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CHAPTER TWENTY

Smell as Communication

ESTHER-MARIA GUGGENMOS

INTRODUCTION: IMAGINING THE WORLD OF SMELL IN CHINESE BUDDHIST BIOGRAPHIES

This contribution attempts to highlight how a religious aesthetic approach can generate significant new insights into well-researched textual material. It does so by looking at Chinese Buddhist biographies from the perspective of how the world of smell is communicated.

There is a long history of academically established ways to approach biographies. We identify places, people, and historical events. We seek patterns that shape biographies and ask for the history of the textual genre. We apply methods of textual analysis that concentrate on distilling the plot and reconstruct the narration and its agents. In the following discussion, we will go beyond these forms of interpretation and exemplify the new approach through an in-depth look at the role of olfaction (smell) in the *Biographies of Thaumaturge Monks* (*Shenseng zhuan* 神僧傳, T. 2064, in the following SSZ). This textual corpus was assembled in 1417 CE by the third emperor of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor, and collects material from standard biographical corpora like the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳) as well as from secular records or popular collections of miracle tales. The aim of the compilation is to distil the convincing aspects and strength of Buddhist belief.

From fragrance to stink, smells cover a broad range within these biographies. Through our inductive approach, we see odors as shaping the meaning of social interaction. By concentrating on smell, we adopt an aesthetics of religion approach to this corpus, intending to shed light on how religion is mediated through the senses: the interest in sensual perception and communication is what unites our approaches in the field of religious aesthetics.

I will introduce the material by selecting a biography from the corpus and illustrating established ways of explaining and contextualizing it. I will then screen through the 208 biographies of this corpus, bearing in mind the question of how smell occurs in and forms part of the communication process. The results reveal two modes of action in which olfaction plays a role: we find in the corpus, on the one hand, odors that are intentionally induced and, on the other, spontaneously occurring. Both of these modes carry a specific message and it becomes obvious that deciphering the communication happening in the narrations requires decoding the cultural context and the meaning of the social practices established within it. Through the analysis, we therefore gain an understanding of the world of smell and its links to the cultural context. I will conclude with an outlook on areas of knowledge that touch upon and include aspects of the olfactory codes

occurring in the biographies, such as transformation processes across Asia and along the Silk Road.

STUDYING SMELL IN BIOGRAPHIES

Biographical collections are an important genre of Chinese historiography that has been well established over centuries, from the first dynastic history around 100 BCE onward. Biographies strive for authenticity in collating various sources, like eulogies, memorials, and family records. They attempt to illustrate historical development by expressing moral aspects that contribute to the rise or fall of a dynasty, a family, or other parts of society (principle of praise and admonition, *baobian* 褒貶). By imperial order, Chinese Buddhist biographies were compiled to demonstrate the power of Buddhism and emulate the recognized, mostly Confucian, stereotypes of intellectual qualities, moral behavior, and life conduct.¹ In the Indian context, Buddhist biographical writing took the form of narrations about previous lives of the historical Buddha, *jātakas*, while in the Tibetan context, we know about biographies written in the mode of imitating the Buddha's life, experiencing ascetic hardship and forms of awakening. In contrast, Chinese Buddhist biographies follow established Chinese patterns, start with the name, geographical ancestry, and family of the monk (or less often the nun), and possibly his/her unusual career as a child prodigy according to Confucian ideals. They might also draw a counter-image of somebody with arcane knowledge but socially inept behavior. Episodes from his or her life will follow. Also, Buddhist biographies tend to end by mentioning the person's death, including the circumstances, age, place, and possibly an account of posthumous fame as well as preserving variations of the episodes told. A Chinese Buddhist biography is therefore a text that is dense with information and compiled from different textual genres, linked by the compiler. At times, the procedure of combining the material is reflected in an uneven reading experience.

