

Nose Contemplation: Contemporary Meditative Olfactory Photography and  
Synesthetic Aesthetics of Song Dynasty China

By

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## Abstract

This paper examines China's olfactory culture of the Song Dynasty and explores the intersensory aesthetics between scent and visibility to search for a Contemporary artistic rendition of the traditional practices. The project conducts research on synaesthesia-related theories in Chinese aesthetic tradition, such as Nose Contemplation (biguan, 鼻观), aiming to untangle the mystery of olfactory imagery in Chinese culture and investigating how this aesthetics of synaesthesia can be revived in the setting of contemporary art-making and meditational multisensory photography.

Incorporating research outcomes from textual analysis, poetry and art historical case studies, personal meditation exercises and incense-making practices, this study demonstrates that visual artistic mediums, such as photography, can trigger or be infused with intersensory experience through olfactory meditational skills of utilizing *Qi*. There are two potential ways to aromatize the visual: first, through a pictorial composition and through self-moral cultivation and dismissal of secular desire. The process of scenting one's art with *Qi* constitutes a contemporary meditative artistic practice, which I term Olfactory Photography.

## Acknowledgment

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## Introduction

China's olfactory culture peaked during the Song Dynasty as the importation of foreign aromatics increased and the activity of incense burning secularised. Under the ideological influences of various schools of thought, such as Mahayana Buddhism's "interoperability of the six senses (liugen huyong, 六根互用)," Neo-Confucianism's "Investigating Things towards Knowing (gewu zhizhi, 格物致知)," and *Qi* 气,<sup>1</sup> the literati class showed an inclination towards scent-oriented taste in art. Arising from the flourishing of olfactory convention and heritage, it is a trans-sensorial aesthetic of synesthesia<sup>2</sup> (*Tonggan*, 通感). Song intellectuals manifested it through creating artistic, religious, and philosophical works of poetry, calligraphy, architecture, and, most importantly, literati flower-and-bird paintings (*wenren huaniaohua*, 文人花鸟画). Fragrance (*Xiang*, 香) became an aesthetic notion that denotes more than merely physical nasal

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<sup>1</sup> *Qi* 气, in Chinese philosophy, religion and herbology, refers to the life force/energy that constitutes the world. In this essay, I use *Qi* in the context of Neo-Confucian philosophy, which refers to the ontological material that composes the universe.

<sup>2</sup> The term "Synesthesia" used throughout the article refers to the Chinese concept *Tonggan* 通感 unless otherwise addressed. The terms "Synesthesia" and "Tonggan" will be used interchangeably.

pleasure and interconnects with other sensorial faculty,<sup>3</sup> thus being applicable in apprehending ocular-centric art mediums and crucial in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) Chinese floral paintings.<sup>4</sup>

This research study on Song Dynasty synaesthesia aims to explore the intersensory aesthetics between scent and visibility, introducing related theories such as Nose Contemplation (*biguan*, 鼻观), a way to meditate through smelling. This thesis seeks to untangle the mystery of olfactory imagery in Chinese culture, investigating how this traditional aesthetics of synaesthesia can be revived in the setting of contemporary art-making and constructing a theoretical framework for meditational multisensory photography practice. Through the final installation creation, I attempt to establish the concept of Olfactory Photography as an artistic, creative and contemplative process utilizing traditional olfactory meditation techniques to achieve a synesthetic experience and, if possible, personal enlightenment.

Chapter 1 of the thesis covers the methodology used to conduct this interdisciplinary and multisensory research project. Research methodologies employed for this project include textual analysis, multisensory case studies and practice-based research, covering the theoretical framework of art historical study, Chinese literature study, cultural study, and research-creation involving olfaction, imagery, text and somatosensation.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the aesthetic term “subtle fragrance parse shadows (anxiang shuying, 暗香疏影)” became widely used as an ideal description for praising plum flower Kai Lin 开林 Li 李, “[Lin Bu’s Significance on the Painting History —— Ink Plum Paintings and Poems as the Center in Song and Yuan Dynasties] 林逋的绘画史意义——以宋、元墨梅诗画创作为中心,” [*Journal of Lanzhou University of Arts and Science (Social Sciences)*] 兰州文理学院学报 (社会科学版) 31, no. 5 (September 2015): 98–102..

<sup>4</sup> 早川太基, “詩人の嗅覺: 黄庭堅作品における「香」の表現,” 中國文學報 87 (April 2016): 42, [Link to Article](#).

Chapter 2 takes a literature study approach to first introduce the crucial theory of Nose Contemplation constructed by ancient Chinese writers from the 11 and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in relation to their experience of scent with a case study of famous Song Dynasty poets Huang Tingjian 黄庭坚 and Su Shi 苏轼's literary exchange. The chapter then covers the theoretical origin of Nose Contemplation, introducing the underlying Buddhist theory of the Interoperability of the Six Roots (liugen huyong, 六根互用) and synesthesia (tonggan, 通感).

Chapter 3 discusses the feasibility of creating intersensory art between the visual and the olfactory with a case study of Southern Song Dynasty painter Yang Wujia's 扬无咎 (1097-1169) work *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* 四梅图. This chapter goes into iconographical and stylistic analysis of this Song Dynasty Chinese literati flower-and-bird paintings (wenren huaniaohua, 文人花鸟画), inquire into an olfactory synesthesia triggered by visual stimuli and its fundamental Neo-Confucian theories on *Qi*, composition and moral aesthetics. In the end, I propose two potential ways to aromatize the visual: first, through a pictorial composition of empty space, driven by the Neo-Confucian doctrine on the epistemic investigation "Investigating Things towards Knowing (gewu zhizhi, 格物致知);"<sup>5</sup> second, through moral cultivation and infusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Investigating Things towards Knowing": translation of 格物致知 used by Franklin J. Woo in Woo, Franklin J. Review of Review of On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550—1900, by Benjamin A. Elman. China Review International 14, no. 1 (2007): 87–97.



Chapter 4 furthers the potentiality of Nose Contemplation in creating and experiencing olfactory visual artwork, proposing that the meditational technique can be practiced as a reciprocal aesthetic olfaction and a contemplative journey to spiritual convergence into One (Unity of Heaven and Humanity, 天人合一).<sup>6</sup> Nose Contemplation aids the practitioner in sensing a virtue-to-aroma-to-visual *Qi* transformation by cultivating the particular virtue of Noble and Integrity (gaojie, 高洁) and functioning as epistemic breathing.

Chapter 5 covers the contemporary rendition of the multisensorial research conducted in my olfactory photographic installation. This chapter introduces my interdisciplinary installation, creation process, reasoning, decisions, and intentions for the viewer's interactive and immersive experience.

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Another commonly accepted translation of the concept is “Study Things to Acquire Knowledge.”

<sup>6</sup> Unity of Heaven and Humanity (tianren heyi, 天人合一): The term is a philosophical concept that is found common across religions and schools of thought in China. It represents a way of thinking which holds that heaven, earth and humanity are interconnected.

# Chapter 1 Methodology

## 1.1 Textual Analysis

The textual analysis of this project covers two major categories: texts on the olfactory culture and aesthetics of China and scent-themed classical poems of the Song Dynasty, particularly works by and related to poet Huang Tingjian. Secondary textual research includes the topics of poetry study, Buddhism study, material study of incense and aromatics, synesthesia, painting and aesthetics theories of Song China. Poet Huang Tingjian was dedicated to making and writing about incense. He combined the activity of incense burning with *Chan* meditative practice and artistic creation. Huang's poems on scent can be categorized into two major themes: incense and floral fragrance. Both are crucial to my research on Song Dynasty Chinese olfactory culture and its synecdochical utilization in contemporary artmaking. Chapter 2 goes into a detailed analysis of a set of poems by Huang, introducing the underlying intellectual theories on olfactory aesthetics. While covering the philosophical thoughts of Huang and other Song scholars, this poetry analysis sheds light on the material culture related to incense and aromatics. Combining historical texts on aromatics, such as *Xiang Sheng*<sup>7</sup> 香乘 by Zhou Jiazhou<sup>8</sup> 周嘉胄 (1582-1658), with the poems, the methodology enables me to select specific aromatics and incense recipes for the exhibition.

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<sup>7</sup> *Xiang Sheng* 《香乘》 by Zhou Jiazhou 周嘉胄, is a written collection of Chinese aromatics and incense recipes. The book covers all notable aromatic medicines and various aromatherapy methods available before Ming Dynasty. It is considered one of the most important literature in Chinese incense-making history.

<sup>8</sup> Zhou Jiazhou 周嘉胄(1582- 1658), Ming Dynasty collector.

## 1.2 Case Studies and Influences

This project includes an analysis of three types of artistic mediums: poetry, incense and painting. The purpose of the studies is to explore analogically the synthesis between meditation and artistic expression through synesthesia, creating a multimedia installation with multisensorial contemplative elements gathered through textual analysis practice-based research. Three specific subjects of study are Huang Tingjian's literary exchange with Su Shi in the poem *There Was Someone Who Kindly Gave Me 'Fragrance Within the Curtains' from South of the River: Jocular Response, Two Hexasyllabic Poems* 有惠江南帳中香者戲贈二首 (1086), *Harmonizing with Huang Lu-chih's*<sup>9</sup> *[Poems on] Burning Incense: Two Poems* 和黄魯直烧香二首(1087), traditional incense recipes for *Fragrance Within the Curtains* 帳中香 and Song Dynasty painter Yang Wujiu's *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* 四梅图.

The exhibition is greatly influenced by contemporary photographers Hiroshi Sugimoto and Masao Yamamoto.<sup>10</sup> Sugimoto's recent exhibition *The Descent of the Kasuga Spirit* held at Kasuga-Taisha, an eighth-century Shinto shrine with a duskily lit environment, sets out a contemplative atmosphere. My exhibiting space adopts a similar overall brightness from artificial lighting during nighttime, experimenting with aiding calmness through luminosity and

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<sup>9</sup> Penname of Huang Tingjian.

