

Introduction: How the Senses Are Good to Think With

The *amma* shoots and kills from her eyes.¹ It is through her glance that her destructive anger is most able to turn all to blood and waste. I first realised this while observing a procession for Mari in Chinnapura. As a gaggle of marching villagers returned from the river, where the goddess had been bathed, it stopped in the middle of a dusty hill. Someone had placed a small banana tree, cut from its base, in the path before them. Everyone waited. What were they waiting for? I asked. They explained in hushed tones that the tree, instead of they themselves, was now getting the angry stare of the goddess.

(Hanchett 1988: 159)

The opening ethnographic epigraph from Hanchett (1988) illustrates the act of seeing and being seen or felt. The act of seeing emanates from *amma*, whose stare becomes a source of destruction. The villagers in Chinnapura, India, had managed to deflect her stare from them onto the banana tree.² Such deflection indicates how plants are used as ‘stasis victims’ (Hanchett 1988: 275) in place of humans, where the former receives the angry stare of deities on behalf of the latter. The fear of ocular encounters with deities such as the *amma* goddess, or the serpent deity in folk Hinduism, extends to deliberate choices of offerings. Pungent seasoning such as the incorporation of chillies into food offerings is considered taboo. This is because the intense flavour will irritate the eyes of deities, subsequently incurring their wrath, thereby leading to misfortune befalling the family performing these rituals of offerings (Hanchett 1988).

Another example of ocular symbolism relates to colours. To avert the evil eye or to exorcise malevolent spirits, a combination of balls of cooked rice with such hues as red (vermillion), yellow (turmeric), and black (black sesame seeds) is used to repel these maleficent forces. Red is taken as a colour that connotes energy and power, and which is also related to blood, and thereby forms a substitute for ‘blood-rice’ in order to satiate bloodthirsty spirits (Hanchett 1988: 288). Yellow/turmeric is historically associated with red, an association to do with its presumed ‘heating’ nature. Moreover, it transforms into bright red when combined with water and lime, which is a mixture used to remove the evil eye. Black as an ‘ominous colour’ (Hanchett 1988: 289) then, is

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thought to possess the power to counteract the ocular destruction of malicious spirits.

Compare these instances of looking and being looked at, including ocular-colour symbolism, with flood myths drawn from fourth-century CE China. Associating young children with dangerous spirits and animals, myths of that period record:

All small mountains lack proper spirits as their masters, for their masters are mostly energetically refined spirits of wood and stone, thousand-year-old creatures, and blood-drinking ghosts. They never think of blessing people but only of wreaking calamities. They love to test Daoist masters . . . [and] some are able to ruin men's elixirs. Now whenever doctors brew efficacious medicines or salves, they never allow them to be seen by chickens, dogs, small children, or women. If they are encroached upon by any of these creatures, then the potions will not work when used. Moreover, those who dye colored cloth *loathe to have such evil-eyed ones look at them*, for the cloth will always lose its beautiful colour. (cited in Lewis 2006: 91; my emphasis)

In this quote, taken from the Dunhuang version of the Six Dynasties, children, women, and animals are equated with ghosts and 'ancient nature spirits' that disrupt the work of Daoist masters in the mountains.³ Interestingly, 'it is the eyes of women or small children that destroy the effectiveness of medicine or the beauty of the colored cloth' (Lewis 2006: 91; emphasis in original). Ocular cases such as these and plenteous more of other sensory ilk are recorded in a variety of ethnographies, historiographies, and studies about different Asian societies. Studying the ocular – and by extension, various other senses – brings us to further examinations of the accompanying social, cultural, and political implications (Gu 2020). Aside from the emphasis on sight and on being seen, the other senses are also registered in various cultures and experiences of Asian social life.