Such material remains unintelligible without proper explanation and it is the merit of outstanding and extensive translations that we are able to gain a deeper understanding of these works within a short time today.² Decoding the locations, times, and setting of the episodes as well as the historical relevance of the narrations is a time-consuming task through which the historical situation is elucidated. In the field of (mainly Western) literary studies, biographical writing has been analyzed on the broad basis of narratological and other textual studies, but less so with regard to Chinese material. John Kieschnick was among the first to reflect on the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* by identifying different types of biographies, such as those of the ascetic, the scholar, or the thaumaturge (Kieschnick 1997). Recently, textual analysis was applied to the SSZ to identify semantic patterns that shape the narrations and show how far these are constructed in order to generate trust and belief in Buddhism (Guggenmos 2019).

While these established ways of looking at biographies reveal rich information that significantly contributes to our understanding of historical developments, the field of religious aesthetics offers fresh insights into an otherwise well-researched genre. Religious aesthetics provides a multitude of ways by which we could approach the SSZ. In the following, we will focus on olfaction. This does not imply that we deny that the world of odors orchestrates situations together with other sensual occurrences that can be much more dominant. Textual, visual, and auditory moments shape situations and are also, on an academic level, reflected more intensively. By venturing into the realm between fragrance and stink, we concentrate on a sensory world that, in East Asia

and Europe alike, often remained and even to date remains unconscious and unreflected but is strongly bound to emotion and long-term memory.³ In many cases, we are missing a distinct vocabulary to refer to and differentiate between odors and the interaction and communication that take place on the basis of the occurrence of smell.

Olfaction has been and continues to be researched in a variety of fields. The Nobel Prize for Medicine was awarded in 2004 to Richard Axel and Linda Buck for clarifying the mechanisms that control the way in which odors are perceived at the molecular and cellular levels and, since then, we have known that it is not only the nose but also other organs of the human body that can perceive smell. In 2010, the cell physiologist Hanns Hatt from Bochum received the Robert Pflieger Foundation prize for identifying the smell of egg cells that attracts sperm. Hatt dedicated his whole academic life to deciphering the cognitive and emotional connections of certain smells in their biological context. Neuroscientists, psychologists, and linguists have explored the relationship between olfaction and cognition (e.g., Rouby et al. 2002). Aroma research is a field closely connected to the food industry. At our university in Erlangen, in 2018, after years of intense research, a Chair for Aroma Research was established. Even in fields like architecture, with works on “Invisible Architecture” (Barbara and Perlliss 2006), olfaction is acquiring fresh relevance. In the humanities, scholars of European history have focused on how the world of smell was mediated in the early Christian context (Harvey 2006). The medieval *imaginatio* of spices and the spice trade was the research focus of Paul Freedman and Gary P. Nabhan (Freedman 2008; Nabhan 2014). In anthropology, mainly Western-oriented sources have been assembled by David Howes (1991, 2005) and Jim Drobnick (2006). The cultural historian Constance Classen established the research field of the history of the senses and started out with a joint publication on aromatics (Classen et al. 1994) while, regarding India, the cultural history of smell, especially its ancient roots, has been analyzed by James McHugh (2012). Chinese sources on fragrance and perfume have recently attracted the attention of Sinologists, through tracing individual aromatics like ambergris (Borschberg 2003a, b), and especially through the French project “Parfume en Chine: Pour une histoire des parfums et des substances aromatiques en Chine . . . et ailleurs” (Perfume in China: Towards the history of perfume and aromatic substances in China . . . and elsewhere; recent exhibition: Lefebvre 2018). This systematic concentration on religious aesthetics adds to the spectrum of studies a new perspective by identifying culturally variant patterns of smell communication.

SMELL AS COMMUNICATION IN THE BIOGRAPHIES OF THAUMATURGE MONKS

The SSZ is, as mentioned above, mainly a collation of Chinese Buddhist biographical material. It has been the focus of a long-term joint research project by the Buddhologist Li Wei and myself (Guggenmos and Li 2019). Its 208 biographies are arranged in nine chapters, with a focus on what makes Buddhism an efficacious and powerful religion. Buddhist monks are convincingly demonstrating this strength through deeply understanding the concrete implications of the law of cause and effect, by having insight into cosmic patterns and the patterns of stimulus-response (*ganying*), and by being able to perform wonders in the eyes of the general public (Guggenmos 2019).