<sup>10</sup> Link to Artist/Representative gallery Websites:

Hiroshi Sugimoto: [Link to Website](#)

Masao Yamamoto: [Link to Website](#)

synesthesia. During the daytime, the space will be filled with natural lighting, thereby adding temporality to the exhibition. Masao Yamamoto's work of Zen photography influenced my photographic aspect of the installation by identifying potential keynotes in meditative *Chan* photography. Chapter 5 of the thesis discusses the research outcome in detail.

### **1.3 Practice-Based Research**

Practice-based research of this project involves two sub-methods: aromatic and incense study, and personal *Chan* meditation. To enhance my comprehension of Chinese olfactory culture, I engaged in a systematic training process and acquired a registered incense-making certificate (*Vocational Skills Training Certificate: Incense Maker*). To obtain the certificate, I took courses on incense history and typology and olfactory training on aromatic kinds and synthetic incense recipes during my two-month trip back to China from June 2023 to August 2023 at the All-China Federation of Industry & Commerce Talent Exchange and Service Center. My incense production follows the traditional method of *hexiang* (合香, mixed incense), which means bonding distinct types of natural aromatics for three main purposes: key note smell, adhesive and burning time. The recipe of my creation adopted in the exhibition will be explained in detail in Chapter 5.

The second sub-method aims to explore the feasibility of *Chan* practice in travelling, photographing and incense burning. As the schools of thought instruct, one must not rely on mere textual study for enlightenment. Meditation can be done in any scenario and environment with a contemplative mind, restful body, tranquil heart and breathing. I, therefore, endeavor to achieve a calming state through photography trips. I travelled to small local temples in Northern

China, mainly the one in Province Shandong, to capture and meditate on both the visual and olfactory peacefulness encountered during the trip. As for incense burning, I practiced the traditional meditation technique of Nose Contemplation discussed in Chapter 2. The technique is termed *guan biduan bai* (观鼻端白, contemplation of whiteness at the end of one's nose), meaning to watch one's breath turn into visible whiteness (which I will explain soon in the story of Sundarananda) and become a brilliant light after a period of meditation. The practice was first introduced in the story of Sundarananda Shakyas' <sup>11</sup> 孙陀罗难陀 practice, recorded in volume five of *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (c. 705CE). As a disciple of Buddha, and someone who followed the doctrine strictly, Sundarananda struggles to reach *samadhi*, a state of profound contemplation and concentration undisturbed by secular thoughts and emotions. Buddha then teaches Sundarananda to concentrate only on observing the end of his nose, nothing else. After 21 days, Sundarananda starts to see his breath coming in and out as if it is smoke. His body and mind felt like a realm of expanding light, conjoining the whole. The world around him becomes clear, and his breath becomes a white light. Sundarananda then finally reaches *samadhi*. Song intellectuals deemed this practice a skilled method of meditation, and to research the feasibility of this method, I practiced it three times each week over a period of three months.

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<sup>11</sup> Sundarananda Shakyas 孙陀罗难陀, also known as Prince Nanda Shakyas, was the younger half-brother of Buddha.

## Chapter 2 Nose Contemplation and Interoperability of Six Roots

### 2.1 Nose Contemplation: Meditation through Smell and Incense

This chapter explores the theory of "nose contemplation" introduced by ancient Chinese writers from the 11 and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries (Song Dynasty) in relation to their experience of scent. Northern Song Dynasty calligrapher, poet and incense maker Huang Tingjian 黄庭坚<sup>12</sup> (1045 AD -1105 AD) started a literary exchange in the form of a letter with Su Shi 苏轼<sup>13</sup> (1037 AD – 1101 AD), another well-known literary figure of the era. The conversation began when Huang received an ancient Chinese sleep-aiding incense named Fragrance Within Curtains (*zhangzhong xiang*, 帐中香) from a friend, then wrote back to Huang a set of poems, *There Was Someone Who Kindly Gave Me 'Fragrance Within the Curtains' from South of the River: Jocular Response, Two Hexasyllabic Poems* 有惠江南帐中香者戲贈二首 (1086) and sent it to Su Shi. Su later wrote another set of poems entitled *Harmonizing with Huang Lu-chih's* <sup>14</sup> [*Poems on*] *Burning*

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<sup>12</sup> Huang Tingjian (Hanyu Pinyin system)/ T'ing-chien (Wade-Giles system) 黄庭坚 are two different spellings of the name of the same poet. His penname is Huang Luzhi/ Huang Lu-chih 鲁直, in two spelling systems which Su Shi will use in his response.

<sup>13</sup> Su Shi 苏轼, penname Su Dongpo 苏东坡, is a renowned Chinese calligrapher, essayist and poet during the Song Dynasty. Su's poem was famous for embodying philosophical wisdom and sociopolitical criticism by describing natural scenery and ordinary day-to-day life events.

<sup>14</sup> Penname of Huang Tingjian.

*Incense: Two Poems* 和黄鲁直烧香二首(1087) as a reply. The poems and their underlying intellectual discussion on scent and meditation are critical to the development of olfactory and incense culture in China as incense burning became an integral part of leisure, aesthetic and meditative activities in the life of Northern Song Dynasty people. To explore this merge of recreational incense burning, Buddhist meditation practice and the significance of “olfactory enlightenment”<sup>15</sup> through scent in the context of *Chan* <sup>16</sup> 禅 that these poems demonstrate, I will analyze the set of poems with Stuart Sargent's <sup>17</sup> translation of the original Chinese poem where Huang foregrounds meditative effects of incense and Su introduces the notion of **nose contemplation** (*biguan*, 鼻观).

有惠江南帳中香者戲贈二首

*There Was Someone Who Kindly Gave Me 'Fragrance Within the Curtains' from South of the River: Jocular Response, Two Hexasyllabic Poems*

Written by 黄庭坚 Huang Tingjian/ Huang Ting-chien

Translated by Stuart Sargent<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Professor Soyang Park, used the term “olfactory enlightenment” during supervising meeting (Independent Study, OCAD University, Online via Teams, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

<sup>16</sup> *Chan* 禅 (Chinese), *Son* 선 (Korean), *Zen* 禅 (Japanese) and *Chữ Hán* 禪 (Vietnamese) are of the same practice in different names as branches of Buddhism characteristic of which as part of Buddhism which emphasizes personal inquiry and meditation from everyday life to reach enlightenment rather than the study of scriptures.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Sargent, writer with Ph.D. in Chinese Study at Stanford University.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Sargent, writer with Ph.D. in Chinese Study at Stanford University.

其一 One

百鍊香螺沉水，宝薰近出江南。

Refined a hundredfold: fragrant snail and aloeswood, a precious fumigant has recently come out of Chiang-nan.

一稊黄云绕几，深禅想对同参。

A single tendril of yellow cloud winds round the armrest; in deep meditation, I imagine I face a fellow practitioner.

其二 Two

螺甲割昆仑耳，香材屑鹧鸪斑。

From snail's armor, slice off a K'un-l'un ear; for the incense, crumble partridge-spots.

欲雨鸣鸠日永，下帷睡鸭春闲。

About to rain, coo the doves, the day is endless. Lower the blind: sleeping duck, spring is idle.

The first set of poems was written by Huang in the year 1086 as an impression for the 'Fragrance Within Curtains' he received from a friend (not Su Shi). Huang Tingjian was well-known among Song Dynasty literati for his poetic depiction of scents. As the localization of Buddhism and popularization of *Chan* thoughts gradually occurred during Song, Huang's poems seek to integrate the leisure activity of incense burning with contemplative meditation of both body and mind.

*Chan* instructs that all daily life events can be a path to the great wisdom of dispelling all troubles, ignorance and suffering. For *Chan*, meditation is not searching for enlightenment, it is

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Translated in: Stuart Sargent and Huang T'ing-Chien, "Huang T'ing-Chien's 'Incense of Awareness': Poems of Exchange, Poems of Enlightenment," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 1 (2001): 60–71, [Link to Article](#).



itself a demonstration of enlightenment. Different from most other schools of Buddhism, *Chan* does not instruct us to study texts and scripts to eliminate ignorance of our Buddha-nature. It insists that reading and reasoning cannot be the way to end troubles and suffering. Compared to more “ritually-defined” Buddhist schools, *Chan* believes that we can restore our Buddha nature by ending the troubles that prevent us from conducting ourselves as enlightening beings.<sup>19</sup> Sorting out this confusion in olfaction during incense burning could potentially be such a process. Therefore, one can practice incense burning in a household setting to meditate on *Chan* rather than going to a temple.

The line "a precious fumigant has recently come out of Chiang-nan" addresses the origin of the incense. The term "Chiang-nan" commonly denotes *Jiangnan*, a geographic area in Southeast China. However, in Chinese incense study, the term refers to particular recipes of luxury incense created by Li Yu<sup>20</sup> 李煜, the third ruler of the Southern Tang (937 AD - 975 AD). Li was an enthusiastic lover of incense and has synthesized numerous original incense formulas, including multiple versions of 'Fragrance within Curtains' as recorded *Chen's Fragrance Record* (*Chenshi xiangpu* 陈氏香谱),<sup>21</sup> a catalogue of recipes from various sources and makers of the early Song Dynasty. The kind Huang received could be *lizhu zhangzhong meihua xiang* (李主帐

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Herschok, “Chan Buddhism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2023 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), [Link to Article](#).

<sup>20</sup> Li Yu 李煜 (937 AD - 975 AD), the third ruler of the Southern Tang state during imperial China's Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907 AD – 979 AD)

<sup>21</sup> Chen Jing 陈敬, *Chenshi xiangpu* 陈氏香谱[Chen's Fragrance Record], 1127. (CNPeReading 华语出版社, 2016).