Thirty-nine-year-old American Edward S. Morse first set foot in Japan in 1877. After having sailed for seventeen days from San Francisco, Morse finally arrived in Yokohama. At the harbour, he and a few fellow passengers transferred to a smaller Japanese boat that was to take them to their hotel. Greeted by three Japanese men who were rowing the boat and whose 'only clothing [consisted] of a loin-cloth', Morse saw that they were short and 'immensely strong' fellows who worked vigorously to reach the shore that was two miles away. He also noticed that these rowers were emitting a 'peculiar series of grunts' in 'keeping time with each other [using] sounds like *hei hei cha, hei hei cha*'. For Morse, the 'noise they made sounded like the exhaust of some compound and wheezy engine' (Morse 1917a: 1).

On the next day after breakfast, Morse began to explore the town and was struck by the varied sensory features that formed part of his first impressions. From the 'quaint open shops' to the 'sounds of the people' and the 'cedar and tea filling the air' (Morse 1917a: 4), Morse's account of his travels in *Japan*

Day by Day (two volumes) – along with other travel writings and a whole host of different genres of texts on Asia – are potentially illustrative of how the senses formed part and parcel of everyday life in parts of Asia such as Japan. As Morse concludes his travels in Japan, he opines: ‘In closing, the reader may wonder, after the manners of the Japanese have been so often contrasted with those of ourselves, what my attitude is regarding my own people. I believe we have much to learn from Japanese life, and that we may to our advantage frankly recognise some of our weaknesses’ (Morse 1917b: 435).

The sensory encounters Morse experienced – based on what he had seen, heard, and smelled – draw attention to the fact that particular sensory perceptions, enactments, borrowings, tensions, and transformations should not only be regarded as quotidian aspects of daily life. These are important avenues through which the sociocultural may be explored and critically analysed. In echoing and extending from Morse (1917a, b), there is much to learn from social life and history in Asia in terms of sense experience vis-à-vis multiple positionalities and through varying lines of inquiry located in extant sensory scholarship. In addition to his exposition of indigenous sensory epistemologies in *The Savage Mind* (Strauss 1966), Levi-Strauss (1969) later further made a case for how food is good to think with. This adage, which is alluded to in the title of this introduction, extends to how the senses are an important avenue to think about social life at large (Howes 1990).

My various examples reflected here provoke the following queries: How can one reconstruct writings and knowledge about Asia in the past and present through the medium of the senses? What role do the senses play in everyday life Asia across a variety of historical contexts and periods – stretching from the pre- to postcolonial and including the transnational? How are the senses connected to a range of everyday life domains that may comprise religion, morality, foodways, music, linguistic practices, local–foreign interactions, the migratory and economic movements of social actors and commodities both within and beyond the region, among others? How can one then theorise and compare these variegated sensescapes and their multivalent ascribed meanings? In short, *how and why do the senses matter in Asia?*

Making Sense of Asia

This book sets a new agenda to explore how the senses transpire across a variety of historical and cultural contexts. It deploys anthropological approaches (e.g. Classen 1997; Goody 2002; Howes 2005, 2019; Stoller 1989) and other interdisciplinary lines of inquiry in conceptually renewing extant sensory scholarship. Sociocultural meanings of the senses in society have recently garnered scholarly attention in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, and geography. However, extant works have

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mainly focused on Euro-American contexts or on non-industrial societies. Sensory research in Asian settings is in a largely nascent stage. Generally, primary and secondary sensory research on non-Western contexts (Smith 2006, 2007, 2021) is relatively incipient; this observation still continues to hold true. This book documents and analyses how the senses in everyday life manifest in historical and contemporary contexts within Asian communities and cultures. I deliberate upon how social actors and institutions accord meanings to the senses which can be located in the fabric of everyday life experiences. My aim therefore is to ‘reconstitute the sensory environment’ (Corbin 1995: 184) and interrogate how the senses are employed. I unravel different sensory models and their attendant hierarchical orders, and problematise sensory modalities and their sociocultural significance.⁴ In doing so, this interrogation takes on theoretical, comparative, and contextual commitments as key inquiries in articulating the social life of the senses in Asia and history.