Looking for smell in the SSZ is not the first thing one would normally do when reading through the various biographies of monastic thaumaturges. Indeed, one finds simple instances of smell: a chair as a present from the emperor made from aromatic aloeswood

shows his special favor (後知玄居安國寺。懿宗親臨法席。賜沈香為座。; biography of *Zhixuan* 知玄, seventh century CE, T. 2064, L: 1007b23–24)—a fact that is also known to us through other sources. In another instance, a monk is able to appear in two places simultaneously and a certain kind of frankincense is offered (*xunlu xiang* 薰陸香, boswellia thurifera; biography of Beidu 杯渡, who is hard to date but famous for crossing water in a wooden cup, 962b7). Both aloeswood and frankincense were imported via the Silk Road (Nabhan 2014). They are applied naturally in the actual Buddhist context.

The biographical records do not necessarily distinguish between smell and taste, which is in line with the common knowledge of experimental research. Food from different regions smells nice and tastes pleasant (為靈期等設食。食味是菜。而香美不同世食。; biography of Beidu 杯渡; 962b22–23). Already the ancient Chinese term “*wei* 味” holds the double meaning of “smell-taste.” Similarly, the term “*xiang* 香” is applied to render the Sanskrit “*gandha*” into Chinese, reflecting a broad range of meaning and commonly designating one of the six sense organs, *ṣaḍāyātana*, which are messengers of the Buddha and able to generate faith and devotion—a connection that is expressed through the use of incense and incense burners.

Naturally, fragrance as an attribute of something or somebody deserving veneration and respect occurs in the names of both places (especially temples), and people. In the SSZ, we find a “fragrant and majestic chapel” (*Xiangyan dian* 香嚴殿, biography of Yanshou 延壽, tenth century CE, 1011b16), the “temple of the fragrant mountain” (*Xiangshan si* 香山寺; biography of Song Toutuo 嵩頭陀, hard to date but established the temple, 971b4; and biography of Faxi 法喜, who died in this temple in the fourth century CE, 979c11; also *Gu xiangji si* 古香積寺; biography of Sengjia 僧伽, fl. around 700 CE, 992a20) and monks bearing references to fragrance in their names (biography of Xiangduli 香闍梨, 971a9–20). Incense burners (*xianglu* 香爐), either held in the hand or placed on the ground, together with the fragrance emanating from them, are mentioned in relation to the veneration of Buddhist statues (以爐香甌水置, biography of Amoghavajra, Bukong 不空, eighth century CE, 1001b29). Igniting incense is part of daily veneration behavior, combined with kneeling (焚香長跪, biography of Zhi[bian?] 智誓, date unknown, 1005b13), washing one’s hands, and invoking Buddha’s name (清旦盥手焚香念慈氏如來, biography of Congjian 從諫, date unknown, 1008c19).

Remarkable is the usage of sandalwood for carving Buddhist statues. In one of the early biographies, the monk Falan (first century CE) visits China, bringing not only textual material but also a painted statue made of sandalwood by a royal master of his craft from the “Western regions” (948c18). The statue is painted and the paintings are exhibited in Luoyang. This narration illustrates nicely the hypothesis of McHugh that Chinese Buddhists imported sandalwood statues from India (McHugh 2012: x, 203ff.). It is much later that in the Chinese context not only painted copies but also real statues of sandalwood can be found.

Such an enumeration of the different occurrences of smell—although interesting—does not seem to deliver any systematic insights into a culture of smell but is of sporadic character, similar to collecting insights into the usage of different substances. The aesthetics of religion approach aims to go farther and explore the role that smell plays in the narrations, seeking a language of smell that might be found behind the individual occurrences of odors.

