noxious air, have been central to human understandings of disease transmission since before the emergence of germ theory. Miasma theory remains salient in writing on COVID-19, particularly where the virus crosses cultural or ethnic borders. Several Western commentators, for example, appear to give olfactory evidence when positioning Chinese "wet markets" as the origin site of the virus. In *The COVID-19 Reader* (2021), one writer describes the markets as "various covered stalls on a walkway with pungent smells where different kinds of animals were caged in close proximity . . . including bats, civets, snakes, frogs, ferrets, and others. A lack of hygiene was obvious from the smells and scattered wastes."[5] Given this olfactory experience, the authors describe their lack of surprise that a pandemic might emerge from this context. Their description of the wet markets, however, stands in contrast to Zhong, Crang, and Zeng's 2020 ethnography, which shows how freshness is constructed and valued in people's sensory experiences of markets in China.

What the sensory experiences of COVID-19 so powerfully illustrate is how olfaction is simultaneously an intimately embodied, individual experience and a social phenomenon that travels between bodies and communities—and

even around the globe. In *Aromas of Asia: Exchanges, Histories, Threats* we are concerned with this specific question: how does the mobility of olfactory sense make social worlds? Our analysis privileges flows, exchanges, and encounters to identify prejudices, accusations, and power games of scent and odor. This not only helps us chart new dimensions of people's lived experiences and histories but also invites us to rethink the category of Asia itself, not as a preexisting entity but as one that emerges through sensory exchange.

What some have called the "*sensual revolution* in the humanities, social sciences and the arts,"[6] emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s, challenged the assumed ascendency of psychological or medical approaches to the study of perception, inviting scholars to explore the sociocultural construction of the senses, and thus our foundational experience of the world. This theoretical turn did not emerge from nowhere; as scholars such as Mark M. Smith have articulated, it stands on the work of early historians like Johan Huizinga and Lucien Febvre, among others.[7] Fundamentally, sensory studies asks us to move beyond cursory treatments of the senses as natural tools of perception or cultural epiphenomena to consider how the senses constitute, and orient people within, social and material worlds. Now, over fifteen years since the publication of the first issue of the *Senses and Society* journal, the sensory revolution has proved a fertile one, with scholars across multiple disciplines working variously to articulate multisensorial experiences, to challenge sensory hierarchies, and to broaden our understanding of what constitutes a "sense." A significant driving force behind this work, particularly in cultural anthropology, has been to critique and dismantle Western "commonsense" ideas about the senses.[8] For example, the Roman-Grecian categorizations of the senses into five modalities (vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch) has been shown to be a rather parochial configuration, one that is frequently contradicted by sensory cosmologies and vocabularies around the world and through time (see, for example, Marinucci, Jia, Khoo and Duruz, and Tang, in this volume).[9] Other sensory categories also challenge the aforementioned Western hierarchies and the privileging of vision: for example, in Chinese philosophy, the eyes and the ears are described as of equal significance.[10] As a result of the sensual revolution, scholars working today must acknowledge the importance of the senses in understanding seemingly all lines of inquiry, and they must not dismiss sensory perception as a neutral, shared mode of encountering the world.

Despite this significant body of work and decentering efforts, recent critiques show how contemporary scholarship on the senses remains wedded

to Western and English-language scholarly contexts and concerns.[11] Kelvin Low points out that scholarship is bifurcated between "Euro–American contexts" and "non-industrial societies," where the latter tend to be presented primarily as a counterexample or foil to Western sensory cultures and hierarchies.[12] Comparatively, there has been remarkably minimal analysis of sensoria in Asian contexts, and few existing works analyze olfaction.[13]