中梅花香, King Li's Plum Fragrance Within Curtains), an aroma passed down by Li.<sup>22</sup>

'Fragrance Within Curtains' is a sleep-aiding mixed incense, traditionally heated in a bedroom setting, to diffuse a calming scent for a sedative effect on the user's body and mind. The incense's fragrance tends to arouse the royal luxury atmosphere of a monarch's bedroom, one that excites carnality. However, Huang is absentminded, not interested in the sumptuousness of the secular scent. He senses it and writes, "about to rain, coo the doves, the day is endless," creating a relaxed ambience and idle mood through visualization of the murky sky before a storm. He praises about the gloom while the lulling scent begins to put his mind at ease. The last line, "lower the blind: sleeping duck<sup>23</sup>, spring is idle," describes scenes of closing blinds and smoke rising from an incense censer shaped in the form of a sleeping duck, expressing a feeling of calmness. While Huang's body slackens, he writes, "In deep meditation, I imagine I face a fellow practitioner," hinting at the idea of meditating through scent in *Chan's* context of meditation in such a relaxing atmosphere and invites "fellow practitioner," his good friend Su Shi, to contemplate together and discuss the feasibility of "olfactory enlightenment."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Taiki Hayakawa 早川太基. "詩人の嗅覺：黃庭堅作品における「香」の表現" [The Olfactory Sense of a Poet: Expression of Aroma in the Poetry of Huang Tingjia]. 中國文學報 [Journal of Chinese literature] 87 (April 2016): 22–45. [Link to Article](#).

<sup>23</sup> "Sleeping duck" refers to the shape of an incense burner. The refining zoomorphic design of the censor was a prevalent theme frequently mentioned in poems such as Li Qingzhao's 李清照 (1084 AD – 1155 AD) "Lyrics to the Melody of Sandy Creek Washer" (Huan Xi Sha 浣溪沙), where she writes the line: "the oblique duck-shaped hairpin on the head looks as if it about to fly." The term reoccurs in Huang's other poems, too, such as "Cherishing the Remaining Joy" (Xi Yuhuan 惜余欢), where he uses the phrase "incense breaking in the duck censor."

<sup>24</sup> Professor Soyang Park, used the term "olfactory enlightenment" during supervising meeting (Independent Study, OCAD University, Online via Teams, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

和黄鲁直烧香二首

*Harmonizing with Huang Lu-chih's*<sup>25</sup> [Poems on] *Burning Incense: Two Poems*

Wrote by 苏轼 Su Shi

Translated by Stuart Sargent

其一 One

四句烧香偈子·随风遍满东南。

Four-line gathas on burning incense, go with the incense and spread all over the southeast.

不是闻思所及·且令鼻观先参。

They are not something hearing or thought can reach, just have the nose-contemplation experience them first.

其二 Two

万卷明窗小字·眼花只有斓斑。

Ten thousand volumes, bright window, small characters, "flowers" before the eyes, nothing but a shimmering blur.

一炷烟消火冷·半生身老心闲。

One strand [of incense], smoke dispersed, fire cold: halfway through life, body old, heart idle.

In his response to Huang, Su Shi introduces a vital concept of "nose-contemplation," thereby sheds light on the ways of practicing olfactory meditation. In the third line, he addresses, "they are not something hearing, or thought can reach," the exclusiveness and sensory experience of olfactory perception that writing and verbal language cannot convey comprehensively. Understanding the line from a *Chan* perspective, Su also invokes the *Chan* teaching that one

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<sup>25</sup> Penname of Huang Tingjian.

cannot read or reason a way out of trouble and suffering. However, there is a solution. In the last line of poem one, Su accentuates the concept of *biguan* (鼻观, nose-contemplation), a way to meditate and achieve enlightenment through the sense of smell. The expression was first used by Song Dynasty writers such as Huang, Su, Lu You<sup>26</sup> 陆游 (1125 AD -1210 AD) and Zhu Xi<sup>27</sup> 朱熹 (1130 AD – 1200 AD). Understood by many Song poets, it involves two forms of meditation via olfaction.<sup>28</sup> First is *bigen wenxiang* (鼻根闻香, nose-smelling fragrance) which refers to searching for wisdom through olfactory perception. The second way is *guan biduan bai* (观鼻端白, contemplation of whiteness at the end of one's nose). Among Song literati, "nose-contemplation" often refers to the first way of meditation, "nose-smelling fragrance."<sup>29</sup> As the nose interacts with scented smoke, one judges the sensed odor, thereby resulting in experiencing secularity. When reflecting on the interaction of smelling, one realizes that the scent is one of the "six dust," and carries no reality. The troubling thoughts and desires related to olfaction are, therefore, mere phantoms in one's heart. The incense, its attached ideas and scents, thus have no

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<sup>26</sup> Lu You 陆游 (1125 AD -1210 AD), Chinese historian and poet during the Southern Song Dynasty, known as the poet with the most self-written poems in Chinese history.

<sup>27</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130 AD – 1200 AD), Chinese calligrapher, historian, Neo-Confucian philosopher and writer during the Song Dynasty.

<sup>28</sup> 逸梅 Yimei 曹 Cao, "闻香：黄庭坚诗歌的鼻观世界" [Smelling Fragrance: A Nose-Contemplating World in Huang Tingjian's Poetry]. 《文艺研究》, 2020, 78, [Link to Article](#)

<sup>29</sup> 裕错 Yucuo 周 Zhou, "'六根互用' 与宋代文人的生活、审美及文学表现" [Interoperability of the Six Roots and Life, Aesthetics and Literary Expression of Song Dynasty Literati], 中国社会科学, no. 6 (2011): 146.

reality in and of themselves and can be said to be *Kongji*<sup>30</sup> (空寂, empty and silent). The "nose-contemplation" is constructing "an incorporeal elevation of the body into higher awareness."<sup>31</sup> Huang and Su's interpretation of the *Chan* teaching erects a tradition of unconstrained olfactory meditation. During Song, like Bodhidharma's teaching of being unbonded to strict formal Buddhist doctrines, "nose-contemplation" unfettered Song intellectuals from specified incense ritual traditions.<sup>32</sup> Through their poetic expression, Huang and Su make the sole act of smelling an intrinsically meditative spiritual practice. Floral, woody, or spicy, one can demonstrate "olfactory enlightenment"<sup>33</sup> with any scent.

## 2.2 Interoperability of Six Roots

Song scholar-officials approached the aromatic world contemplatively.<sup>34</sup> The practice renders scents with an extra layer of transcendental significance. The daily activity of incense burning and all scent-related activity now leads to a path to Nirvana. "Nose-contemplation," with its underlying premise of the Interoperability of the Six Roots (*liugen huyong*, 六根互用), popularized during the Song Dynasty, elevates the olfactory experience with an aesthetic of

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<sup>30</sup> *Kongji* 空寂, empty and silent, Buddhist term, meaning something with no Svabhava (self-being), in other words, no essences of being, no beginning nor end.

<sup>31</sup> Professor Soyang Park, used during supervising meeting (Independent Study, OCAD University, Online via Teams, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

<sup>32</sup> Bodhidharma 菩提达摩 (ca. 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century), first *Chan* Patriarch, transmitter of Chan Buddhism to China.

<sup>33</sup> Professor Soyang Park, used the term "olfactory enlightenment" during a supervising meeting (Independent Study, OCAD University, online via Teams, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

<sup>34</sup> Government officials and prestigious scholars of Song Dynasty, a distinct social class of the era.

religious synesthesia (*tonggan*, 通感). The concept profoundly influenced leisure activity, literary production and artworks after the Northern Song Dynasty. This section moves on to explore this aesthetic of "interoperability," its theory of origin, how it serves as a fundamental premise for Nose Contemplation and how it could function in visual artistic mediums.

Buddhists deem the sensory instruments of eyes 眼, ears 耳, nose 鼻, tongue 舌, body 神 and mind 意 as *liugen* (六根, six roots), cognize *liuchen* (六尘, six dust), the phenomenon of sight, sound, scent, taste, touch and thought in the physical world. "Six roots" here must be differentiated from the five commonly recognized physiological perceptual senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste, which represent the abilities of physical organs in a scientific sense. In the context of *Chan*, "six roots" connote spiritual ways of understanding the world that could potentially lead to a path to Nirvana.<sup>35</sup> The five senses denote a biological sensory system, while the "six roots" can operate both physically and spiritually. Buddhists believe that six roots in contact with six dust can cause greedy desires, confusion and even sins. Enlightenment implies that the practitioner has overcome the influence of "six dust," thus acquiring the state of "six roots of sensations are pure and clean (六根清净)."

The concept of "interoperability of the six senses" originated from the Buddhist text *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*<sup>36</sup> (*leng yan jing*, 楞严经), claiming that any "six roots" can function trans-

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<sup>35</sup> 裕错 Yucuo 周 Zhou, "‘六根互用’与宋代文人的生活、审美及文学表现" [Interoperability of the Six Roots and Life, Aesthetics and Literary Expression of Song Dynasty Literati], 中国社会科学, no. 6 (2011), 139.

<sup>36</sup> Arhats 大阿罗汉们 and translated into Chinese by Buddhist Master Paramiti 般刺密谛, *Leng yan jing* 楞严经 [Śūraṅgama Sūtra], 705. The Mahayana Buddhist sutra points at the Mind when stirred by the first thought, creates

sensorially like the other five if one is in such a “pure and clean” state, free of worldly desires.<sup>37</sup> The "roots" can be used interchangeably as long as they remain uninfluenced by secular distractions, thereby achieving "interoperability of the six roots," a form of active synesthesia. An example written in *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* describes Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva<sup>38</sup> 观世音菩萨 starts off practicing via hearing but soon recognizes that all "roots" are interconnected. Avalokiteshvara then utilizes other senses together to attain a state of *yuantong* (圆通, perfect penetration with mindfulness) where the bodhisattva experiences no more obstacles of ignorance and trouble as pure, peaceful nature is restored. Under the "perfect penetration with mindfulness," the "six roots" become intercommunicable. One can then taste aromas, hear color, etc.

Based on the idea of interoperability of the six roots (*liugen huyong*, 六根互用), Song writers, including Huang, later proposed that any of the six senses can be a medium of meditation for enlightenment, and that is, transmuting the mind into the *da yuan jing zhi* (大圆镜智, Great Mirror Wisdom). The Great Mirror Wisdom is one of the four wisdoms of Mahayana Buddhism. One who acquired such wisdom can perfectly distinguish the good and evil of all

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the fundamental illusion of an ego and splits the Whole into subject and object. It is influential to the school of *Chan* 禅 in China.

