

### The Historian's Gaze

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# The Wisdom of Senses. Neo-Confucian Reflections on Cultural Body

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**Abstract** Sensory experiences are not passive feelings limited to the body or part of it, but influence the concept of the self, and play epistemological and aesthetic functions. This essay presents a few significant examples of the exploration of sensorial functions in the ambit of Neo-Confucian philosophical and moral texts. The examples show a holistic approach, and above all explore the 'legitimation' of senses in the *li-qi* 理-氣 discussion or their role in the self-cultivation process.

**Keywords** Cultural body. Neo-Confucianism. Moral intuition. Sensorial perception. Emotions.

**Summary** 1 Body, Self and Feelings. – 2 Mind and Sensory Organs. – 3 Zhang Zai. – 4 Zhu Xi. – 5 Li Zhi. – 6 Wang Fuzhi. – 7 Yan Yuan. – 8 Dai Zhen.

## 1 Body, Self and Feelings

In the studies on emotions and states of mind, the cultural role of the body and the senses is an important topic. Sensory experiences are not passive feelings limited to the body or part of it, but influence the concept of the self, and play epistemological and aesthetic functions. The rich lexicon of bodily sensations enriches the language of literary descriptions, medical and criminal texts, and is also used in philosophical and moral treatises. Literary sources are very useful for understanding sensorial perceptions, as they document myths, songs, poems, and legends that accompany various senses; they show how sensory reactions become passions, beliefs, stimulation for solidari-



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ty, exclusion, self-cultivation, love and hate.<sup>1</sup> Owing to the limitation of space allowed, this essay presents a few significant examples of their exploration in the ambit of Neo-Confucian thinkers.

The previous studies dealing with the 'cultural body' and the representation of sensorial functions have mainly concentrated on some aspects or specific topics, such as religious thought, Daoist theory and practices, and medicine. After the pioneering work by Geaney (2002), studies dedicated to sensorial experiences from psychological and anthropological perspectives have increased considerably, thanks to the growing awareness of the symbolic and imaginative value of the sensory function, consolidated among contemporary scholars, who recognise the role of the senses in the ethical, aesthetic and social fields. Those researches concerning the history of ideas have highlighted the different orientations of Chinese writers, aimed at an ethical perspective compared with Western scientists and Jesuits (Meynard 2020). These findings are undoubtedly considerable, but further studies should be made to examine overall the peculiar contribution of Chinese thought - and Neo-Confucianism in particular - on the role of the body in the whole world view, the relationship with human nature, values and the symbolic meanings attributed to it. Such a contribution would be necessary not only in the light of the progress of new disciplines, such as neurosciences and biosociology, but because it would bring new light to the intersection of the various subjects and knowledge areas, in addition to those mentioned, including the practices of self-cultivation, physiognomy, cosmology, philosophical thought. I tried this path through a few specific textual analyses of the representation of specific sensory experiences, and key terms, such as *xiang* 香 ('aroma', incense and its metaphorical use) in the literary production of late imperial China (Santangelo, Middendorf 2006; Santangelo 2014; 2018; 2019). Deep enquiries concerning embodied moral psychology and cognition of Confucian philosophy and the bodily foundations of early Confucian virtues have appeared in the last decades (among them, Seok 2013; Csikszentmihalyi 2004). Moreover, besides philosophical analyses of Confucian and Neo-Confucian vision of the body (on Neo-Confucian vision see Yang 1996, 293-412), new studies on the modern and contemporary periods have been published, but they mainly explore the space-timed perception of senses in the life of great urban settings through the analysis of narrative texts of contemporary urban fictions (Møller-Olsen 2021), or the use of sensorial means and communication in media, art, music, theatrical performances and literature (Wu, Huang 2022).

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**1** On a psychological level, the reader may re-live personal or others' past experiences, and from an anthropological perspective, the analysis of the descriptions of these experiences is useful for cross-cultural studies, to understand what is universal and what specifically inherent to a certain society and time. For the importance of literary and theatre sources, see Balaban 2012.

It is evident that the implications in the description of the sensory experiences and perceptions of the body are innumerable. The present essay can merely afford an essential analysis of the thought of a few thinkers, highlighting the characteristics of the Neo-Confucian exploration of the senses by examining the constants in their representation, through some significant examples of the evolution of Neo-Confucianism. This preliminary study offers some ideas for further research that help to open up new spaces in this field.