Broadly, I locate the meaningfulness of sensory experiences by examining how they bridge selves, community, social institutions, and varied cultural forms. By paying close attention to the senses as a key means of inquiry (Classen 1997), *Sensory Anthropology* is about foregrounding the discipline of anthropology as a sense-able subject across its various thematic concerns and debates.⁵ It would also be sensible to undertake an ethnographic inquiry into sensory cultures in the region. This arises from current inchoate attention in extant sensory scholarship. By doing so, this book works through the unevenness in existing studies as an historical-anthropological undertaking (cf. Howes & Classen 2014) by deploying new conceptual perspectives. After all, close overlaps between social anthropology and history (Aijmer 1997; Tagliacozzo & Willford 2009) as disciplines of social science or social studies imply that these two subjects of inquiry are ‘indissociables’ (Evans-Pritchard 1961: 21). In sum, this study entails analysing ‘what is perceived through the senses, judged through the senses, and produced and reproduced through the senses’ (Strati 2007: 62) and culminates in my endeavour to generate sensible knowledge (Strati 2007; Strohm 2019) about Asia across historical milieux.

I examine works stemming from a range of disciplinary approaches including history, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. The subject matter of this book requires a close reading and stitching together of myriad lines of inquiry undertaken across such various disciplines and recorded over a non-exhaustive corpus of possible sources. I discuss these works as cases to flesh out the importance of sensory lives in varying historical and contemporary contexts. In the process, I show that more attention should be paid to Asia. While sensory articulations may abound in different genres of writing on Asia (e.g. Hay 2010; Houghteling 2022; Irvine 2020; Keulemans 2014; Odin 1986; Rotter 2019), some of such works largely remain at the level of description (as a recent

example, see Lam et al. 2017). These analyses lead to ‘surface impressions’ (Howes 2003) that are shy of deeper examinations of their sociocultural significance. In other words, such scholarship seldom takes the sensory as its core subject of investigation and sociocultural analysis. Analytical possibilities of demonstrating how everyday life and its accompanying domains that include foodways, morality, religious beliefs, race/class/gender dynamics, and power relations are mediated through the senses in Asia, are usually not substantially pursued. Besides, extant studies about sensory histories and practices focus mainly on Western or Anglocentric historical contexts. Furthermore, Porath (2019b) notes that where synaesthesia in the West has been closely associated with artists, and in particular musicians, both synaesthetic and multisensory experiences – both in the domains of quotidian activities and ritual as well as artistic practices – of peoples and cultures in the Southeast Asian region remain lacking.

These notwithstanding, there are as well some relatively recent exceptions (Chau 2008; Gould et al. 2019; Howes and Classen 2014; Huang 2016; Jenner 2010; McHugh 2012; Porath 2019a; Snake-Beings 2020). Says Geertz (2016: 4) on her work on the importance of storytelling and oral tradition in Bali: ‘It requires the development of a methodology for discovering indirect evidence of important historical acts that were not described at the time.’ Such indirect ethnographic evidence of sensory practices and beliefs, though difficult and arduous to locate, form the crux of this study. In responding to and branching out from current research in sensory scholarship and to consider what forms data for this book, I emplace my ethnographic interests in ‘history’ and ‘Asia’ as sociocultural contexts for methodically theorising sensory empirical phenomena.

This book approaches history by adopting a *longue durée* position. Instead of bracketing time and periods that consign sensory regimes to either the circumference or bounds of temporality, group, region, or nation which others have done in their works (Lam et al. 2017; McHugh 2012), I trace and examine sensory cultures across multiple time periods. I employ core theoretical anchors in accounting for convergences and divergences, and webs of connectivities and overlays in sense experience in time past and present. I develop my arguments by comparing not nations or empires per se, but thematic foci threading across religious, human–natural–supernatural, gastronomic, aesthetic, moral, and social life. In doing so, this study delineates broad sensory histories and comparative possibilities and proposes newer ways to juxtapose and interrelate a variety of sensory practices and scripts. My comparative approach dovetails at constructing sensescapas in and of Asia that provide more depth, texture, and multisensory dimensions. My goal is to offer a comprehensive and expansive range of human–nonhuman sensoria as they are enacted both within and between cultures and communities in the region

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and further. It thereby presents an overarching temporal and geographical balance in surveying sensory practices.