<sup>37</sup> 曹 Cao, 逸梅 Yimei. "闻香：黄庭坚诗歌的鼻观世界" [Smelling Fragrance: A Nose-Contemplating World in Huang Tingjian's Poetry], 71. 《文艺研究》, 2020. [Link to Article](#)

<sup>38</sup> In Buddhism, Avalokitasvara 观世音 is the bodhisattva (an individual becoming a buddha) of compassion among all Buddhas

living beings and their causes as if an all-seeing mirror of Buddha. As a result, those who are highly skilled at meditating and achieving such a state could theoretically practice synesthesia. This trans-sensorial synesthesia of *tonggan*, therefore, functioned as a contemplative *Chan* meditation process, necessitating the moral virtuosity and character (de, 德) of its practitioners and became aesthetically crucial to the Song Dynasty artists.

"Nose-contemplation" is an example of Huang postulating synesthesia during the artistic creation of poetry, inspiring later trans-sensorial theory of "*biguan lunshi* (鼻观论诗, nose-contemplating poetry) that proposes criticizing poems via olfaction."<sup>39</sup> Based on the same theory of Interoperability of the Six Roots and throughout the history of Chinese literary and art criticism, scholars attempted to use the expression "soundless poem (wusheng shi, 无声诗)" to describe paintings and "shapeless painting (wuxing hua, 无形画)" to characterize poetry, demonstrating the practicability of conjoining the visuality with an auditory experience through synesthesia.<sup>40</sup> However, different from synesthesia in a biological sense, the *tonggan* indicates a dual-phase aesthetic judgmental process that occurs during artwork appreciation. The first phase of *tonggan* involves sensory perception through primary receptors. At the same time, the secondary sensorial faculty is triggered during aesthetic activity when one's heart is focused and in a state of mindfulness. Thus, one can evaluate the work of art based on the experience of the

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<sup>39</sup> 裕错 Yucuo 周 Zhou, "'六根互用'与宋代文人的生活、审美及文学表现" [Interoperability of the Six Roots and Life, Aesthetics, and Literary Expression of Song Dynasty Literati]. 中国社会科学, no. 6 (2011): 148

<sup>40</sup> Yi 毅 Zhang 张, "[The Phenomenal Viewing of 'Soundless Poems' and 'Shapeless Paintings'] '无声诗'与'无形画'的现象直观," *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 北京大学学报(哲学社会科学版) 49, no. 3 (May 2012): 27.



secondary sense. The process involves one's biological function, aesthetic judgment, and heart and cannot be reduced to merely an intuitive response.

## Chapter 3 Aromatizing the Visual: Case Study on *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms*

Applying the theory of Interoperability of the Six Roots, this section will now attempt to introduce another synesthetic aesthetic and creative process analogical to “nose-contemplating poetry” and “soundless poem,” which involves a trans-sensorial experience between the visual and the olfactory. In other words, an olfactory (secondary sense) synesthesia triggered by visual stimuli (primary sense). For a clear illustration of the synesthesia process and to argue for the feasibility of the intersensory aesthetic between olfaction and visibility, I will conduct a case study of iconographical and stylistic analysis of Song Dynasty Chinese literati flower-and-bird paintings (*wenren huaniaohua*, 文人花鸟画).<sup>41</sup> The painting I will examine is one of the ink-plum (*momei*, 墨梅) paintings<sup>42</sup> by Southern Song Dynasty painter Yang Wujiu 扬无咎 (1097-1169) and his notable work *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* 四梅图 (Figure 1). The work depicts four stages of the life of the plum and is often considered one of the most iconic pieces of its genre.

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<sup>41</sup> Chinese literati flower-and-bird paintings (*wenren huaniaohua*, 文人花鸟画) is a genre of Chinese painting started during the Northern Song Dynasty. The genre aims to convey the painter’s ideologies through depicting birds, plants and trees.

<sup>42</sup> Ink-plum painting (*momei hua*, 墨梅画) is a genre of Chinese ink wash painting that illustrates plum blossom using black ink, not other vibrant colors like court paintings

After analyzing Yang’s work, I propose two potential ways to aromatize the visual using *Qi* — an important concept in Neo-Confucian philosophy which I will explain later as my theoretical research outcome: first, through a pictorial composition of empty space, driven by the Neo-Confucian doctrine on the epistemic investigation termed “Investigating Things towards Knowing (gewu zhizhi, 格物致知);”<sup>43</sup> second, through self-moral cultivation and dismissal of secular desires.

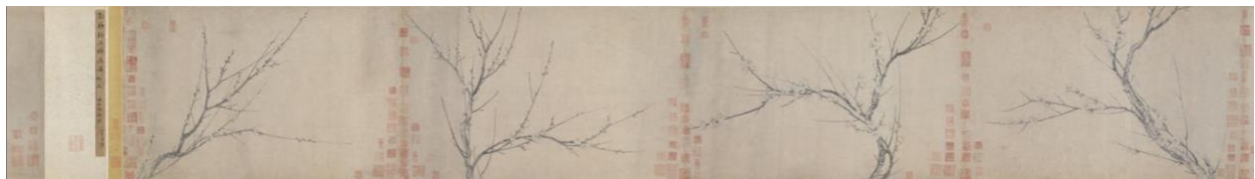


Figure 1 Four Branches of Plum Blossoms 四梅图 (part),

Song Dynasty, Yang Wujiu,

Ink on Paper,

The Palace Museum in Beijing, China

### 3.1 Aesthetics of Synesthesia and Visual Fragrance

The scent of plum plays a significant role in the history of Chinese olfactory aesthetics as Song scholars share a long tradition of using the phrase “subtle fragrance (anxiang, 暗香)” to capture the tenuous aroma of the blossom.<sup>44</sup> This olfactory impression was first presented in the work of

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<sup>43</sup> Franklin J. Woo, review of *Review of On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550—1900*, by Benjamin A. Elman, *China Review International* 14, no. 1 (2007): 87–97.

<sup>44</sup> Litian 礼天 Tao 陶, “[Theory of Nose View: Aesthetic Appreciation of Smell] 鼻观说: 嗅觉审美鉴赏论,” *文艺研究*, March 2, 1991, 40.

the famous Song poet Lin Bu's 林逋<sup>45</sup> (967-1082) renowned line describing plum: "sparse shadows are reflected over clear and shallow water, subtle fragrance flows under the dusky moon."<sup>46</sup> Artists of the *ink plum* school, including painter Yang, who popularized the genre, whether intentionally or not, attempted to resemble this ideal visualization of plum scent in their works.<sup>47</sup> In *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms*, Yang captures the olfactory "subtle fragrance" through three distinct yet indispensable ways: metaphysically, pictorially and morally. I will now break it down and explain how this trans-sensorial experience of fragrance via imagery is achievable.

### 3.2 Neo-Confucian *Qi*

Synesthesia of *Tonggan* might have a Buddhist root but also entails an understanding and control of *Qi*. The metaphysical unveiling of "subtle fragrance" achieved by Yang in *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* posits a Neo-Confucian perspective cultivated by philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹. The theoretical framework proposes that all physical things, including people, are made of *Qi* 气; *Qi* is born from *Li* 理, the metaphysical source of all ontological existence. Zhu argues that *Qi*, as

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<sup>45</sup> Lin Bu 林逋 (967-1082), Northern Song Dynasty Chinese poet. Lin lived as a hermit later in life and turned down prestigious governmental position offers. His works on solitude won him nationwide fame.

<sup>46</sup> Li 李, "[Lin Bu's Significance on the Painting History —— Ink Plum Paintings and Poems as the Center in Song and Yuan Dynasties] 林逋的绘画史意义——以宋、元墨梅诗画创作为中心," 98.

<sup>47</sup> Li 李, 98.

the arche of all tangibles, can only be directly perceived via nasal activities, such as breathing.<sup>48</sup> Zhu often uses *Qi* as a means of artistic and aesthetic criticism to evaluate calligraphy and paintings, proposing that brush strokes are traces of *Qi*'s operation left throughout the process of creation and a reflection of the artist's moral character.<sup>49</sup> The "subtle fragrance" is, thus, a compliment for the particular kind of *Qi* of Yang left during the painting, which can only be interpreted and appreciated via olfaction. The viewer achieves intersensory synesthesia between visual perception and smell as they attempt to sense the *Qi* of Yang embedded in the painting. *Qi* takes on variable forms, here it transforms from morality to imagery, then is inhaled by the viewer in the form of scent.

### 3.3 Pictorial Scent

One can avail the visualization of fragrance through certain pictorial techniques. The strong association between the floral aroma and plum interconnects the viewer's sensory perceptions, opening a potential path of synesthesia. First, Yang uses heavy and thick brush strokes to draw out the branches (Figure 2). He then paints black ink dots to illustrate the brittle buds while keeping the flowers uncolored by delineating their shapes with thin lines (Figure 3). The technique renders the blooms with purity and moistness while keeping the buds dry. Each part consists of only the sparse branches, restricting the amount of information one can perceive visually to a minimum. However, the number and the blooming phases of the opened buds differ

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<sup>48</sup> Li Xia 丽霞 Jiang 姜, "[A Study on the Aesthetic Thought of 'Nose View' in Song Dynasty] 宋代'鼻观'美学思想研究," *A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Master at Hubei University*, May 2021, 38.

<sup>49</sup> Ying Ying 英映 Wang 王, "[Chu Hsi's Rationalistic Aesthetics and the Painting Style] 朱熹理学审美与闽画之风," *JOURNAL OF XINJIANG ARTS INSTITUTE 新疆艺术学院学报* 9, no. 2 (2011): 77.

noticeably, contrasting the moistureless buds with profuse blossoms in other parts to capture the plant's everchanging liveness. The simplicity of the composition encourages the viewer to seek more as the depicted wetness of the transient flower indicates a freshness which brings fragrance into the picture.