## 2 Mind and Sensory Organs

The philosophical discussion on sensory experiences revolved around moral questions, and since the beginning of Confucian thought, sensitive knowledge was examined from an ethical perspective. Mencius and especially Xunzi laid the foundations for future discussions: according to Xunzi 荀子 (300-230 BC), the effects of desiring and loathing were produced by senses owing to their hedonistic and vitalistic motivations.<sup>2</sup> Mencius focussed on the relationship between senses and desires but contrasted these “inferior” natural tendencies with the “superior” virtues of heavenly morality (*ming* 命).<sup>3</sup> In the following centuries, notwithstanding the changes of perspective due for instance to the Buddhist influence, the “organs/functions of the senses” (*guan* 官) continued to be supposed to work under the direction of the heart-mind (*xin* 心) as ruler (*jun* 君).<sup>4</sup> The sensory experiences have been closely associated with theories of knowledge, motivation, desire and emotion, medical theory and practice, and sexual cultivation, but fundamentally the double implication of social and moral effects of the senses remained the basis of the debate on them.<sup>5</sup>

A practical reflection, connecting the senses with human nature, their function towards the heart-mind, and their role in the basic hedonistic tendencies of humans, was inherited by Neo-Confucians.

<sup>2</sup> In his analysis on the basic functions of sensory organs and sensations which are considered as appetitive organs, Xunzi 荀子 (Wang Ba 王霸, 10) speaks about the relation of *qing* 情 with physical feelings and social consequences: “desires of ears and eyes”, and, more specifically, about the desires of the senses for colours, sounds, tastes, smells. Cf. Geaney 2002, 44-5; Nylan 2001, 94.

<sup>3</sup> *Mencius* 孟子, Jin Xin. xia 盡心下, 70. On self-cultivation, *Mencius*, Li Lou. shang 離婁上 15. See also “craving for food” *Gan shi* 甘食 (*Mencius*, Jin xin. shang, 27).

<sup>4</sup> For the bureaucratic metaphor of the senses in the early Chinese philosophy, see *Xunzi*, Tian lun 天論, 4; and *Zheng ming* 正名, 5, 12, 18, 19; *Mencius*, Gaozi shang 告子上, 7, 15; *Guanzi* 管子, Xin Shu. shang 心術上, 1, 4, 7, 8. For a similar position in Qing dynasty, see later Dai Zhen (*Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證, 1:32). For an allegorical political interpretation of ancient texts, see Levi Sabattini 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Harper 1998, 412-14. For heat therapies and massage, see Harper 1998, 68, 91-5, 97-8 *passim*.

Before going on with this short survey, it is worthy to notice the holistic approach in traditional China, not only in the rejection of the subject-object distinction in the epistemological process (Ames 1991, 228). Scholars were well aware of the deep connection of sensory experiences with the emotional sphere of the subject and in cultural constructions (Santangelo, Middendorf 2006, 2, 59, 232, 236). This is evident in the symbolic, epistemological and aesthetic roles attributed to sensory functions. Moreover, the somatisation of emotions is manifested both in the medical discourse and in symbolic expressions of written language, for instance, the notions of ‘five viscera’ (*wuzang* 五臟) and ‘four limbs’ (*sizhi* 四肢). The sense organs and the heart-mind served as functional nodes in large circulatory systems governing the entire human body, and were situated within body-wide connections with the heart-mind, as nodal points for the flow of *qi* and blood. Most of the Neo-Confucian thinkers have dedicated their attention to the complementarity of mind and senses. This holistic perception of the unity of sensory functions was shared by most thinkers, also outside the School of Mind, from Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578-1645) to Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-92) and Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724-77).<sup>6</sup> Liu Zongzhou expressed the concept of the unity of mind and body, and stated that “ears, mouth, eyes, nose and the four limbs are all complete in the heart-mind”.<sup>7</sup> From Mencius to Wang Fuzhi and Dai Zhen, the functions of the senses are listed together with the functions of the heart-mind (*kou er mu xin* 口耳目心). Later thinkers, like Wang Fuzhi and Dai Zhen, have emphasised the unity of different functions in human beings, and have ‘legitimated’ the role of senses because they are not in contrast with cardinal virtues and rather mutually cooperate in the body, provided that sensorial organs follow their way. This approach explains also the role of the senses in the Neo-Confucian self-perfection process, which confirms the moral perspective from which most themes were debated. Senses are involved in spiritual exercises and the ‘practice of the self-cultivation process’ (*gongfu* 工夫).

<sup>6</sup> On the extensive use of ‘Neo-Confucianism’, see Santangelo 2016, 7 fn. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Liu Zongzhou, *juan 6*, in *Siku quanshu*, or Huang Zongxi, *Mingru xue’an*, 62:693-4.