By Asia, I am referring to both sensory encounters in and of Asia. The ‘site’ under consideration is neither limited to a geographical referent (cf. Chakrabarty 2000) in the region, nor is it regarded as a unitary continent (Ho 2017; Subrahmanyam 2016; Tankha & Thampi 2005). The focus is on sensory practices and their interfaces, and not on spatial fixity. I am intrigued by the dynamics of sensory encounters that are not only rooted in a specific locale, but are grounded in cultural frameworks emanating from Asian societies. In reimagining Asia as comprising interconnected sets of formations which transcend boundaries, including the territorial, national, or cultural (Chen 2021), I therefore take Asia not to be confined within an East–West polarity. Instead, I also consider what occurs within East and West given the historical and contemporary criss-crossing mobilities of peoples, ideas, and goods that continue to take place within, around, and beyond Asia (Chen 2021; Ho 2017; Ryang 2021). This approach thereby enables comparisons with both Asian and non-Asian frames where relevant. The East–West connection, and how sensory investigation threads across such linkages, may be found in works that, for instance, discuss how the Japanese appropriation of flamenco from Spain translates into impacting upon Japanese gender relations (Van Ede 2017). I would also go further beyond the East–West linkage to analyse multipronged sensory ties and connections that include, apart from East and West, the South and North (Ryang 2021). This perspective therefore requires addressing a multitude of heterogeneous sensory data, including the deployment of diverse theoretical and conceptual tools that together anchor this book. Conceptualising Asia as such underscores the porosity, mobility, and comparability of sensory practices beyond physical sites (cf. Edmond et al. 2011; Low & Abdullah 2020) and the boundaries of nation states (Andaya 2006; Ho 2017). These may be perceived from different periods of Asian history and in terms of how their pluralities connect societies in the region and further. In order to reconfigure sensory scholarship with Asia in the forefront, then, my examples and analysis should not be confined only to the continent of Asia (cf. Ryang 2021). In conceiving Asia as a ‘product of interaction with other regions’ (Wang 2010: 989) and necessarily transnational, this view parenthetically carves out further transregional analytical space for addressing sensory mobilities in terms of diaspora and migration (Fisher 2004; Visram 2002).

Cultures adopt different emphases on the various senses, including the meanings that are rendered to a range of sense acts (Howes & Classen 2014). How we use or refer to the senses in our social encounters are cultural acts that provide the basis for sociocultural investigation and cross-cultural comparison. The investigation here is supported by empirical material that I corral from a range of ethnographies and other works on Asian societies that are accompanied by sensory accounts. I advance thematic discussions by scrutinising

written historical accounts or ‘texts’ that avail themselves to sensory theorisation. Cultural interpretations are directly extrapolated from the data from these secondary texts. Given cultural malleability, historically and contemporaneously (as well as regionally), these may change over time. I systematically problematise such ‘nuggets of historical information’ (Smith 2007: 1) on the senses and how they work individually and/or interactively over different sensory models. Specifically, my data are culled from studies that focus either on presenting sensory histories in the main, or on Asian social life and its varying domains in more general terms. It follows that a rereading, extrapolation, and reinterpretation of these current works is requisite in foregrounding sensory analyses that I engage with in this book. These are complemented with my archival research on media reports and oral histories. At the same time, I expand the scope of historical inquiry to consider scrutinising not only historical texts and sources (official administrative records, trade records, etc.) that are the toolkits of historians and other scholars who study history, but include other oral, textual, and literary representations of institutions, peoples, and cultures (Abbott & Khin Thant Han 2000; Creese 2004; Levi-Strauss 1978; Malinowski 1926; Singh 2019; Yasar 2019). These inquiries are aimed at constructing and analysing versions of sensory pasts that may as well hold contemporary resonance.⁶ As a fount of empirical evidence and ethnographic variation, such sources include travel writing, literature (running the gamut of poetry, myths, and folk tales and legends),⁷ oral and written accounts, media reports, and letters written to the press in colonial periods that highlight sensory encounters among different social groups or classes.⁸ I concur with Smith (2007: 125) that print, which constitutes the ‘principal medium through which we can access the senses of the past and their meanings’, continues to serve as an effective channel in analyses of sensory histories. Such texts are important resources and forms of social and historical records and cultural content and heritage (Wang, C. Y. 2020).⁹ They possess both ‘theoretical [and] analytical usefulness’ (Howell 1982: xvi–xvii) as they interact and intersect with different domains of knowledge and expression throughout the world (Pratt 1992). These texts serve as models to explain individual and collective existence, as means for the transmission of traditional knowledge, and as precepts for social action.