INDUCED SMELL

In a review of all of the episodes in which odors feature, a basic distinction can be drawn regarding how smell is perceived and operationalized (Table 20.1): On the one hand,

TABLE 20.1: Smell as communication in the SSZ

Induced smell	Spontaneously occurring smell	
fragrance:	(a) stink	(b) fragrance
– preparation for a miracle or for death	– dissatisfied mummy relocation	– context of death: virtuous monk
– maintain a connection to god and deceased	– sign of illness: localized in body and acting against the power of Buddhism	– monk changing location: vague message that he left and that “things are ok”
– feeling connected to each other		– sign of Buddhist teaching
→ used to enforce sincerity in special situations	→ counter player to Buddhism	– sign of purity
→ incense as language of humans for directional communication with god and the deceased and for mutual social bonding	→ language of the dead	→ sign of the presence of something esteemed as Buddhist
		→ language of the dead and the absent virtuous being

there are odors that are intentionally produced through burning, which are often found within the context of veneration. On the other hand, there are smells that emerge spontaneously and convey messages.

Induced smells occur in the SSZ (a) on the occasion of preparation for an expected miracle and for death, (b) to maintain a connection to a god or deceased monk, and (c) to promote a sense of connection:

(a) The monk Sengyi is awaiting a wonder and, in order to prepare properly, he bathes, burns incense, sits in silence, and starts to wait. The incense is, in this context, part of a preparatory purification awaiting the reaction by the principle of *linggan* 靈感 which is connected to the idea that sincerity will cause an effect (洗浴燒香端坐靜室, biography of Sengyi 僧意, probably fifth or sixth century CE, 966a25). Another monk is preparing for death: he rises at dawn, burns incense, talks to the assembled crowd, sits down for meditation with crossed legs, and passes away (開寶八年二月二十六日晨起焚香告眾加趺而化, biography of Yan-shou 延壽, tenth century CE, 1011b19).

(b) As a god bids farewell to yet another monk, he hands him three boxes of incense, so that he will be able to maintain contact even in his absence (尋還山陰廟。臨別執手贈猷香三奩。於是鳴鞞吹角凌雲而去。), biography of Tanqiu 曇猷, fl. around 400 CE, 955b8–9). It seems safe to say that, through incense, a directional communication occurs between the one who ignites the fire and the one who is addressed by it. This resonates with classical theories of sacrifice, since Marcel Mauss (Mauss and Hubert 1899). Also, in the realm of venerating the dead, fragrance is present: following a cremation, the ashes are collected, a white *stūpa* (originally a burial mound) is erected, and in spring and autumn the deceased is offered a fire of fragrance (春秋奉香火之薦焉普聞, biography of Congjian 從諫, ninth century, 1008c27). Fragrant substances are not always burnt: the monk Jianzhen 鑑真 (688–763), mainly known due to his mission to Japan, is venerated after his death by the

Japanese king and the aristocrats. They clean his statue with fragrance (其國國王貴人信士。時將寶香塗之。), 1000c15–16).

- (c) Two people can feel connected through the offering of incense: the monk Lu Fahe 陸法和 and Emperor Yuan of Liang 梁元帝 (508–555) share a karmic connection through a fragrant fire of incense as the empty seat for the monk is decorated with burning incense (尚不希釋梵天王坐處。豈規主位。但於空王佛所。與主上有香火因緣。 974b02–4).

SPONTANEOUSLY EMERGING SMELLS

Regarding spontaneously emerging smells, it is characteristic that, while induced smells are pleasant, spontaneous smells can be fragrant but also awkward. After the monk Sengjia passed away, his mummified body was placed on an altar until an unpleasant smell began to disseminate from it (俄而大風歙起臭氣遍滿。), 992c4). This smell was interpreted as the dissatisfaction of the monk with the choice of location. As soon as he was transferred elsewhere, the mummy began to emit a fragrance. At this new location, a *stūpa* was erected and incense was offered to it (其臭頓息。頃刻之間奇香郁烈即以其年五月送至臨淮起塔供養。 992c7–8). The corpse is interpreted as the transformation body (*huashen* 化身) of Bodhisattva Guanyin, whose language changed into the language of smell as a means of communication.