### 3 Zhang Zai

The Neo-Confucian reflection on senses can be started from Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-77), in whose thought Xunzi's concept is crucial. In his *Zhengmeng* 正蒙 (Correcting Ignorance), Zhang Zai distinguishes two kinds of knowledge, superior moral learning and inferior sensory perception, limited to what one "hears and sees" (*Zhang Zai ji*, 6:20; 7:24).<sup>8</sup> "Knowing from hearing and seeing" was the sensory perception (*wenjian zhizhi* 聞見之知), the "narrow" (*xia* 狹) and "superficial knowledge through hearing and seeing" (*wenjian xiaozhi* 聞見小知), and it was contrasted with the "understanding through virtue and nature" (*dexing zhi zhi* 德性之知), the "holistic enlightened knowledge" (*cheng ming suo zhi* 誠明所知) (*Zhang Zai ji*, 6:20; 7:24).<sup>9</sup> The partiality and unreliability of the senses, however, were not based only on moral arguments, but were explained with philosophical and medical reasons: shapes, colours, sounds, smells, and other sensory aspects are easily changing, and are petty and insignificant phenomena. Moreover, individual perceptual errors for partiality (*pianjian* 偏見) are possible owing to "disease and delusion" (*ji yu wang* 疾與妄), i.e. eyes' sickness, such as cataracts or hallucinatory states (*Zhang Zai ji*, 6:20, cit. in Zuo 2019, 97-110).

This dichotomy created by Zhang Zai, based on the inadequacy of the sensorial cognitive function versus the deep intuitive/moral knowledge, remained in the writings of several scholars from Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi until the late imperial period, even with changes of meanings (Angle, Tiwald 2017, 112-22). Nevertheless, Zhang's analysis acknowledges the necessity and utility of senses owing to the combination of internality with externality: "Although ears and eyes [the senses] are considered a burden on human nature, they have the power to combine the inner and the outer, and knowing it is the crucial point to open up" (*Zhang Zai ji*, Da Xin 大心, 7:25).<sup>10</sup> This happens because human beings perceive (*wenjian* 聞見) the external signal through their senses that open one's body and consciousness,

<sup>8</sup> For his contemporary Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011-77), knowledge starts from sensory perception and reaches up to the intuition of mystical union. The senses just perceive objects, while the mind-heart understands a more profound reality, by means of figures (*xiang* 象) and numbers (*shu* 數), and finally "true knowledge" is reached by holiness through principle. Being beyond forms, principle offers a comprehension of the whole of reality. Cf. Arrault 2002, 242.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. also *Er Cheng yishu* 二程遺書, *juan* 25 (*Siku quanshu*, *zibu* 子部, Rujialei 儒家類 and *Zhuzi yulei*, 64:1560).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Zuo 2019, 85. For another interpretation, that emphasises the contrast between sensorial and intuitive/moral knowledge, see Zheng 2015, 1256: "Zhang assumes that, although the senses are always considered a burden of the heart-mind, it is nonetheless the crucial point to open up to see (*qi* 啓 means both 'to open' and 'to see') that virtue which unifies the inner and the outer".

and this is the enlightenment (*qi* 啓) of “the virtue of the combination of external and internal” (*nei wai zhi he* 內外之合之德) (*Zhang Zai ji*, 7:25). This means that Zhang does not regard the senses themselves as the source of ethical failures or just a source of temptations that obstacles moral perfection. Without the function of sensory organs, man would not be able to perceive external reality (*ren zhi you shou* 人之有受) and would be like inanimate things (*Zhang Zi yulu*, Shang 張子語錄, 上, in *Zhang Zai ji*, 1:313).

However, Zhang raised critical questions on the reliability of the senses and distinguished a true knowledge, that only allows the perception of the unity of oneself with everything (*qi shi tianxia wu yi wu fei wo* 其視天下無一物非我), “the ability to embody all things of the universe” (*neng ti tianxia zhe wu* 能體天下之物) (*Zhang Zai ji*, Zhengmeng, 7:24). This knowledge is superior because it corresponds to the holistic feeling of the self in unity with the universe through a kind of intuition, “resonance” (*gan* 感) (*Zhang Zai ji*, Zhengmeng, 17:63, cit. by Zuo 2019, 89). He uses a neologism by combining terms used in the Classics, “what is understood through wholeness and enlightenment” (*cheng ming suo zhi* 誠明所知),<sup>11</sup> which refers to the concept of oneness, in communication with cosmic unity (*yiti* 一體). Borrowing the Mencian idea of one body in response to harm to others, Zhang Zai highlighted the metaphor of the sensitivity of the heart-mind to the conditions of one’s physical body, associated with empathy and reciprocity. This image leads to the sensitivity towards the conditions of all humans and other beings because humans have the same body as Heaven and Earth (*yu tian di tong ti* 與天地同體) and all things. This is the difference with the sensorial perception that is limited in comparison to this intuition and enlightenment.