Studies of sense, then, retain a distinct center-periphery relationship between the West and the "rest." While illuminating the distinctiveness of multiple sensory cosmologies can work to destabilize an idea of human sensory perception as "natural" or universal, such studies can also reinforce ideas of radical alterity or otherness. Thus, they have historically contributed to constructing and maintaining unequal structures of power. Part of the problem is a predilection toward describing discrete sensory cultures as relatively stable worlds that are "rooted" in place and essentialized to a particular population. Scholars frequently focus on the minutiae of everyday life without explaining what happens when sensory orders come into contact, not only in one-to-one encounters but also on larger scales and within broader sensory landscapes, shaped by deep histories of trade, colonization, and migration (see, for example, Khoo and Duruz, also McClelland in this volume). The former approach constructs cultures as "sensory isolates," denying the histories of exchange through which sensory worlds merge and diverge through forces of imposition, appropriation, and rejection. Any attempt to maintain sensory isolates becomes impossible when we consider key "sensory highways" that have historically run across and shaped Asia, such as economic exchange along the Silk Road, the diffusion of dharmic religious traditions out of South Asia, and the waves of invasion, colonization, and forced relocation that shaped the history of the continent. In recent decades, the speed and number of interconnections of sensory worlds have only intensified, whether by the diffusion of global popular culture, the spread of pandemics, or environmental devastation via clouds of industrial smog.

Seeking to conceptualize Asia and its borders as a dynamic space of olfactory exchange, this collection responds to recent provocations about (Asian) "transnational sensescapes" by Kelvin Low, Devorah Kalekin-Fishman, and others.[14] Low argues that localized sensoria should be studied on their own terms, utilizing their own terminologies, to properly understand symbolisms and the theoretical importance of the senses.[15] The language of "sensescapes" that we deploy here originates and extends upon the work of Arjun Appadurai in conceptualizing global interconnectedness in modernity

via the structure of "scapes" (e.g., "technoscapes," "ethnoscapes" and "ideoscapes").[16] Scapes have the quality of being observable from both emic and etic perspectives (insider and outsider). They position people in the world and give it meaning, but they also depict sensory environments. However, as Dennis, Dawson, and Behie, recent critics of this concept and its abuses, argue,[17] we must be careful to avoid seeing "scapes" as fixed or preexisting the act of perception. Rather, they are always emergent, arising through human encounters with the environment, as J. J. Gibson's work on the affordances of perception originally suggests.[18] In this manner, the delineation of "Asian scentscapes" in this volume does not suggest that there is a single or unified plane of olfactory perception that crosses or exhausts the borders of Asia. Indeed, our deployment of the scapes metaphor is intended to destabilize the idea of set or impermeable borders in order to describe, as Appadurai originally described, "a complex, overlapping and disconnected order that is highly unpredictable."[19]

Although the "scapes" metaphor easily evokes visual perception, the contributions in this collection draw attention to the particular qualities and agencies of olfaction as a mode of exchange. Smell is a powerful boundary marker that has been used to enforce—sometimes violently—differences in dimensions, including ethnicity, gender, caste, and class (see McClelland and Kapoor in this volume). It shapes individual, collective, and state-based memory, as well as discourses about heritage, language, and power. Olfaction enables a pervasive intimacy; smell cannot be "undone" or "unsmelled," yet it fades beyond notice or even perception upon prolonged exposure. That is, people become encultured to scent, unable to consciously perceive its character until a contrasting phenomenon is introduced. This makes smell a potent metaphor for thinking about relations between self and other, evoking how unfamiliar "new smells" provoke strong reactions, both positive and negative. It is perhaps for this reason that Koichi Iwabuchi chose the metaphor of odor to discuss how products of popular culture are produced and received as they travel across Asia and into the West. In his seminal 2002 work *Recentering Globalization*, Iwabuchi suggests that popular consumer commodities originating from Japan are intentionally made "culturally odorless" so that they can be easily appropriated into local contexts. But making something odorless is a difficult task, and smell can be difficult to ward against or keep out. Through its potency, smell can reconfigure borders, unsettle official histories, and create new social-sensory realities from emerging contexts, such as environmental degradation, pathogen outbreaks, and shifting racial

politics. Such exchanges operate through time and at multiple scales to constitute personal, local, national, and regional scentscapes. For these reasons, we propose that smell is not simply an undertheorized dimension of life in Asia but also a particularly generative phenomenon to think with when attempting to theorize the dynamics of transnational exchange.