An unpleasant smell can also be a sign of illness: of the monk Qi Yu 耆域 (fl. around 300 CE), it is said that

he traveled everywhere in China and did not have a fixed dwelling place. An easy happiness accompanied him and he could perform miracles. By nature, he looked down upon customs and led an unsteady life. [. . .] In summer, somebody got sick in the workshop of the palace and was about to die. Qi Yu placed his begging bowl on the belly of the sick man. He covered the whole belly with a white fabric and murmured magical formulae of several thousand words. Instantly, an unpleasant smell filled the whole room. The sick man said: “I am living [again].” Qi Yu ordered somebody to lift the fabric. In the begging bowl were several *sheng* [about one liter, an old hollow for grain] of mud. They smelled so badly that none could draw near. The sick man was healed thereafter. (耆域者。天竺人也。周流華戎靡有常所。而倜儻神奇。[. . .] 尚方暑中有一人病癰將死。域以應器著病者腹上。白布通覆之。呪願數千言。即有臭氣燻徹一室。病者曰。我活矣。域令人舉布。應器中有若淤泥者數升。臭不可近。病者遂瘥。 950c4–5, 950c25–29)

The power of Buddhism makes it possible to remove the illness from the body in the form of a stinking substance and thus to overcome it. It enables the monk to control and direct bad smells and the corresponding substances.

Also in another story, a malodorous illness occurs. Through being washed by another monk, the skin of Zhihui 智暉 (around 900 CE) began to give out a scent and emit light (我以宿業白癩。師能為我洗摩。暉為之無難色。俄有神光異香。方訝之。忽失所在歸視瘡痂亦皆異香也, biography of Zhihui, 1013a18–21). Fragrance and light are combined into a unit repeatedly in the SSZ.

Returning to the world of pleasant scents, numerous narrations tell about suddenly emerging fragrances in the context of death. A fragrant corpse in general hints at a spiritually advanced monk who is able to perform wonders: when Fachong is about to

die, it is summer, but his corpse neither stinks nor decays. Its fragrance is that of an “overripe melon” (而屍不臭爛。香如爛瓜。), biography of Fachong 法充, sixth century CE, 979a26). On the occasion of the death of another monk, he knew about it in advance and died without disease, smiling. His body was sweet-smelling and soft, his facial expression happy (未及旬日無疾而終。屍骸香軟形貌熙悅。臨亡然一燭以付後閻舍人吳慶。), biography of Baozhi 寶誌, 418–514 CE, 971a1–3).

Several times, the SSZ mentions a “special scent” that emerges once a monk leaves his body: the monk Beidu announces his death, disappears, and leaves behind a “special scent” (*yixiang* 異香, 962a10). He is found dead. Close to his corpse, lotus blossoms grow, and he smells fresh. After one night, this stops and he is buried.

A pleasant scent can also appear if an outstanding monk is simply changing his location: the monk Sengjia placed his clothes on the wooden floor of a building and left. People smelled a “special scent” afterwards (992b5). Through that, they knew that the monk had left, without knowing where he went. As in the case of the monk who was dissatisfied with the location of his corpse, the language of smell expresses a general message, the details of which have to be figured out by the witnesses.

Just as fragrance can be a sign of the presence and virtue of a divine monk, it can also be a sign of the Buddhist teaching or of purification: Tansui 曇邃 is secretly explaining to his disciple the Buddhist teaching. People passing by see two seating platforms for the master and his pupil and they hear voices. The air is filled with a strange fragrance (又聞有奇香之氣。), biography of Tansui, date unknown, 960c3–4). The monk Fuhong 傅弘 is considered special because sometimes his breast emits golden rays of light. A special scent floats up from his palms and his body is sometimes of an abnormally large size (或金色表於胸臆。異香流於掌內。或見身長丈餘臂過於膝。腳長二尺指長六寸, biography of Fuhong, sixth century CE, 975b25–27).