#### 4 Zhu Xi

In his reorganisation of the previous Neo-Confucians’ thought, Zhu Xi maintains Zhang Zai’s distinction and extends it to the dyad of the superior knowledge of the “moral mind” (*daoxin* 道心), based on self-cultivation and virtuous behaviour, and the sensorial perception of the “human mind” (*renxin* 人心) in the everyday practical sensorial feelings like hunger, cold and itch (*Zhuzi Yulei*, 78:2010-13; 62:1486-7). Notwithstanding the late Ming and Qing criticism against his dichotomy of principle-desire and principle-energy, Zhu was more open than many of his followers who focussed on the rhetoric of the repression of desires in favour of heavenly principles. Zhu Xi morally

<sup>11</sup> Transl. by Zheng 2015, 1256-7.

accepts sensory desires, provided they are functional to the individual and social life, and correspond to the vital necessities, in contrast with desires for superfluous things. These sensory desires are associated with principles based on vitalistic and innate reasons: they are necessary (*bi* 必) and natural (*ziran* 自然). Human nature is received by Heaven and consists of innate morality (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom), but its manifestations include also natural and universal desires (*Zhuzi Yulei*, 14:505). The classical desires for food, sex, music, aromas and body's leisure are among the various sensory desires Zhu includes in the concept of human nature, originated from "the naturalness of the Heavenly Principle" (*tianli zhi ziran* 天理之自然) (*Zhuzi Yulei*, 61:1461; see also Lee 2020, 281-4).

The first turning point can be seen in some thinkers of the late Ming period, especially the School of Mind. The role of all senses in self-cultivation exercises is examined by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529). Dealing with the term *gewu* 格物 ('investigation of things'), he mentions the ears, the eyes, the mouth, the nose, and the four limbs that must not see, hear, say and behave against propriety. This is possible because the heart-mind is the master of the body. Sensory organs allow all perceptions and behaviour, but what makes it possible is the mind. Owing to the centrality of the mind, self-cultivation lies in

realizing through personal experience the true substance of one's mind and always making it broad and extremely impartial without the slightest incorrectness. Once the master is correct, then, as it operates through the channel of the eye, it will naturally see nothing which is contrary to propriety. As it operates through the channels of the ear, it will naturally hear nothing which is contrary to propriety. And as it operates through the channels of the mouth and the four limbs, it will naturally say or do nothing which is contrary to propriety. This means that the cultivation of the personal life consists in rectifying the mind. (*Wang Yangming Chuanxilu xia* 傳習錄下, 120)<sup>12</sup>

Activating will (*yi* 意) concentrates the visual and auditory faculties, so much so that "there are no principles that are not authentically understood" (Ng 1999, 108). Moreover, in the cat metaphor, self-cultivation is compared to the cat catching a mouse, with *eyes single-mindedly watching and ears single-mindedly listening*.

But sensory involvement is not limited to the metaphorical level. Wang Ji 王畿 (1498-1583), a Wang Yangming's disciple, explains the discipline in the use of senses, through the method of "restfulness/

<sup>12</sup> See *Instructions for Practical Living*: Chan 1963, 247, item 318.

liberation from sensorial temptations" (*genqibei* 艮其背).<sup>13</sup> His resort to the term *genqibei* recalls Cheng Hao's 程顥 (1032-85) statement, that the sage interacts with things without getting obsessed or burdened with temptations.<sup>14</sup> Paraphrasing Mencius (Jin Xin. xia, 70), he states that the sensory organs of the ears, eyes, mouth, nose and the four limbs act all on the surface, and only the back is not moving, so they perceive phenomena (*er mu kou bi siti zhu gen zhi yong, jie zai yu mian, wei bei wei bu dong, gu yi qu xiang* 耳目口鼻四體諸根之用, 皆在于面, 惟背為不動, 故以取象):

The eyes' disposition towards beautiful forms and colours, ears towards pleasant sounds, nose towards fragrant smells, mouth towards delicious tastes, and the four limbs towards leisure are all physiological natural principles, and therefore they belong to human nature. But there is the heavenly rule [*ming* 命], and to comply with it one fulfils his nature [*jie ziran zhi shengli, gu yue xing ye, ran you ming yan, liming suoyi jin xing ye* 皆自然之生理, 故曰性也, 然有命焉, 立命所以盡性也]. If you look at the colours restfully, the eye is not a conveyor of seduction but it cleverly can stop. If you hear the sounds restfully, the ear is not conveyor of seduction, and the listening is only conscientious. (*Longxi Wang xiansheng quanji* 龍溪王先生全集, *juan* 8, § *Gen zhi jing yi zhi zhi* 艮止精一之旨, 1)

At the beginning of this passage, Wang Ji seems to echo what Zhu Xi says about it.<sup>15</sup> In the second part, he follows Mencius: he recommends moderation in the use of senses, and their natural functions. In this respect, Wang Ji follows the common and orthodox opinion that sensorial experiences are natural but that the gentleman does not consider them as belonging to human nature, because only humanness, filiality and other virtues are the Heavenly morality (*sheng se chou wei anyi zishi tianxing* 聲色臭味安佚自是天性, 'music and beauties, smells and tastes, comfortable positions belong naturally to heavenly inclinations'). In another passage, Wang Ji discusses the use of the senses and their functions to affirm the priority of moral culti-