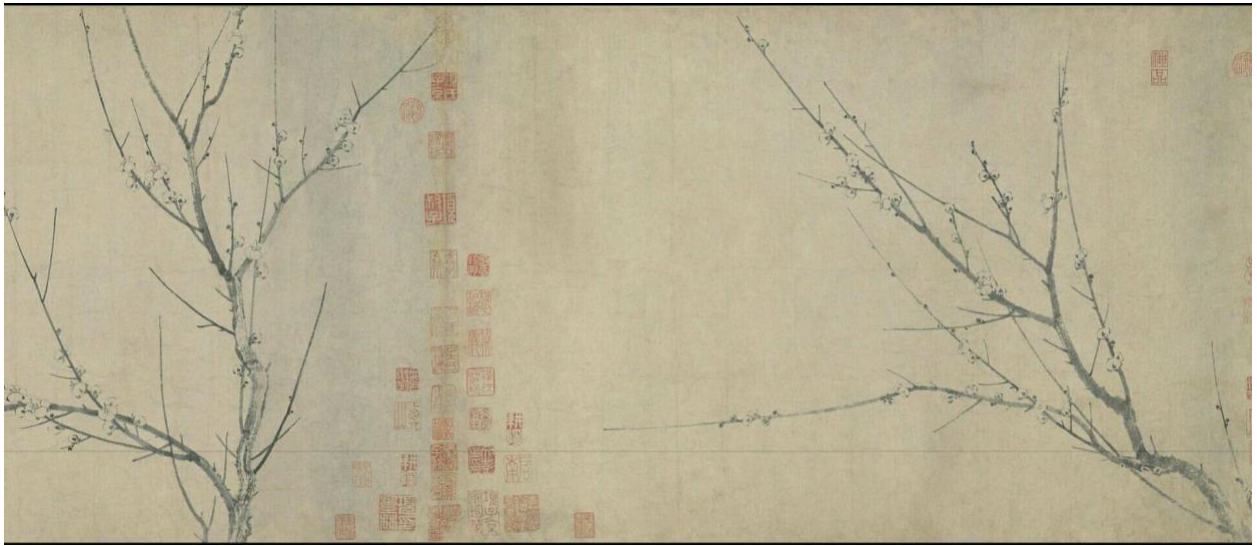


Figure 2 Four Branches of Plum Blossoms 四梅图 (zoomed)

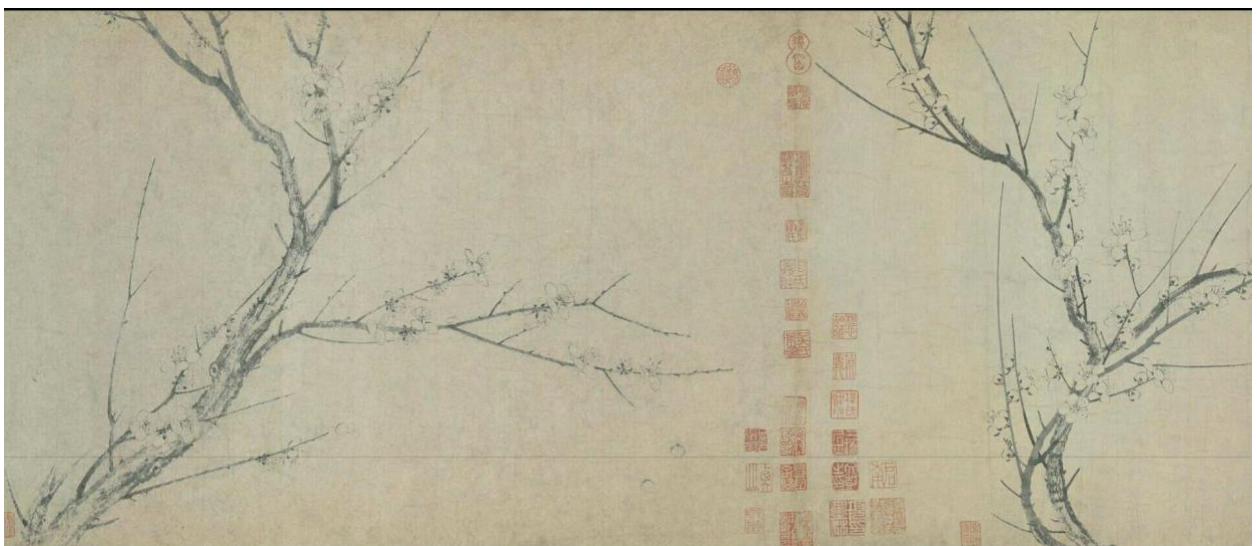


Figure 3 Four Branches of Plum Blossoms 四梅图 (zoomed)

Second, the aromatization of the visual requires a pictorial composition of empty space. Yang Wujiu in *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* showcases maturity in such compositional choice by limiting the subject of depiction to only the plums, leaving the rest of the painting blank. The choice is a manifestation of Confucian philosophy's epistemic doctrine "Investigating Things towards Knowing (gewu zhizhi, 格物致知)," emphasizing a necessary dedication to investigating and learning the world. Building on the doctrine, philosopher Zhu Xi proposes that one has to investigate the specific subject of study and its function in the realm of *Li* and *Qi* in order to acquire its virtue.<sup>50</sup> The numerous virtues of plum, in this case, can be obtained and practiced if a person scrutinizes and inquires into plum with great effort. The *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* exhibits such a process of inquiry through Yang's circumstantial illustration of only the bloom and nothing else. The simplistic composition demonstrates a single-minded pursuit of mastery over the plum's tangibility in the fluctuating form of *Qi* and the metaphysical form constituted by *Li*. Yang's painting is, therefore, a process of concentrated learning and an invitation to the viewer to investigate the flower thoroughly with no distractions.

The empty space (liubai, 留白) of the painting, it is not a mere void but instead a part of *Qi*, an expansion of the plum's subtle yet expanding life force. Yang's use of empty space in *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* intensifies the blossom's *Qi*, strengthening the petite plum buds to diffuse a concealed fragrance that can only be perceived with olfaction. Not seeing is, in

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<sup>50</sup> Xinyue 馨悦 Wang 王, "[Humanism Painting under the Neo-Confucianism of Song and Ming Dynasties] 宋明理学下的人文绘画思想," 古代美术, 2015, 38, [Link to Article](#)

a way, smelling. One might argue that this intersensory correspondence is merely an indicative sensorial stimulus. In fact, the pictorial technique cannot alone achieve the synesthesia of *Tonggan*. Hence, this is the reason why it can only “avail” and open a “potential path” to synesthesia, which requires further mediational techniques to complete, such as Nose Contemplation. As a result, this simplistic yet meticulous composition of empty space discloses its necessity in aiding one in performing meditation.

### 3.4 Moral Fragrance

Yang’s third way of initiating the viewer’s trans-sensorial experience is through portraying virtuosity, showcasing how the peculiar *Qi* in *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* is fragrant. The symbolic representation of virtuosity as objects in Chinese paintings is a long-standing technique that flourished during the Song Dynasty known as *bide* (比德, virtue comparison). The term denotes the act of likening characteristics of natural objects to human virtues. *Bide* in visual culture usually involves depicting and appreciating nature that symbolizes certain desirable human moral characteristics. The tradition judges the virtuosity of both the illustrated subject and the artist for aesthetic value visually and olfactorily. Plum trees, often blooming under frigid weather and in solitude, becomes one of the most popular and praised metaphors for tenacity, rebellion, courage, etc., in Song Dynasty literati paintings.<sup>51</sup> Yang took a step further in playing with the iconography of the plum through an implication of the Four Virtues (*side*, 四德). Neo-

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<sup>51</sup> Xin 新 Wang 王, “[Influence of Neo-Confucianism on Literati Painting of Southern Song Dynasty] 理学对南宋文人画的影响,” *Art Science and Technology*, n.d., 165.



Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi proposes that the four stages of the blooming plum represent the four stages of *Qi* and *Li*, *Yuan* 元, *Heng* 亨, *Li* 利 and *Zhen* 贞, corresponding to the Four Virtues of human beings: benevolence (ren, 仁), righteousness (yi, 义), manners (li, 礼) and wisdom (zhi, 智).<sup>52</sup> Yang portrayed the four stages of plum to connote the Four Virtues, as well as tenacity, rebellion, courage, and many others. The painting becomes the ideal imagery of concentrated sanctimony that the literati class pursues.

The fragrance of imagery resides in its creator. In Song literati aesthetics, the artist's moral characteristics are reflected in the works through the harmonization of one's *Qi* (such as devotional brushstrokes, contemplative mindset and physical tranquility). The *Qi* of good morals is aromatic, thereby giving off a fragrant scent that can be perceived via the sensorial faculty of the nose. That is to say, the artist must possess certain virtuous characteristics evincible in the artwork to perfume the creation, and a fragrant work should disclose its creator's personal moral cultivation. A more pleasing scent is diffused if one's virtue aligns perfectly with the properties of the depicted subject, making the artwork an upright one of no dissemblance. Going back to Yang's *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* as an example, this particularly eulogized painting, among all remarkable artworks from the Song Dynasty, was considered aromatized by both ancient and contemporary scholars, partially due to the nobleness exhibited throughout Yang's career. Though there are exiguous existing records documenting Yang's personal life, it is known that Yang was notable for his righteousness and integrity, especially during the Shaoxing

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<sup>52</sup> Xianru 贤如 Xu 徐, "[The Aesthetics and Nature in the View of Bi-de Concept Centered on the Image of Plum Blossom] 比德观念中的审美与自然 ——以梅花意象为例," 贵州大学学报 34, no. 117 (March 2020): 93, [Link to Article](#).

period (1131-1162),<sup>53</sup> a time of treachery. Yang turned down official positions offered by the court multiple times to pursue his artistic, intellectual, and meditative venture of painting plums. The blossom is recognized to be an embodiment of nobility and an honorable reputation, perfectly suitable to be an avatar for his virtuous character. The morally ambrosial *Qi* inscribed by Yang in the brushstroke merges with the plum's *Qi* of decency, producing the aroma of "subtle fragrance."