CONCLUSION

Looking at the biographies from the perspective of smell reveals fresh insights: the text-specific language of smell emerges, which goes beyond the enumeration of single substances. Smells and the production of smells serve specific functions. Incense is consciously applied in preparation for an outstanding event in a process that is orchestrated with other elements of purification. It is commonly used in the context of veneration as a means of directional communication, but also in order to sustain social bonds by representing an absent monk. Intentionally induced smells have a positive connotation, while spontaneously occurring smells can be either pleasant or disgusting. Stink is the language of the deceased through which he or she can express dissatisfaction with a certain situation. Stink can also be the sign of an illness that is materializing in a body as foul-smelling mud. The power of Buddhism causes the local concentration of the illness so that, in consequence, it can be literally removed. While the things Buddhism overcomes—like sickness—stink, everything associated with Buddhism, like a sign of its teaching, its purity, or a previously present virtuous monk, even his corpse, are fragrant and hereby signify the presence of Buddhism. Additionally, fragrance can be a means of communication for a deceased virtuous monk. Through this code of smell, the world of Buddhism, as presented in the text, is designed as olfactorily distant from average smell realms. This can also be seen beyond the *Biographies of Thaumaturge Monks*: to avoid any misleading associations Buddhist nuns are not allowed to wear perfume; in the Dharmaguptakavinaya, the monastic discipline for nuns in East Asia, it is counted as an offence to adorn oneself with



FIGURE 20.1: Donors presenting fruit and incense, *Mile jingtu tu* 彌勒淨土圖. Five Dynasties, 940 CE (*Tianfu wu nian* 天福五年), painted on silk, 76.5 x 53 cm, EO.1135. Courtesy of bpk | RMN, Grand Palais | Ravoux / Paris, Musée Guimet, Musée national des arts asiatiques.

perfume as a nun.⁴ Assembling all of these observations, one might put forward the preliminary hypothesis that Buddhism in China constructs a distinct world of scent and codes it in accordance with its intentions. This is an analytical insight that can only be gained through a systematic screening of sources and by embedding the occurrence of smells in their narrative contexts. Enumerating single instances of smells can only constitute the first step in working with the texts to gain culturally specific sensorial knowledge. Sometimes, cognitive insights help us to understand better certain connections, but mostly the applicable data are more general—like the connection between smell and taste, or between smell and long-term memory. In future research it might be tempting to tailor concrete cognitive studies to questions emerging from the textual material.

Let me conclude with a very short final observation: working on the Silk Road and its artifacts, especially the art found in the region of Dunhuang which flourished as an oasis in the second half of the first millennium CE, we often discover incense and see incense burners, mostly as handles in the hands of donors (Figure 20.1). Sometimes, a couple is donating and, while the husband is holding the incense, his wife is presenting a plate of fruit. They cover the aspects of fragrance and freshness one might interpret. When one remembers the major translated Buddhist texts, like the Lotus Sūtra, fragrance is also abundantly present. What is different is that it is often presented in the form of fresh flowers. Flowers are delicate and easily decay, but they combine their fragrance with their transient freshness and beauty. In the Indian context, wall paintings rarely show incense burners, but include female figures like *Apsaras* presenting flowers (Figure 20.2).⁵ It might



FIGURE 20.2: Apsaras presenting fragrant flowers, rock painting in Sigiriya, Sri Lanka, fifth century. © Yves Picq, own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=35598090>.

be that, as a foreign religion, common veneration behavior in Chinese Buddhism developed a tendency to be more associated with the dried wood and gum used for incense that were imported along with Buddhism from India via the Silk Road, while presenting flowers appeared in more specific contexts, such as in Chinese esoteric Buddhist practices like flower-offering rituals. At this point, this thought is highly preliminary. As such, it is hoped that this will increase the reader's sensitivity to matters of smell and inspire further explorations into the realm of olfaction.

RECOMMENDED READING

- McHugh, James (2012), *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Fascinating study of smell in Indian culture concentrating on early India. A Chinese pendant of such a study unfortunately does not yet exist.
- Schafer, Edward H. (1963), *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics*. Berkeley: University of California Press. The classic on exotics in the golden age of Chinese history, Tang dynasty China. Aromatics are given a chapter of their own. While highly interesting to read, this approach is very different from an approach that concentrates on sensorial knowledge and perception.