<sup>13</sup> The expression *genqibei* 艮其背, from the *Yijing* (*gen* 艮, hexagram 52 艮), is explained by Zhu Xi (*Zhuzi yulei*, 73:1850-8), as "keeping one's independence from external and sensual temptations in order to stop the growth of inner desire", following the Confucius' recommendation not to look at, listen to, speak, do what is contrary to propriety (*Lunyu*, Yan Yuan, 1). This expression was used by other previous writers such as Su Dongpo (SKQS 經部, 易類, 東坡易傳, 卷五) and Hu Hong 胡宏 (SKQS *Zhi yan* 知言, 4:4b).

<sup>14</sup> See Cheng Hao, "Dingxingshu 定性書", <https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh-hant/定性書>. See Zheng Zemian's study (2015) on it.

<sup>15</sup> *waiwu bu jie, neiyu bu meng* 外物不接, 內欲不萌 (if we do not come across external things or affairs, no desires arise within). See Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, 73:1850-8, who develops *Lunyu*, Yan Yuan, 1.



vation and conscience. He starts from the Mencian affirmation “all things are already complete in us” (*wanwu jie bei yu wo* 萬物皆備於我, *Mencius*, Jin xin. shang, 4) to exalt “sincerity on self-examination”, and reciprocity (*shu* 恕). Then, he recalls Wang Yangming’s phrase, “the unity of all things is humaneness (*yiti zhi ren* 一體之仁) (*Wang Yangming Chuanxilu*, 142, 182), which is propaedeutic to his discourse on the interaction between man and other beings. Going on to examine the functioning of the senses, about sight he says: “In front of colours, my eyes can spontaneously distinguish blue and yellow, because the colours of all things are already complete in my eyes” (*wu zhi mu yu se zi neng bian qing huang, shi wanwu zhi se bei yu mu ye* 吾之目遇色自能辨青黃, 是萬物之色備於目也). Then, referring to Wang Yangming’s principle of unity between knowledge and action (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一), by analogy, it passes to the mind and conscience with the immediate consequences on human behaviour: “Meeting my father, my mind’s conscience cannot but understand filial piety [*wu xin zhi liangzhi yu fu, zi neng zhi xiao* 吾心之良知遇父自能知孝]”. The process of seeing is analogous to or is the first step of the spontaneous moral reaction in everyday life.<sup>16</sup> The perception and distinction of colours, sounds, etc. derive from the fact that they are already in our sensorial organs, ‘already complete within the self’, like innate conscience provokes our spontaneous moral reactions to all vicissitudes of the world in front of us.

The Taizhou School attributed the highest value to the body-person, starting from Wang Gen 王艮 (1483-1541), who stated that the Way is respected when the body-person is respected and vice versa (道尊, 則身尊. 身尊則, 道尊) (*Mingru xue’an* 明儒學案, 32:315). Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515-88) confirmed the same concept and argued that “one’s own body is the Way” (cf. Zheng 2016, 400-6), and explained how sensorial perceptions allow the unlimited embodiment of objects and phenomena, by extending the self to the management of social and moral affairs (cf. Yu 2010, 398-406). For Luo Rufang and other Taizhou scholars self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) allows the flowing of the original positive energy from the universe to the four limbs of the body (*shenti sizhi* 身體四肢) and heart-mind, and thus the recovery of original natural conscience (*fu yi zizhi* 復以自知), by sharing the cosmic energy of the original yang (*iyiyang zhi qi* 一陽之氣) (cf. Zhang 2010, 42, 48, 64; 2012, 155-73).

16 Wang Ji 王畿 1976, 1-4. Cf. *Wang Yangming Chuanxilu*, 5, 8.

## 5 Li Zhi

During the social-economic changes and the consequent expansion of printing from the mid-Ming period, the growth of entertainment publications, the development of fiction and drama, practical and travel guides, sensual needs underwent great changes, and material desires were broadened (see Brokaw 1991; Chow 2004). Some thinkers, like Li Zhi, have questioned the relationship between principle and desire. Li Zhi quotes and comments on the *Hub of the Heart Sutra*, that records the Buddhist metaphysical doctrine of the emptiness of beings and their perceptions:

The Six Sense Roots are all empty: there are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. The Six Dusty Sense Fields are all empty: there are no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, or mental elements. (*Xinjing tigang* 心經提綱 [The Hub of the Heart Sutra], *Fenshu*, 3:100, transl. by Lebovitz 2016, 117)