Historicizing Olfactory Asia

Asia is home to a heterogeneous and changing complex of scentscapes that have blended together and come apart throughout history. It is an olfactory context that exists in relation to, and is defined by, its encounter with external cultures. Conversely, Western sensory superiority has long required, and continues to require, an olfactory other. Famously, Edward Said described a science of imperialism justifying exploitation and domination by European powers and ascribing inferior and negative characteristics to the "Orient."[20] Interacting with enduring frames of Orientalism, Western ocularcentrism has historically enacted a kind of sensory colonialism, by aligning Asia and its peoples with more "debased" or "primal" senses.[21] All scholars, therefore, must consider colonial encounter as a condition for exploring their field or subject matter from the historical position of today, even where that may be precolonial in nature.

The olfactory tropes of Orientalism present as extremes. At one pole, Asian cultures have been cast as pungent, populated by "stinky" foods and bodies: see, for example, Mallapragada[22] on curry, or Khoo and Duruz (chapter 4) on durians. This pungency emits a dangerous sensuality that effects an unwanted intimacy across the boundaries of the self and other. It can be both alluring and threatening. An American diplomat, Bayard Taylor, wrote in his journal in 1853 of the "sickening smell of opium" that marked the streets of Shanghai. At the other extreme, Asia is subject to readings of a stringently sanitized, antiseptic, or odorless character. Pop-science articles dissect differences in deodorant use due to East Asian genes said to determine sweat production,[23] while travelogues wax lyrical about Singaporean public transport, with its stringent cleaning regimes, "orchid-tea fragrance," and new anti-COVID ventilation systems.[24] Ultimately, tropes of both pungency and sanitation work to dehumanize by casting Asian peoples and cultures as unnatural bearers and producers of scent.[25] Most notably, there is an unequal distribution of olfactory stereotypes across different communities in Asia, demonstrating how localized sensory hierarchies and imperial

histories beyond the West-Orient bifurcation intersect with more global frames.

This volume contests Orientalist olfactory tropes while identifying their continued significance and potential to do real harm across multiple scales. Working against the reductive opposition of "West-rationality-vision" and "Asia-irrationality-smell," our contributors commit to taking scent seriously as an analytic instrument and dimension of lived experience. By paying attention to historic and ethnographic detail, the authors in this volume break down simple readings of a monolithic "Asia" as either pungent or sanitized, to articulate how olfaction is deployed within specific sensory orders, and how these orders intersect across local, regional, and transnational scales. This work therefore engages with stubborn historical projects of sensory colonialism that continue to shape the region, not least the sanitary civilizing campaigns of the Japanese Empire in colonial Seoul,[26] the British Empire in colonial Bengal, or the reach of the Singaporean state (see Toulson in this volume).[27] The contributors thus complicate sensory power structures within Asia beyond the center-periphery tensions of the East-West divide, revealing, in the words of Arif Dirlik, "societies globally in their complex heterogeneity and contingency."[28] It is this dynamic and emergent nature of "Asia" that we revisit in this book through the lens of sensory transnationalism.

An additional common thread across many of the chapters in this collection that deserves mention is the connection between religious or spiritual movements and olfaction. Scent and smell are frequently said to "materialize" or "manifest" the transcendent, and religious movements explore, employ, and nurture the olfactory sense as a matter of spirituality. In particular, see Marinucci, Jia, McClelland, Tanada, and Toulson in this volume.