*Four Branches of Plum Blossoms*, a nourishing combination of virtuosities, is, therefore, "fragrant." Those who perceive the *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms* should be able to meditate on the "subtle fragrance" and confront a synesthetic aesthetic experience between vision and olfaction. With that in mind, I propose that self-moral cultivation is quintessential to scenting one's artwork. A stronger synchronization between desirable morals and embodied virtues of the depicted subject induces a more luscious fragrance. The variety of scents also depends on the type of virtue, which is distinguished by the *Qi* of its possessor. A courageous person might leave a different fragrance in his work than a humble person. To exhibit a desirable fragrance in one's art requires the cultivation of one's own morals, aiming at becoming a better person through self-disciplining and propagating virtues. Moral cultivation is, therefore, crucial to *Tonggan*.

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<sup>53</sup> Shaoxing is the second and last reign title of Southern Song Emperor Gaozong. A period of 32 years (1131-1162) known for the miscarriage of justice and treacherous officials being active in court.

## Chapter 4 Nose Contemplation as Reciprocal Aesthetic Olfaction

This chapter explores the significance of practicing the technique of Nose Contemplation to access *Qi*. As the previous chapter concludes, there are two potential ways to aromatize the visual: first, through pictorial composition and second, through self-moral cultivation, both involving *Qi*. However, the synesthetic fragrance of imagery requires reciprocal initiation from both the creator and the viewer, making the aromatization a constant interaction between the two through *Qi*, thereby becoming a meditative realization of oneness. Scenting and smelling artwork are two distinct operations done by the artist and the viewer. One makes the work fragrant while the other one experiences the fragrance. Aesthetic olfaction in imagery can occur if the two operations are sufficiently practiced on both sides. The technique of utilizing one's "roots" to smell the visual could take toilsome

practice to achieve. Nose Contemplation, the traditional way of meditation via olfaction involving active synesthesia, is crucial to both the artist's and the viewer's olfactory aesthetic judgement. The technique assists artists in transferring *Qi* onto the work and aids the viewer in sensing the aroma and moral cultivation, and at the same time, allows the viewer to access the "fragrance" and, most importantly, participate in the oneness.

## 4.1 Noble and Integrity

The previous subsection affirms the indispensableness of moral cultivation to the successful diffusion of trans-sensorial fragrance in paintings. I now explain how Nose Contemplation is pivotal in accomplishing this virtue-to-aroma-to-visual transformation through cultivating the particular virtue of Noble and Integrity (*gaojie*, 高洁). The technique is, after all, a meditative one, meaning that one could potentially become free of secular temptation through practicing, ensuring one arrives at a virtuous state. Poets Huang Tingjian and Su Shi contemplated scents using Nose Contemplation, arriving at the conclusion that the technique helps eliminate one's worldly desires.<sup>54</sup> Though the technique was originally a Buddhist one, its popularization occurred during the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian period when doctrines and knowledge of the three religions (Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism) synchronized. The virtue of being Noble and Integrity, being free of secular desires, is a unanimous one shared among all four religions. Whether one can arrive at enlightenment or not, Nose Contemplation conciliates unsanctified and vicious temptations. Being Noble and Integrity infers a possession of purity in the heart and resistance to wickedness which Nose Contemplation can cultivate.

## 4.2 Epistemic Breathing

*Qi* is the physicality of all tangible and, at the same time, moral spirit.<sup>55</sup> Nose Contemplation is a breathing technique, a skilled way of operating *Qi*. Olfactory appreciation for fragrances and

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<sup>54</sup> 曹 Cao, “[Smell the Fragrance: The Nose-Viewed World of Huang Tingjian’s Poetry] 闻香：黄庭坚诗歌的鼻观世界,” 76.

<sup>55</sup> Wang 王, “[Chu Hsi’s Rationalistic Aesthetics and the Painting Style] 朱熹理学审美与闽画之风,” 77.

morality requires the mechanic of inhaling and exhaling, demanding one to sense the *Qi*. Both *guan biduan bai* (观鼻端白, contemplation of whiteness at the end of one's nose) and *bigen wenxiang* (鼻根闻香, nose-smelling fragrance) involve such a mechanism. While “contemplation of whiteness at the end of one's nose” is an enlightenment-oriented meditation method, “nose-smelling fragrance” is rather a breathing-initiated recognition of both the substantial and incorporeal surrounding world. In other words, “nose-smelling fragrance” is to “understand” via smelling the existential principle behind a subject. It is what I call an epistemic breathing. Following the Neo-Confucian doctrine of “Investigating Things towards Knowing (*gewu zhizhi*, 格物致知),” Song artists such as poet Huang Tingjian as discussed in Chapter 2, philosopher Zhu Xi and painter Yang Wujiu in Chapter 3, established and further reinforced this aesthetic convention of embodying *Qi* in artworks. Breathing, as in Nose Contemplation, allows the creator to access the realm of *Qi* for both artistic investigation and production. As a result, one can create a better work.

The same goes for the viewer, one can “Nose Contemplate” the morality and metaphysical principles (*Qi*) of the subject depicted, the artwork matter and its creator through scent, accessing intersensory ontological knowledge (*Li*) and thereby performing aesthetic judgement based on olfaction. Thus, Nose Contemplation is an aesthetic olfaction capable of both scent infusion and perception in artworks. It is an operative technique to create and discern trans-sensorial or synesthetic (*Tonggan*) olfactory experiences depending on proficiency in this meditation method and closeness to spiritual enlightenment (*six roots of sensations are pure and clean*).

### 4.3 Oneness

Moreover, Nose Contemplation is an ongoing interaction and communication of *Qi* among all. Inferring from previous arguments, smelling the visual is a movement of *Qi*, first residing in the creator, then transmitted into the work, and picked up by the viewer. This circulation of *Qi* also posits the transformation of its sensorial form and the corresponding accessible “root.” From morality and tangibility to visual imagery, then to scent, or the other way around, trans-sensorial aesthetic olfaction underlies this fluctuation of *Qi* among all associated entities. Synesthesia (*Tonggan*) is a consolidation of sensory perceptions, all merging into one. Synesthetic olfaction of *Tonggan* involves experiencing a sense of connectedness and plays a part in the vast world, a unified oneness constructed out of the shapeshifting *Qi*. As a result, aromatizing the visual becomes one’s meditative journey of realizing Oneness.

## Chapter 5 Olfactory Photography

This section covers the experimental and visual outcomes of the multisensorial research I conducted. I will introduce my multimedia installation with references to the previous theoretical discussions, followed by the rationale about on the creation process and decisions, and my intentions for the viewer's interactive and immersive experience. In this Chapter, I will break down my production of the installation, which involves five creative processes: incense-making, photography, travels, aroma infusing and exhibition-making. For the exhibition, I created six scent-infused silk-printed photographic works of my meditative journey throughout the past several years, displayed in a hexagonal arrangement with an incense ritual following the Song Dynasty conventions performed in the middle, aromatizing the exhibition space. The goal of the installation is to create a space of interconnecting senses, joining the faculty of olfaction, vision and mind to meditate on the Oneness of *Qi*. In this exhibition, the scent is visualized, imagery is aromatized, and one's body and mind can mingle freely in this space of "subtle fragrance," synesthesia (*Tonggan*) and intersensory harmony. Olfaction in imagery is spiritual meditation, and this meditative process is thereby what I term Olfactory Photography.

### 5.1 Incense

First, the incense-making part of my work adopts the ancient recipe *lizhu zhangzhong meihua xiang* (李主帐中梅花香, King Li's Plum Fragrance Within Curtains), first discussed in

Chapter 2, for two reasons. First, it is the same recipe that poet Huang Tingjian contemplated, a secular scent (as opposed to ritual incense such as sandalwood) affirmed to be suitable for meditative purposes through Nose Contemplation.<sup>56</sup> The incense is not lusciously disruptive but has a subtle woody note with no excitant, perfect for a calming and contemplative atmosphere. I aim to recreate the same aroma with a version of a recipe acquired during my research on the book *Xiang Sheng*<sup>57</sup> 《香乘》 by Zhou Jiazhou<sup>58</sup> 周嘉胄. In volume 18 of *Xiang Sheng*, King Li's Plum Fragrance Within Curtains contains cloves, agarwood, Narra, Spikenard, basil, borneol, musk, juniper charcoal powder and operculum, all ground into a powder.<sup>59</sup> Second reason for choosing this scent is the harmonization of trans-sensorial themes. The incense is titled “Plum Fragrance.” Though it does not have actual plum as an ingredient, past incense makers believed that the burning fragrance resembles plum blossom, and as mentioned in previous sections, the most notable impression of the flower is “subtle fragrance.” Therefore, previously identified pictorial, moral and meditative techniques in Chapter 3 are practicable in the process of creation for this installation.

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<sup>56</sup> Cheng Lin Sheng, “SANDALWOOD AND BUDDHISM: A PERSPECTIVE OF MATERIAL CULTURE,” *Quarterly Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 70, no. 3 (September 30, 2022): 11, [Link to Article](#).

<sup>57</sup> *Xiang Sheng* 《香乘》 by Zhou Jiazhou 周嘉胄, is a written collection of Chinese aromatics and incense recipes. The book covers all notable aromatic medicines and various aromatherapy methods available before Ming Dynasty. It is considered one of the most important literature in Chinese incense-making history.

<sup>58</sup> Zhou Jiazhou 周嘉胄(1582- 1658), Ming Dynasty collector.

<sup>59</sup> Jiazhou Zhou and 周嘉胄 b, *Ming kan Zhou Jiazhou xiang sheng: fu xiang zhuan tu pu* 明刊周嘉胄香乘：附香篆圖譜 / 周嘉胄 撰；王鴻定 編. (Hangzhou: Xi leng yin she chu ban she, 2011).

The recipe in original text: “李王帳中梅花香補 丁香一兩新好者沉香一兩 紫檀香半兩 甘松半兩 零陵香半兩 龍腦四錢 麝香四錢 杉松炭末一兩制甲香三分 右為細末煉蜜放冷和丸窰半月熬之”



This incense is used for scent infusion in silks and diffusion in exhibition space. To perfume the room, this incense powder is heated using the traditional incense-burning method of *gehuo xunxiang* (隔火熏香, smoldering incensation). The method places incense powder on a tiny piece of metal named *Silver Leaf* 银叶 and is heated indirectly by charcoal with incense ashes in between. It was the conventional way of incensation for non-ritual purposes during the Song Dynasty. The reason for adopting this method is that, first, smoldering incensation maximizes the scent of the ingredients, avoiding olfactory contamination from the smoke of combustion and thereby protecting smoke-sensitive audiences from inhaling fumes. The fragrance it produces is warm, temperate and, most importantly, subtle.