But this emptiness (*kong* 空) is not different from the form (*se* 色) in the original nonduality of subject and object, existence and nonexistence. In his essay, emblematic of the Taizhou School's Dao-Buddhist-Confucian syncretism, Li Zhi emphasises the role of the heart-mind to get the self-realisation of the nonduality of opposites, forms and emptiness, as well as the potentiality of everyone to achieve wisdom by using his/her mind. What is new is his ethical approach, as Li Zhi acknowledges the importance of senses for the vital function of desires for food, clothing, wealth, advantages, economic and social improvements, as they are the natural expressions of the childmind (*tongxin* 童心) and do not distract from moral effort. Their fulfilment is the bright virtue of the childmind and they naturally correspond to the universal order; like food and clothing, wealth, advantages, economic and social improvements fulfil the five senses that are endowed by Heaven: this is their natural condition (Li Zhi, *Da Geng Zhongcheng* 答耿中丞, *Fenshu*, 1:17).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Chow (2020, 152-3) emphasises the great changes from the orthodox morality: while Zhu Xi considered wealth, life's satisfactions, pleasures and rank something depending on destiny and thus not worthy of care and temptations for selfish desires, here Li Zhi claims they are natural tendencies, that enrich the five senses endowed by Heaven.

## 6 Wang Fuzhi

Another turning point started with Wang Fuzhi's criticism of a supposed Dao-Buddhist refusal of sensory experience, and his appreciation of taste and smell as coming from the interaction with other beings.<sup>18</sup> Wang Fuzhi's exploration of nature and political legitimacy was influenced by western scientific knowledge and methods (Lin 2010; Xu 2012). In his arguments against the distinction between the "ordering principle" (*li* 理) and "humoral energy" (*qi* 氣), he states the original moral potentiality and psychophysical nature, and refers to senses and virtues as examples of the unity of the body. Heaven creates human beings through the five phases of yin and yang energies. Then, the principle is located in man and is concentrated in human nature. Consequently, through his senses, sounds and images, smells and tastes enrich man's life (*hou qi sheng* 厚其生), as well as the four cardinal virtues of humaneness, justice, propriety and wisdom, confirm human morality, so that everything is suitable to principle. Therefore, he concludes that if senses follow their way, they are not in contrast with Confucian cardinal virtues, and rather mutually cooperate in the body (*Zhangzi Zhengmeng Zhu*, Cheng ming pian 誠明篇, 3:79).

On the one side Wang, exploring sensorial perception (*ti zhi jue* 體之覺), singles out "shape [i.e. touch sensation and pain], sound, smell, taste, warmth and cold" (*xing ye, sheng ye, chou ye, wei ye, wenliang ye* 形也, 聲也, 臭也, 味也, 溫涼也) (*Zhangzi Zhengmeng zhu*, Dong wu pian 動物篇, 3:68-9)<sup>19</sup> and follows the idea of limitations of sense perception in the process of learning and understanding reality: "The power of sight and hearing is limited in perceiving the smallest" (*er mu zhi li qiongyu xiao* 耳目之力窮於小) (1:9, 13).<sup>20</sup> On the other side, Wang Fuzhi is critical of the Dao-Buddhist refusal of sensorial experience and its concupiscible effects.<sup>21</sup> He takes issue with Laozi's criticism of the senses, as well as his influences on Neo-Confucianism: "Laozi says that 'the five colours blind man's eyes, the five sounds deafen man's ears, and the five savours confuse man's taste'. This reasoning means to avoid to look for [mistakes] in oneself, and

<sup>18</sup> See Wang Fuzhi's commentary in Zhang Zai, *Zhangzi Zhengmeng zhu*, Qian cheng pian, xia 乾稱篇下, 9:42. Cf. Gernet 2005, 254. For the original source of Zhang Zai's sentence, see Zhang Zai, *Zhang Zai ji*, 6:22.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=123173>.

<sup>20</sup> See also Gernet 2005, 244-8. In *Du Sishu daquanshuo* 讀四書大全說, 191, Wang expresses his appreciation for "the sole and unique function of mind [*xin guan du zhi zhi gong* 心官獨致之功] in reaching principle beyond senses and shapes [*yu xing'er shang yongsi* 於形而上用思]". Cf. <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=644850&remap=gb#p192>.

<sup>21</sup> See Wang Fuzhi's commentary in Zhang Zai, *Zhangzi Zhengmeng zhu*, Qian cheng pian, xia 乾稱篇下, 9:42. Cf. Gernet 2005, 254.