Introducing the Contributions

Just as scent exceeds attempts to contain it within the discrete borders of a community or locale, single disciplinary approaches appear insufficient in the study of Asian scentscapes. Put simply, smell transgresses disciplinary boundaries and is best approached through methodological and theoretical pluralism. This is the interdisciplinary approach we adopt in the contributions to this collection, drawing upon different methodologies, theoretical lineages, and disciplines including anthropology, art history, economics, history, religious studies, and media studies, sparking conversation between the different disciplines. By bringing multiple perspectives together, we argue, for example,

that the historical sets the anthropological in context and that the sensory worlds of literature and film amplify the philosophical and the poetic. The contributing scholars come from a range of locations within, between, or beyond an Asian geographical region. As editors, we do not claim this spread to be representative or exhaustive, but the chapters do provide a robust cross section of the "scentscapes" that traverse the region.

The book is divided into three sections, each organized around a theme: "Poetics and Philosophies," "Making Sensory Boundaries," and "Bodies—Life, Work, and Death."

Olfactory culture in many parts of Asia is shaped by a shared history of exchange across the Silk Road and the influence of varied forms of imperial or court culture, alongside ancestral cults and dharmic religious practices that utilize incense. In "Poetics and Philosophies," the historic philosophies of China and Japan are brought to the fore. Lorenzo Marinucci considers scent as the "hybridization of bodies and selves." Marinucci examines phenomenological olfactory paradigms within Japanese culture—those of *nioi* and *ka*—to disrupt an opticentric European modern sensibility, describing poetics "on a trail of incense." The author also reviews "Europe's problematic relationship with sense." Mark M. Smith has pointed out, in response to the work of Lucien Febvre and Robert Mandrou, how poets and poetry were highly concerned with the olfactory in European contexts, and in East Asia we may observe a similar trend raised by both Marinucci and later author Jia.[29] In the essay that follows, Peter Romaskiewicz relocates us to the continent, where he investigates Emperor Wu's "strange aromatics" and the intricate scentscapes of medieval China, by focusing on a compilation known as the *Materia Aromatica* (*Xiang pu*), created by Hong Chu in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Qian Jia revisits the discussion of poetics while adding layers to consideration of scent in medieval China. While incense is usually assumed to be burned, Jia shows how in Song China *xiang* (the ideograph used for incense; *ka* in Japanese) is not only burned but also seen, touched, and tasted. She also discusses how in poetry aromas act as an "image," evoking spirituality, eroticism, and the transcendence of boundaries.

In "Making Sensory Boundaries," Gaik Cheng Khoo and Jean Duruz continue the inter-Asian expansion of scentscapes by following "whiffs" of pungent and sometimes stereotyped smells of everyday life—kopi (coffee) and durian—in changing contexts, from Southeast Asia to China. Khoo and Duruz contemporize the patterns of transnational consumption and elaborate on how they are regulated by politics, race, ethnicity, social cultures,

and emerging mainland Chinese consumer desire. Gwyn McClelland continues this section by discussing olfaction in the literary world envisaged by the Catholic Japanese fiction writer Endō Shūsaku, whose well-known book *Silence* was originally titled *The Aroma of Sunshine*. In Endō's fiction, McClelland argues, aroma and scent are associated with othering in the colonial-influenced nineteenth-century Japanese context. Smell as a marker of class in the nineteenth century is evidenced not only in a European context[30] but also in Asia. Olfaction is often employed to enforce boundaries, but such boundary setting may be undercut by aromas themselves, and this is Endō's yearning—for the place(s) that transcend East and West. Through the lens of Dalit autobiography, Shivani Kapoor writes that odor transcends boundaries, speaking in "defiant, messy" terms and "challenging the Brahmanical hegemonic sensorium." Kapoor urges consideration of "words that smell." Moving from literature to the cinematic, Aubrey Tang explores how a Hong Kong detective comedy shot from the perspective of a blind man undercuts a dependence on the visual by showing olfaction as the "most persistent and ineluctable" of senses. By adopting the lens of a sensing body, she argues, we may effectively examine the ongoing idiosyncrasy of Hong Kong's post-1997 historical situation.