## **5.2 Photography, Travel and Printing**

The photographic works of this installation are six images taken during my meditative journey in both Canada and China (Figure 4-9). Taking inspiration from the works of Hiroshi Sugimoto and Masao Yamamoto, I inquire about the feasibility of photography as a personal meditation in the *Chan* context, that is, to practice taking photos to achieve a state of mindfulness and thereby access *Tonggan*. After visiting temples, shrines, mountains, and lakesides, I sought environments that manifested “subtle fragrances,” and the six images are my meditative photograph of the six scenes chosen.



*Figure 4 Trinity Park, 2023*



*Figure 5 High Park 1, 2023*



*Figure 6 Centre Island, 2022*

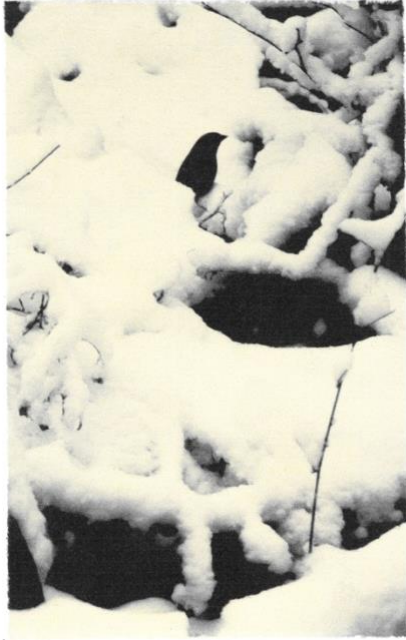


Figure 7 Bradford, 2021

I've taken multiple meditation trips throughout the years. They are one-day solitary hiking trips dedicated to experiencing the view, scent, sound and the *Qi* of the surrounding environment with concentration. The photos are titled with the location where they were taken. They are images trying to capture the movement of *Qi*. Starting from *Centre Island* (2022) (Figure 6), the work attempts to frame the force of water --- a popular subject of depiction among Song artists such as Ma Yuan 马远 (c.1160-1225) in his work *Water Album* (c.1212) (Figure 10). Ma Yuan's work portrays the rhythmic beauty of water through its changing patterns and thereby infers the constant transformation of Heaven and Earth 天地.<sup>60</sup> To observe, investigate and

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<sup>60</sup> 丁文星 Ding Wenxing, “宋元山水画中的水隐喻——以南宋马远的《水图》绘画为例,” 艺术评鉴, no. 24 (2020): 40.

understand water, as instructed by the doctrine of “Investigating Things towards Knowing (gewu zhizhi, 格物致知),” then eventually delve into the principle of the Universe, is the purpose of this trip to Toronto Island in 2022. *Centre Island* is the outcome of this ongoing investigation into the ever-changing water, its *Qi* and its scent.



*Figure 8 High Park 2, 2023*

*Tommy Thompson Park* (2023) (Figure 9) is also a *Qi*-oriented investigation into water, but in a form distinct from *Centre Island*. Taking inspiration from Photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto’s seascape, which captures water in its sublime and timeless yet transforming state, I attempt to observe its natural harmony and order, the interplay of movement and stillness, which is one of the core aesthetic concepts in Chinese painting.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> 丁文星 Ding Wenxing, 40.



Figure 9 Tommy Thompson Park, 2023



Figure 10 Water Album (part), Ma Yuan, c.1212, Ink on Silk, The Palace Museum in Beijing

In a similar manner, *High Park 2* (2023) (Figure 8) and *Bradford* (2021) (Figure 7) aim to study birds. *High Park 2* seeks to capture the delicacy of the bird while *Bradford* searches for

the bird's cohesiveness within the environment. Song painter Huang Quan's 黄筌 (c.903-965) work *Birds, Insects, and Turtles Sketched from Life* (907-960) (Figure 11) is influential in the creation of *High Park 2* because of his delicate and meticulous depiction of the birds' nuances. The attention to detail of the creature is necessary when investigating the birds; as a result, I compose the photograph to highlight the avian.



Figure 11 *Birds, Insects, and Turtles Sketched from Life*, Huang Quan, 907-960, Ink and Color on Silk, The Palace Museum in Beijing

*Bradford* examines how the avians blend into nature. It aims to capture the harmonious coexistence and cohesiveness between the birds and the landscape and how beings as delicate as avians perfectly merge with the landscape into one. This idea was also manifested in the Song painting *Mountain Magpie, Sparrows and Bramble* (c. 10<sup>th</sup> century) (Figure 12) by painter

Huang Jucai 黃居采 (933 - c.993). The painting allowed me to acknowledge this aspect of birds in relation to oneness.



Figure 12 Mountain Magpie, Sparrows and Bramble, Huang Zhucui, 10th century, Ink and Color on Silk, National Palace Museum in Taipei

*High Park I* (2023) (Figure 5) and *Trinity Park* (2023) (Figure 4) both seek to experience flowers and trees. *High Park I* was taken during a trip in January 2023, shortly after a snowstorm in Toronto. *Trinity Park* was taken during the 2023 cherry blossom season. The two capture two perspectives when seeing nature. One sees the universality of forests and snow, while the other sees individual blooms' growth. They are two common ways of seeing nature, but when interpreted via *Qi*, they appear to be merging.

The artwork is an embodiment of one's *Qi*, according to philosopher Zhu Xi. Those six photos are taken with a state of tranquility in mind, infused with my *Qi*. Influences on

composition techniques include the utilization of empty space to achieve a sense of simplicity and focus, concluded from the case study of Yang Wujiu's *Four Branches of Plum Blossoms*. Other inspirations for the formal presentation of the imagery relate to the contemporary convention in Zen photography, including monochromatic images and synecdoche (suggestiveness towards a broader concept or idea).<sup>62</sup> In a recent study on Zen photography conducted by scholar Peter Zhang, he proposes that Zen-inspired art is "cool," asserting it is the user's sensory engagement and response to the work.<sup>63</sup> Zhang's visual thermoception argument is a close analogy to mine on imaging scent, both emphasizing a trans-sensorial experience via meditation. The coolness of Zen photography is manifested through the viewer's involvement as they reach a state of ego-less (无我, wu wo) when seeing the art, while a "hot" photo is a self-contained thing of consummated beauty.<sup>64</sup> However, I argue that instead of "cool" or "hot," scent-infiltrated photography in *Chan* context should be "warm." The scent of the photo comes from the *Qi* of the subject, the artist, and the viewer. Unlike calligraphy, where one creates with only the *Qi* of the creator, scented photography manifests the involvement and communication of all three parties. Experiencing the photo is a constant entanglement of *Qi*. Scented photography requires participation from the viewer while operating with agencies from other parties. It is a product of "in-between" and thus "warm."

To practice meditation with the hope of achieving enlightenment through experiencing scented photos is to untangle the *Qi* by realizing how they operate. To aid the process, I decided

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Zhang, "A Note on Photography in a Zen Key," *China Media Research* 9, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 20–28.

<sup>63</sup> Zhang, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Zhang, 20.



to adopt the chroma of Photographer Masao Yamamoto's silver gelatin prints. It is a tone between pure monochrome and color, implying a visual analogy to the flowing *Qi* in an empty space, an invisible scent infiltrating the surroundings, and hazy smoke obscuring the burning incense. All fabric used for printing adopts this tone.

Six photos are printed on handmade silk for two reasons. First, printing imagery on silk (juan, 絹) is an attempt to carry on the material convention of the Chinese painting. However, my installation uses handmade raw fabric silk that is distinct from conventional painting silk (coated with gelatin alum water) for its better absorbance to scent and uneven texture. After experimentation, raw silk appears to persevere incense aroma longer compared to coated silk. In the process of infusing fragrance through smoldering, prints are folded, and the fabric silk can be easily stretched to avoid wrinkles for a smoother presentation. The uneven surface resulting from the handmade process adds extra texture to the photographic work, introducing the sensory perception of touch. Though not emphasized in the installation, touch plays a supporting role in the multisensory installation. Masao Yamamoto's photographic works are small prints intentionally distressed, inviting the viewer to touch and see. I adopt this intersensory approach to photography exhibitions and invite the audiences if they want to play around with senses other than olfaction and thus further experience the synesthesia of *Tonggan*.

### **5.3 Hexagonal**

The six scented photos are arranged hexagonally. Six refers to the "six roots" in the Buddhist context. Enlightenment in Mahayana Buddhism discloses "six roots of sensations are pure and clean (六根清淨)." This state in the context of synesthesia is termed "six windows clear (六窗玲

珑),” indicating a thoroughness in the interconnection among all six senses.<sup>65</sup> The metaphoric description of sense perception here is a “window.” The six photographic works stipulate six ways to interact with the surrounding world, but not merely through vision. The viewer is meant to stand in the center of the hexagon, surrounded by photos and immersed in incense.

The lighting in the exhibition space is set to a dim and warm tone. Influenced by Sugimoto’s recent exhibition in a Shinto shrine, I attempt to lower the brightness of my exhibition to render the photos with a sense of depth, creating a mystery to be explored, inviting audiences to touch and ponder to investigate the concealed parts by limiting their vision, thereby enforcing them to exercise other senses such as olfaction.

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<sup>65</sup> 裕错 Yucuo 周 Zhou, “‘六根互用’与宋代文人的生活、审美及文学表现,” 中国社会科学, no. 6 (2011): 153.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

### **6.1 Legacy of Song Dynasty Olfactory Culture**

The thesis contributes to contemporary scholarship and advances the understanding of multisensorial elements in Chinese art. My interpretation of Song Dynasty floral paintings via olfaction in contemporary studies and modern-day, ocularcentric society enhances appreciation of Chinese cultural heritage by presenting the richness of Chinese olfactory culture and providing insights into the integration of sensory experiences in artistic expression and interdisciplinary apprehension of flower-and-bird painting after the Song Dynasty, thereby connecting to the field of contemporary art.