rather blame external things”.<sup>22</sup> Analysing Zhang Zai’s words, namely that “[t]he appetite for foods and drink, and the sense of smell and taste towards scents and aromas are always a conquest of human nature”,<sup>23</sup> Wang Fuzhi notices that such phenomena come from interaction with other beings because it is through sensorial organs that we perceive the reality of the world. To sum up, senses are associated with desires: they get along well and match each other in dealing with external things, thus desires automatically arise. This is a natural process, as desire is not only what petty people rely on, but also what gentlemen cannot ignore.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, he makes explicit the need for moderation (*jie* 節, *jian* 儉): excess and indulgence (*ren* 任, *chi* 侈) bring disasters (*yang bi ji shen* 殃必及身) to oneself and society (*Du Tongjian Lun*, 30:49-51, 19:55).<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Wang Fuzhi’s exploration of cognitive efforts goes beyond the distinction made by many thinkers between the inferior and superior knowledge we have mentioned, but at the same time, he confirms the limits of human cognitive tools, the perception capacity of the senses and the expressive potentiality of language. He refutes the concept that identifies reality with its representation and underlines that a large part of reality escapes our perceptions and conceptualisations. Thus, reality cannot be limited to what one sees or hear, so that “what the eye does not see is not necessarily without shape [*mu suo bujian fei wuse ye* 目所不見, 非無色也]; what the ear does not hear is not necessarily without sound; what the word does not communicate is not necessarily without meaning”. Wang concludes that, in researching, despite the efforts made by sight, hearing and language, there will always be forms, sounds and concepts that escape our capacity (*Siwenlu* 思問錄, *nei pian* 內篇, in *Xuxiu Siku* 續修四庫, *zi* 子, vol. 945, 553, 船山思問錄, 4).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See also *Shangshu yinyi*, 6:170; *Zhangzi Zhengmeng zhu*, 3:104.

<sup>23</sup> 口腹於飲食, 鼻舌於臭味, 皆攻取之性也 *Zhang Zai ji*, 6:22; *Zhangzi Zhengmeng Zhu*, *Cheng ming pian* 誠明篇, 3:94; *Zhangzi quanshu*, 6, 2:18b.

<sup>24</sup> 耳目口體於天下之物, 相得而各有合, 欲之所自興, 亦天也, 匪徒小人之所依, 抑君子之所不能去也 *Song Lun* 宋論, 2:38 (Taizong 太宗). Cf. <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=602253#p39>. Desires are defined as striving for satisfying the requests of senses (*er mu kou ti zhi ge you suoshi er qiude zhi zhe, suowei yu ye* 耳目口體之各有所適而求得之者, 所謂欲也), *Du Tongjian Lun* 讀通鑿論 (Reading Sima Guang’s *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑), 30:49.

<sup>25</sup> Wang Fuzhi, in his comment to the *Zuozhuan* (Duke Zhuang, 24, 儉, 德之共也, 侈, 惡其大也 “frugality is the reverence of virtue, while extravagance is the great evil”) explains that *jian* 儉 and *chi* 侈 should not be intended as ‘frugality’ and ‘extravagance’ in the economic sense, but rather as ‘self-control’ and ‘indulgence-excess’, respectively. For *yang bi ji shen* 殃必及身, cf. *Mencius*, Jin Xin. xia 盡心下, 74: “If one value as most precious pearls and jade, calamity is sure to befall him [*bao zhuyu zhe, yang bi ji shen* 寶珠玉者, 殃必及身] [instead of valuing the territory, the people, the government]”.

<sup>26</sup> See <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=273173#p5>.

## 7 Yan Yuan

Another innovator, Yan Yuan 顏元 (1635-1704), in his essay “Preservation of Learning” (*Cunxue bian* 存學編), deals with senses and sensorial desires. He argues that principle and energy are together the heavenly Way, like human nature and body are together endowed by Heaven; similarly, innate morality (*xingming* 性命) and physical tendencies (*qizhi* 氣質) in man, although individually different, together constitute this goodness (*Cunxue bian*, in *Yan Yuan ji*, 1:48-9). In another work, “Preservation of Human Nature” (*Cunxing bian* 存性編), Yan Yuan seems to echo certain concepts expounded by Wang Fuzhi, whose works however could not be published until the middle nineteenth century, and thus their influence began later. Both of them, nevertheless, were influenced by Jesuits. Starting from the exposition of his cosmological theory, he equates psychophysical nature with human nature, that is, with good and innate goodness. He criticises the dualism of the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi for their dichotomy principle-energy and the Daoist influences on Neo-Confucianism. By analysing sight, eyes are used as an argument against traditional concepts. He distinguishes the physical substance (the eye socket, the bulb and the pupil) and principle/nature (its sight), to make fun of the contrast between the fallibility of the latter and the purity of the former, between heavenly nature and physical nature (*Cunxing bian*, 1:89).<sup>27</sup> What makes ears, eyes, mouth and body feel satisfied and thus aspire to gain is called ‘desire’, and thus the biological need and satisfaction of the human body as desire.