Anthropology of the Senses: Charting the Field of Inquiry

Scholarship on anthropology of the senses as a field of inquiry has been established over the past several decades. Core thematic interests in this field comprise investigations of sensory symbolism, analyses of sensory practice, as well as the politics of the sensible (Howes 2021). Fundamentally, an anthropology of the senses takes sense perception as

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both cultural and physical acts where the senses form media that communicatively transmit cultural values (Classen 1997; Goody 2002; Pink 2009). It takes interest in investigating the manifold patterns of sense experience that differ across diverse cultures, and unpacks how perceptual and cultural variations of sense modalities influence different aspects of social life including social organisation, projections of subjectivity, and various other cognate domains of culture (Howes 1991). Essentially, cultures each construct and subscribe to their own sensory model where different emphases and values are linked to varied sense perceptions and modalities. These models of sensoria are conveyed through discourse and practice, and deploy both actual as well as metaphorical sensory constructs (Classen & Howes 1996).

Studies have through time built upon and expanded both existing and cognate domains of anthropological inquiry. These domains run the range from phenomenology, the body and embodiment (Hsu & Lim 2020; Polit 2014; Samudra 2020), urbanity (Chandola 2012; Cohen 1988; Earl 2018; Imai 2008), migration and transnationalism (Law 2001; Low 2013), and emotions and affect (Hemsworth 2016; Retsikas 2007; Wang, S. 2020), to food and foodways (Abdullah 2010; Chan 2010; Kong & Sinha 2015), religion (Bautista 2019; Kendall 2001), linguistic anthropology (Beer 2014; Burenhult & Majid 2011; Enfield 2011), visual anthropology (Babb 1981), as well as broader theoretical and methodological expositions anchored in ethnographic studies (Guillebaud 2017; Kavesh 2021; Low 2015b). Sensory writings share a common point of departure, which is to address the Western pentad model that pivots towards the imperialism of sight (Howes 1991; Hsu 2018; Stoller 1989). This has been criticised as a Eurocentric positioning, which becomes limiting in the exploration of various other diverse sensory orders (Low 2019). These orders may be found across different societies including a wide-ranging possibility of sensory hierarchies that do not abide by the pentad template (Geurts 2002; Pandya 1993; Roseman 1991). On top of anthropological research and debates, sensory studies in the discipline have also embarked on contributing to interdisciplinary dialogues (Goody 2002). Works have engaged vis-à-vis theoretical and conceptual interfaces in alignment with other disciplines in both the social sciences and the humanities as I have mentioned in the previous section. There has indeed occurred a ‘sensory revolution’ (Howes 2021) across these varied disciplines and their sensory interfaces, which has considerably matured and burgeoned over the past thirty years.

Where most scholarship on anthropology of the senses has usually focused on either Western or non-industrial communities, scholars have recently begun to spotlight societies in the non-West, which also include a variety

of industrialised contexts traversing across both historical and present-day milieu. Some of the broader themes of analysis in anthropological sensory studies have engaged with issues related to globalisation, modernity, heritage, aesthetics, and cosmology, among various other lines of interrogation. In addition to primary ethnographic data that forms the product and mainstay of writing and conceptual development in ethnography, scholars of the sensory have also complemented ethnography with a variety of secondary data or materials in their research, some of which I discuss in this book. These data encompass a whole range of social ‘texts’, potentially including archival repositories, media reports, a variety of online platforms, film, poetry, diaries, travel writing, and plenteous other genres that capture sensory practices in everyday life. Both primary and secondary data research and analysis focus either on senses in the singular or on senses that are paired together, or spotlight intersensorial relations that parallel cross-cultural comparisons, including discussions on synaesthesia as well. In sum, attuning critically to convergent and divergent forms of sensory expressions and communication can add profitably towards developing richer and more full-bodied comprehensions of social life.