Finally, in "Bodies," we move through the themes of "Life, Work, Death," from the island of Lombok in Indonesia to contemporary China and the island state of Singapore. Saki Tanada describes the world of childbirth in a Sasak world in which odor is associated with making sense of the world, a world between Sasak Islamic hybridity and modern medical cosmologies. By opening up the experiences from her ethnographic work, Tanada articulates how differences in sensing and in bodily experiences may be acknowledged, indicating synesthetic and olfactory encounters and how they are understood, especially in relation to women. Adam Liebman interrogates human bodies' olfactory sense, returning to the contemporary world of the Chinese mainland, in which waste politics tends to elide the regional and promote a hygenized modern urbanity. His work directs our attention to the role of smell in mediating human and nonhuman interactions within the context of environmental degradation and the Anthropocene. As Mark M. Smith suggests, "The environment . . . when under duress . . . stretches and rearranges the senses."[31] In the last chapter, Ruth Toulson's ethnographic work on a Singaporean funeral home describes people's attempts to contain the smell of "leaky," decaying human remains while confronting the ever-present possibility that these carefully constructed boundaries will be overwhelmed.

In drawing connections between intimate olfactory relations with bodies and the work of the Singaporean state, her contribution reinforces how smell works on multiple scales to negotiate borders.

Aroma has long been used to describe and define the region, peoples, and cultures of Asia. All too frequently, as in the context of a global pandemic, this approach has produced negative stereotypes that reinforce the alterity of Asia as the other to the West. Rather than turn away from sensory inquiry in the region, we suggest that it is only by engaging with and breaking down persistent regimes of sensory colonialism that the power of olfaction to enforce borders can be understood. Accordingly, a transnational approach to Asian aromas, or scentscapes founded on mobility and exchange, offers a chance to rethink this region through its diverse and shifting olfactory cultures.

Notes

1. Walker et al., "Anosmia and Loss of Smell."
2. Ibid.
3. Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*.
4. Kant, *Anthropology*, §22, 50–51.
5. Cockerham and Cockerham, *Covid-19 Reader*, 4.
6. Bull et al., "Introducing Sensory Studies," 5.
7. Smith, *Sensory History Manifesto*.
8. A paradigm-shifting early example of this effort is Paul Stoller's *Taste of Ethnographic Things*, which also demonstrates the connection between the sensory turn and the embodiment or praxis turn in theory.
9. For example, see Low, "Theorising Sensory Cultures," 618–36.
10. Ibid., 622.
11. Gould et al., "Interrogation of Sensory Anthropology," 231–58.
12. Low, "Theorising Sensory Cultures," 618.
13. For example, Kalekin-Fishman and Low, *Everyday Life in Asia*; McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion*; Moeran, "Making Scents of Smell," 439–50.
14. Kalekin-Fishman and Low, *Everyday Life*; Low, "Theorising Sensory Cultures"
15. Low, "Theorising Sensory Cultures," 625.
16. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference," 295–310.
17. Dennis, Dawson, and Behie, "Little Fear," 17–24.
18. Gibson, *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.
19. Salazar, "Scapes," 753.
20. Green and Troup, *Houses of History*, 279.
21. Scott, "Kipling, the Orient, and Orientals," 307.
22. Mallapragada, "Curry as Code," 263–75.
23. Guo, "Aiming at China's Armpits."
24. Mustafa, "Singapore's Endless Pursuit of Cleanliness."
25. Such dehumanizing frames are by no means unique to Asia but a product of colonialist expansion more globally.
26. Low, "Theorising Sensory Cultures," 629.
27. Prasad, "Sanitizing the Domestic," 132–53.
28. Quoted in Green and Troup, *Houses of History*, 281.
29. Smith, *Manifesto*.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 72.

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