## 8 Dai Zhen

Analogously, Dai Zhen criticises the current opinion that regards sensory likings and desires as arising from the psychophysical endowment, separated from principle (*Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證, 1:32). Reinterpreting Mencius, Dai argues that the hedonic natural tendency of senses is not different from the heart-mind’s tendency towards morality, and it is one of the three basic functions together with emotional and aesthetic-moral ones. For Dai Zhen, referring to Xunzi, the mind consists of three faculties: desires (*yu* 欲), emotions (*qing* 情), and aesthetic-moral discernment (*zhi* 知). Human nature is nothing but blood, vital energy and heart-mind (*Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證, 3:65-7). Desires are produced by sensory experiences, sounds, shapes, smells and tastes, from which one feels attraction and repulsion; passions are manifested in joy, anger, sad-

<sup>27</sup> See <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=563881&remap=gb>.

ness and pleasure, for which one feels restlessness and satisfaction; by the judgment of the conscience, one likes or dislikes what is beautiful and what is ugly, what is right and what is wrong (*Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證, 3:66).

Dai singles out the innate ability of humans to react to external stimuli, both on sensorial, emotional and intellectual levels. Tastes, sounds, and shapes belong to things but are perceived by one's physical nature, and moral principles belong to human affairs but are perceived by one's aesthetic-moral sense. Physical nature and aesthetic-moral sense have their own tools: the mouth is able to distinguish tastes, the ear to distinguish sounds, the eye to distinguish shapes, and the heart-mind to distinguish moral principles. Tastes, sounds, and shapes belong to things and not to the individual, but when they are perceived by one's physical nature (*xueqi* 血氣), this can distinguish and appreciate them, and what it appreciates should be the best (*Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證, 1:31). Sensory organs allow communication between the body and external things, but each organ, the open portal of this communication, has its own functions: "The heart can direct the ear, the eye, the nose, and the mouth, but it cannot take over their powers. Their powers are each already adequate [to their several functions], and therefore [the various faculties] cannot act in each other's stead" (1:33, transl. by Ewell 1990, 138). Thus, the inclinations of the physical body are various and respond to the specific needs of the ear, eye, nose, and mouth, but are not rooted in the heart-mind. When senses are guided by the heart-mind (*xin zhi guan, jun dao ye* 心之官, 君道也), then the satisfaction of senses corresponds to the conscience, and nature is fully realised in man (1:33). In this way Dai Zhen comes back to the "rule of the heart-mind", but this position does not prevent him from condemning the orthodox bias against desires. Dai also accuses Zhu Xi and his school to be influenced by Dao-Buddhist prejudices against desires (1:35-46). Worthy of note is that Dai Zhen, like Wang Fuzhi, was acquainted with the writings of the Jesuits and was influenced by western culture, on the basis of their statement of "Western learning originated from China" (*xixue Zhong yuan* 西學中源) (Tao 2014; Lin 2010; Xu 2012).

The findings show the interest of Neo-Confucian thinkers in sensorial functions and experience. The priority of moral perspective in dealing with bodily sensations is quite evident: sensory experiences turn into desires, repulsions, passions and reactions that have effects on individual balance and social relationships. The somatisation of emotions is facilitated by the holistic conception of the body and its parts, a conception shared by most of Neo-Confucian thinkers. Senses are supposed to cooperate with the mind, under its control, and are involved in self-cultivation practices.

This survey affords merely a concise analysis of a few selected thinkers, to selectively explore the historical continuity and evolution

of how Neo-Confucians thought about senses and morality. Zhang Zai has been selected because he was one of the founders of the Neo-Confucian metaphysical structure, and influenced later important thinkers, like Zhu Xi and Wang Fuzhi. Zhang's contribution to the distinction between two different kinds of knowledge, the superior moral intuition and the inferior sensorial perception, concerns both gnosology and self-perfection practices, the difference between need and desire for the superfluous. Then, I tried to follow the development of ideas during the economic and social transformations in the second part of the Ming dynasty, by presenting some key passages from Wang Yangming and his school. Finally, I examined Wang Fuzhi's new approach, and his return to the orthodoxy but with some significant innovations. The late great Qing thinkers Yan Yuan and Dai Zhen show a new practical perspective, based on their criticism of Zhuxi's school and its diffidence for senses and desires. From this survey a few constant elements of the debate on the senses are evident. By the way, these few but significant examples show a holistic approach, and above all highlight the 'legitimation' of senses in the *li-qi* 理-氣 discussion or their role in the self-cultivation process. What thinkers were interested in was the vitalistic and hedonic character of senses and the moral supervision of the mind in a holistic concept of the body, whose organs are always considered in connection with the heart-mind. Analyses of the cognitive functions of senses and their role were often framed in the debate on the principle-desires relationship and also in the self-cultivation process, but the emphasis was on the holistic vision of the person rather than the detailed functioning of every sensory organ. The scarce attention to the physiological functions of the senses, if compared with western analytical writings as appears in the Jesuits' writings (Meynard 2020), is probably motivated by their presumed epistemic inferiority to the superiority of the intuition of the mind.

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