Sociocultural History of the Senses

Works on how sensory experiences and relations transpire in historical contexts record knowledge on how societies in earlier times conceived the senses. The history of the senses as another field of inquiry is consonant with the anthropology of the senses, but only insofar as that such scholarship focuses on cultures in the past (Howes & Classen 2014). These works provide opportunities to trace shifts and changes in sensory practices. Charting sensory behaviours adds to the meaningfulness and social significance of history (Howes & Classen 2014; Jenner 2011; Roeder 1994; Smith 2007). Sensuous scholarship that focuses on historical contexts has mainly examined Western societies. Corbin’s (1986) study, for example, offers sociohistorical readings of the senses in France (1750–1880) through olfactory deliberations. His interest is anchored on evaluative schema and symbolic systems pertaining to olfaction. These manifest through class sensibilities and stench and olfactory vigilance in public arenas. Such class-based vigilance crosscut the management of hygiene and health standards in connection with the wider politics of social control and discipline. Corbin’s history of olfactory perception is therefore a prism through which power relations, social structures, and conflicts are illuminated. His later works touch on a broader history of the senses and somatic behaviour (Corbin 1995), and an analysis of sound, landscape, and historical patterns of village life in his study on bells in nineteenth-century France (Corbin 1998). To underscore the pertinence of

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a research agenda on the senses in history, I refer to Corbin's entreatment for a 'history of sensibility':

Is it possible to discern retrospectively the nature of the presence in the world of people in the past through an analysis of the hierarchy of the senses and the balance established between them at a particular moment in history and within a given society? Is it possible to detect the functions of these hierarchies, and so identify the purposes which presided over this organization of the relations between the senses? (Corbin 1995: 182)

This study responds to the questions laid out by Corbin and elucidates the social life of the senses in different historical periods over a range of sociocultural contexts. Further magisterial insights into the significance of sensory history are forwarded by cultural historian Constance Classen and anthropologist David Howes. Classen (1998: 2) explores the rich symbolism of the senses in Western culture through the ages. She argues that such investigations reveal 'the roots of our contemporary perceptual paradigm'. Her emphasis lies in expounding on the cultural interplay of the senses and on the often neglected 'lower' senses comprising taste, smell, and touch. Howes and Classen's *Ways of Sensing* (2014) deploys a 'joint anthropological-historical methodology' in discussing sensory registers found in different social spheres including medicine, politics, art, and law. Operating along the general dichotomy of 'Western' and 'non-Western' cultures, they embark on a cross-cultural investigation of how the senses unfold in such domains. For example, in analysing sensuous healing across medical cultures of the Andes, Tibet, and the Amazonian rainforest, the authors conclude that all three healing traditions share two common themes of 'cosmic integration' and 'sensory integration' (Howes & Classen 2014: 57). Where the former refers to a holistic medical approach combining the natural, the human, and the sacred, the latter points to how the different sense modalities conjoin in the process of healing. These contentions expand sensory engagement by maneuvering beyond Western contexts for further insights towards examining and comparing culture-specific sensory epistemologies.

Such insights should include a response to the Western pentad-senses model. Sensory scholars need to identify and explain the social significance of (1) the number of senses within a culture and how they operate; (2) the different types of one sense within a culture; and (3) different sensorial hierarchies that are subscribed by different societies in practices that elucidate sociality (cf. Howes & Classen 2014; Jay 2011). All of these queries would otherwise be eclipsed should one adhere unreflexively to the Euro-American model as a default inherited frame.¹⁰ As Van Ede (2009: 66) puts it, '[s]ensuous investigations have to start with an open mind'. Shifting the focus away from (but not jettisoning comparison with) Western contexts of sensory philosophies and practices in this study