



Sensing China: modern transformations of sensory culture

edited by Shengqing Wu & Xuelel Huang, Routledge, 2023, x, 297 pp., US \$136.00 (hardback), AU\$65.69 (eBook)

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BOOK REVIEW

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Sensing China: Modern Transformations of Sensory Culture examines the evolving socio-cultural meanings of the sensorium from premodern through contemporary China. This work represents a crucial effort to elevate sensory studies within the field of Sinology. Comprising 12 chapters, the volume has gathered perspectives from literature, history, religious, and media studies, thereby showcasing its remarkable interdisciplinary approach.

The volume is structured into four chronological sections. Part I delves into the conceptualisations of the senses in premodern China. In her study of early China (500 BCE–100 CE), Jane Geaney argues that contemporary readers should not hastily assume the existence of an ancient Chinese equivalent to the modern concept of ‘sense’, and that hearing constituted a way of knowing that was superior to seeing in classical times. Following a survey of key metaphysical claims about the senses throughout premodern China, Paolo Santangelo centres olfaction as his case study, arguing that smell operated as a visceral part of one’s social identity.

Section II addresses the era spanning from the mid-19th century through the 1940s, a time when China transitioned from its last dynasty into a new republic and witnessed the rise of ‘public, participatory sensorial cultures’ (8) among the general populace. Xuelei Huang presents the ‘olfactory-induced cognitive/affective map of Nanjing Road’ (92) across three distinctive historical junctures, illuminating how the smellscape of the main artery in Shanghai fluctuated in alignment with colonialism, modernisation, and the socialist revolution. Shengqing Wu posits that the kiss became a quintessential expression of modern romantic love, notably propelled by Hollywood movie stars’ depictions of kissing, which were well received by the Chinese audience. Xiaobing Tang illustrates that the confluence of sound cinema and community singing catalysed a national movement in China during World War II.

Part III advances into the socialist period (1949–1980s), a time marked by a continual emergence of new meanings of the senses stemming from various responses to Maoist ideology. Pang Laikwan examines the efforts of establishment visual artists to ‘glorify manual labor’ (151), arguing that they emphasised the sensual and affective aspects of physical work, while also endeavouring to transcend corporality by aligning with the broad discourse of socialist propaganda. Lena Henningsen sheds light on the ‘taste’ of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) by unveiling multiple memories regarding food, such as those on coping with hunger and personal lived experiences of cooking healthy local food. Jie Li presents the open-air cinema as a ‘multi-sensory environment’ (199) where ‘extrafilmic sights, sounds, smells, taste, and touch’ (217) engaged the audience beyond the movies themselves.

Part IV ushers the reader into the postmodern world (1980s–present). Drawing on three movies from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, Carlos Rojas analyses how the male protagonists use intimate tactile contact with other men to address conflicted relationships with their distant fathers. Kirk A. Denton explores the implementation of multisensory technologies within contemporary museums, arguing that the technological advancement ironically reinforces the master narrative by crowding out critical

reflections on the past. Part IV concludes with Barbara Mittler's epilogue, in which she further champions the study of the senses as a method to challenge the hegemony of reason in humanistic scholarship. This approach, she argues, not only enriches our understanding of daily lived experience, but also enables the writing of a new history of changing socio-political norms in embodied terms.

Sensing China is commendable for its conceptual coherence. The chapters share several common theoretical considerations that effectively unite them. Foremost among these is the volume's dedication to investigating multisensory experiences, thereby acknowledging the often synesthetic nature of sensations despite the conventional distinctions between vision, hearing, and olfaction, among others. This phenomenological stance positions the volume at the forefront of work challenging the dominance of vision in sensory studies. It also invites readers to explore the Chinese textual tradition, which teems with theories on the interactivities of the senses.

Readers will also appreciate the historical orientation of the volume. The chapters collectively evince a historical sensitivity that the senses were indeed made and lived by different peoples across time. As the volume effectively shows, the changing meanings of the sensorium are integral to the broad processes of constructing meaning, whether amid the birth of the new republic or during the Cultural Revolution. The chronological organisation facilitates a clear historical narrative and illuminates pivotal transitions. While the volume primarily concentrates on the modern and contemporary, it dedicates a robust section to the premodern period. The thoughtful design lays the groundwork for future deliberations that may not have fully materialised in the current volume, such as on the ways in which premodern conceptualisations of the senses transformed and played a role in the eruption of modern sensorial revolutions.

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