The topics on Song Dynasty aesthetics are well-researched. However, investigation into the aesthetics of aromatic scent in paintings and other visual mediums remains in its infancy. This project fills the research gap in multisensorial interpreting methods of Chinese artworks by studying the olfactory elements in ink plum paintings and shedding light on adopting the aesthetic theory of synesthesia in contemporary artistic creation.

### **6.2 Olfactory Photography and Nose Contemplation**

Olfactory Photography is my term for an artistic practice going beyond both smelling and photographing to achieve a personal meditation. The practice is a creative and contemplative activity of utilizing one's senses in a meditative way to seek synesthetic experience. The purpose

is to engage one's faculty of olfaction (both physical and aesthetic) in an aesthetic visual experience. When seeing something worthy of appreciation, one should quieten oneself into a mindful state and then begin sensing the flow of *Qi* via breathing. Nose Contemplation comes in as a technique of epistemic breathing to identify the distinct scent diffusing from the visual. After that, one is capable of smelling the fragrance of imagery and, when practicing it reversely, seeing the aroma. Through months of practicing Nose Contemplation, I sense a modest progress of affirming its feasibility. However, it is a skill to be practiced continuously with concentration.

The same process applies to the artist creating a work of *Tonggan*. In this case, Olfactory Photography infuses one's *Qi* into the art in the process of creation, such as photographing, incense-burning, printing etc. The production is meant to be a meditative journey of generating a *Qi*-embedded work, and as one's "six roots" interconnect, this creation can be interpreted with any sensorial faculty. One can access this synesthetic experience visually, auditorily, olfactorily, gustatorily, tactilely and mindly.

Morality is odorous, and virtuosity is fragrant. To aromatize one's photograph, it is essential for one to live with virtues, thereby perfuming one's *Qi*. An effective and ambrosial work of Olfactory Photography has to be the fruit of moral cultivation. It is to live according to one's most high-minded self. The *Qi* then on variable forms. It is morality, imagery, scent and much more. Olfactory Photography is, after all, sensing the transformation and movement to identify the *Qi*, realizing that all is One (Unity of Heaven and Humanity, 天人合一). This artistic practice is, therefore, a meditation.

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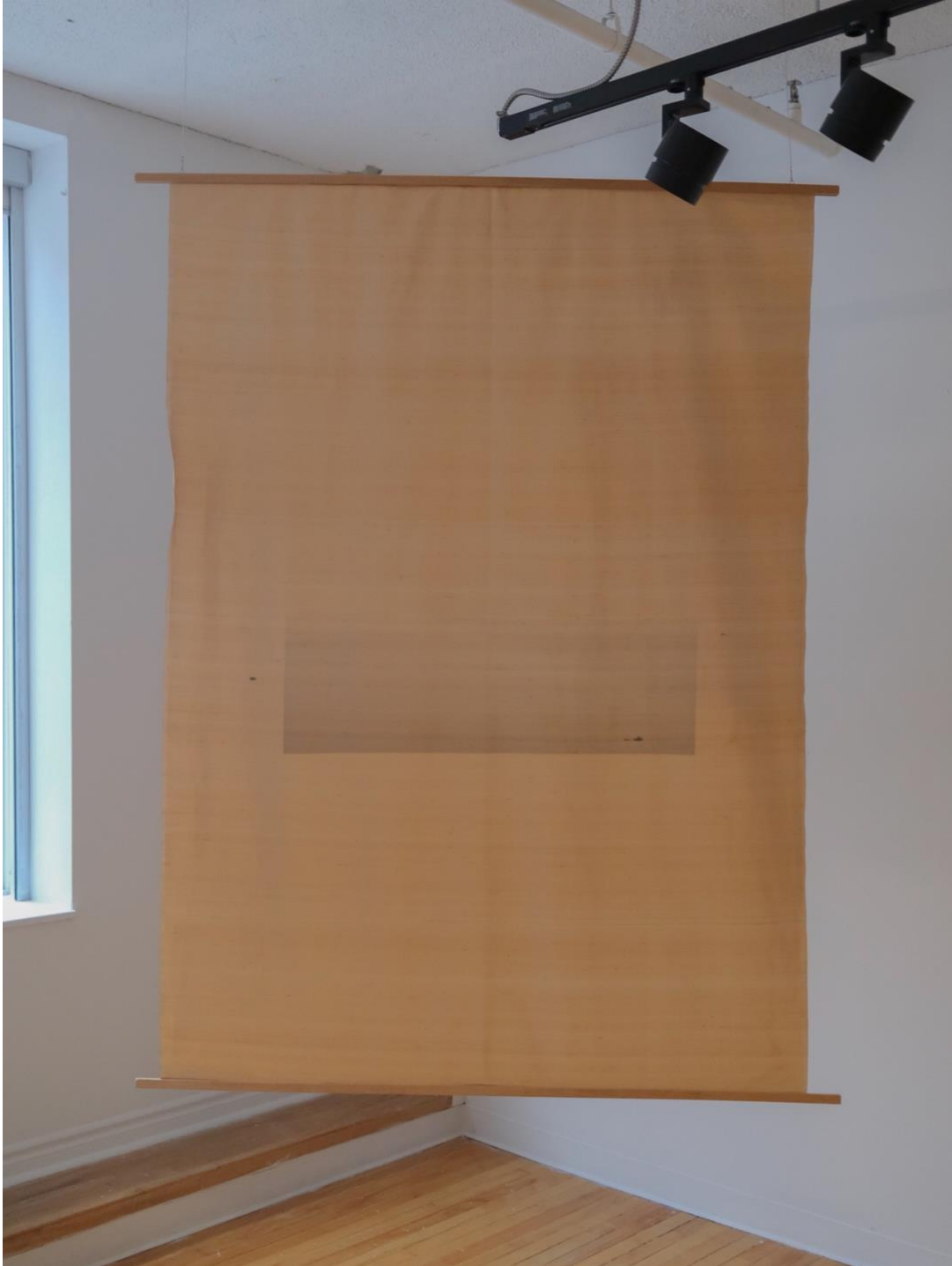
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## Appendix: Documentation

The supplementary files include photographic documentation of the exhibition.





*Figure 13 Tommy Thompson Park, 2023 (printed and installed)*



*Figure 14 Centre Island, 2022 (printed and installed)*



*Figure 15 High Park 1, 2023 (printed and installed)*



*Figure 16 High Park 2, 2023 (printed and installed)*



*Figure 17 Trinity Park, 2023 (printed and installed)*



*Figure 18 Bradford, 2021 (printed and installed)*



*Figure 19 Exhibition space (1)*



*Figure 20 Exhibition space (2)*





*Figure 21 Exhibition space (3)*



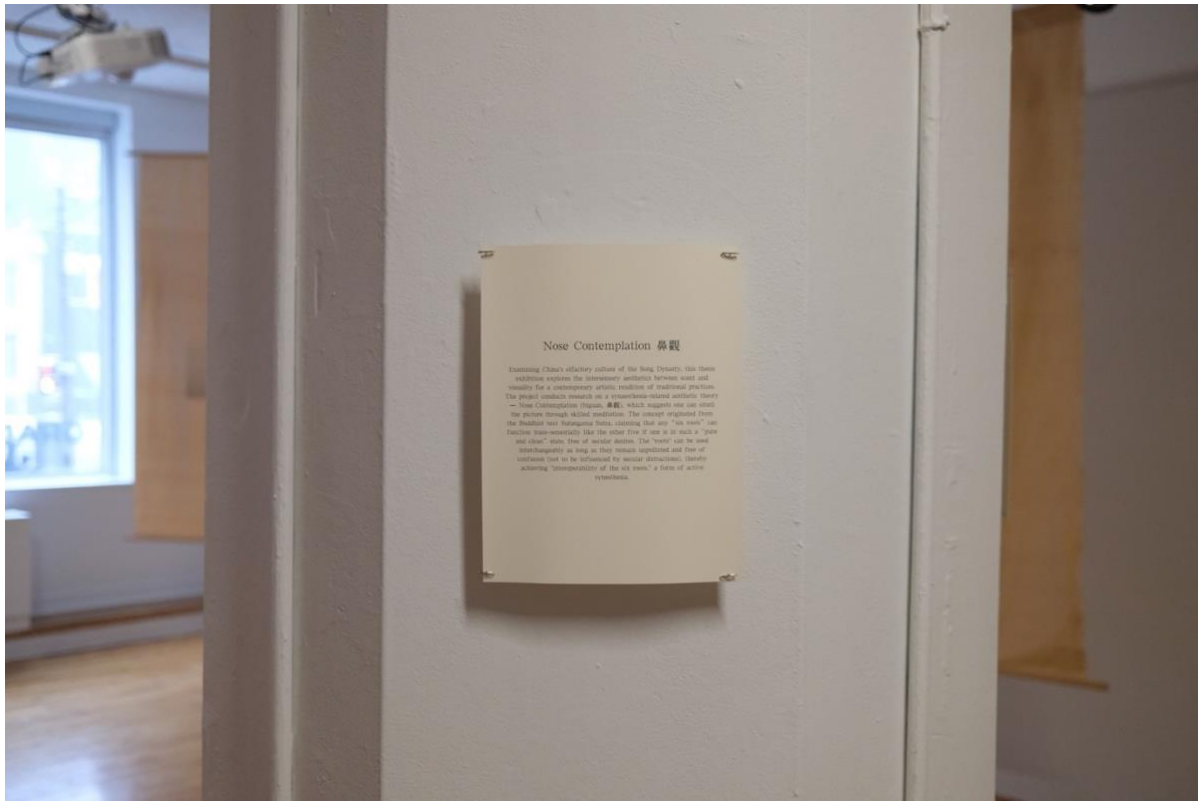
*Figure 22 Incense and tools*



*Figure 23 Incense burner*



*Figure 24 Wall label*



*Figure 25 Artist Statement*