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Lu Xiujing's Writing in Literary Style: A New Approach to the Contribution of Daoist Scriptures to Literary Studies

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Abstract: The interdisciplinary study of Daoism and literature can be broadly categorized into three main approaches: analyzing literary works as sources of Daoist material, examining Daoist scriptures as literary texts, and exploring the influence of Daoist beliefs on writers. This paper proposes a new perspective that complements these existing frameworks: by examining Daoist scriptures, we can better assess whether certain literary expressions or rhetorical devices were innovative or simply widespread conventions among writers of a particular period. Using the works of Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–477 CE) as a case study, this paper builds on Haun Saussy's argument that the use of "fragrance" as a rhetorical device to modify virtue—often surprising to modern scholars—was, in fact, a familiar trope for ancient Chinese writers. However, the paper critiques Saussy's reliance on the works of the famous poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (c. 342–278 BCE) as evidence. Unlike Qu Yuan, who was primarily a literary figure, Lu Xiujing, as a Daoist scholar, frequently employed metaphors related to smell and taste to express abstract moral or doctrinal concepts. For Lu and his contemporaries, such expressions were not regarded as remarkable literary techniques but rather as conventional modes of discourse. This suggests that, at least in early medieval China, such rhetorical usage among writers was not seen as novel but as commonplace.

Keywords: Lu Xiujing; Daoist scriptures; Haun Saussy; literary studies; synesthesia; metaphor; mind

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1. Introduction

Ancient China possesses a vast and diverse body of textual materials, spanning diverse genres including histories, literature, philosophical and religious texts, and commemorative and political writing. The study of Chinese culture has increasingly benefited from the cross-genre and interdisciplinary exchanges that arise from this diversity. Daoist and literary studies, in particular, frequently intersect, encouraging a harmonious exploration of diversity. Over the past century, scholars have made significant contributions to these two fields, advancing our understanding of both.[1]

In academic discourse, there are generally three main approaches to the interaction between Daoism and literature. The first approach treats literary works as sources for the study of Daoism. For example, Edward Schafer explored the Daoist meanings embedded in the imagery and metaphors of Chinese medieval poetry (Schafer 1980, 1985). He also analyzed two rhapsodies (fu 賦) by court literati, arguing that they can only be fully understood within the context of Daoist ritual (Schafer 1977). Suzanne Cahill examined the representation of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母) in Tang poetry, enriching our understanding of this Daoist female transcendent (Cahill 1993). These studies

tend to focus more on the messages and themes conveyed in literary texts rather than on assessing their literary quality.

The second approach involves studying certain Daoist texts as literary works, which are valued for their aesthetic qualities and literary-historical significance. Research in this area often results in annotated translations. For example, Kominami Ichirō's 小南一郎 classic study of Daoist fictions (Kominami 1984). Schafer, Stephen Bokenkamp, and Taylor Feezell have contributed studies on the "Pacing the Void" lyrics (buxuci 步虛詞), which explore their literary and ritual dimensions (Schafer 1977; Bokenkamp 1981; Feezell 2022).

The third approach focuses on studying the Daoist beliefs of individual writers and the influence of Daoism on their literary works. For example, scholars such as Paul W. Kroll and Stephen Bokenkamp have explored the Daoist background of the poet Li Bai 李白 (701–762) (Kroll 2009, 2023; Bokenkamp 2007). Similarly, Edward Schafer and Jan De Meyer have analyzed Wu Yun's 吳筠 (?–778) Daoist identity and its impact on his poetry (Schafer 1981; Meyer 2006). In this line of research, the subjects of study are typically well-known writers, and Daoism serves as a key to understand their literary works. Some comprehensive studies, of course, do not adhere to a single approach but integrate multiple perspectives. For example, Sun Changwu's 孫昌武 work on Daoism and Tang dynasty literature combines all three of the aforementioned approaches, offering a broad examination of the interaction between Daoism and literature in medieval China (Sun 2017).

In this study, I propose a new approach to exploring the interaction between Daoism and literary studies. Even Daoist texts not originally composed for literary purposes can provide valuable insights for literary research. The Daoist texts examined in this approach possess certain characteristics: they were written in a clearly defined period, authored by educated individuals, intended for a general audience of believers, and primarily aimed at disseminating religious ideas rather than achieving aesthetic or literary ends. Since these texts were produced by literati authors and their practical value for believers outweighed their aesthetic appeal, they provide an opportunity to explore the role of literary expressions and rhetorical devices within their cultural context. This approach enables a more harmonious integration of diverse materials—such as Daoist scriptures, Buddhist sutras, classical texts, and literati writings—into the study of literature.

This approach builds upon the second approach discussed earlier. While the second approach emphasizes the aesthetic value and literary originality of the text, this approach focuses on elements that lack aesthetic significance or may be considered "cliched". Further exploration is needed to determine whether it will evolve into a distinct methodological framework, a variant, or a complement to the second approach. Nonetheless, this paper aims to make a constructive contribution to its development. To illustrate the potential of this approach, I will demonstrate how the Daoist writings attributed to Lu Xiujing can enrich Haun Saussy's literary theory.

2. Colorful and Colorless: Haun Saussy's Argument

The inspiration for this analysis comes from Haun Saussy's exploration of Chinese allegorical expressions. In his discussion of the concept of "fragrant virtue" in Chinese literature, Saussy employs the metaphor of "color" to describe the rhetorical device's surprise and aesthetic appeal to Western scholars or non-Chinese readers. In contrast, he argues that the use of "white" is perceived as ordinary and unremarkable by Chinese readers.

> If the "fragrance" of "fragrant virtue" is just such an effect of translation, it lends itself to explanation-to being explained away, alas-as a piece of 'mythology' that, for all its color in our eyes, is only "white" to the Chinese reader. [2] (Saussy 1993, p. 15)

Saussy's interest in the concept of "fragrant virtue" began with an analysis of Qu Yuan's works and prior scholarly interpretations. However, Saussy's primary aim is not to analyze a specific literary work but to highlight unique cultural phenomena across different languages. He argues that expressions that appear novel or elaborate to readers from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds—particularly translators and comparatists—are often part of the regular lexicon within the cultural context of native speakers. Thus, analyzing certain expressions in isolation, without considering the cultural and linguistic traditions of the source language, may lead to an interpretation where so-called subtle rhetorical devices are simply the product of the reader's wishful imagination.

> The "shock of mild surprise" provoked by a phrase such as "the smell of virtue" should not blind us to the fact that we are talking about not actual smells and virtues but the uses of language describe them—and what is more, that we do so here by way translation, the contact of two or more languages. A single word a particular language may very well apply with perfect literalness objects that the speaker of another language would consider see evidently distinct, a situation that may lead the speaker of the second language to impute a vivid metaphorical imagination to the speaker of the first. It does not, however, follow that the speaker the first language has done anything out of the ordinary. (Saussy 1993, p. 14)

Saussy dismisses the view that associating virtues with fragrant smells represents an unconventional or metaphorical interpretation. He argues that such interpretations fail to recognize the dual literal and metaphorical meaning of the expression, as outlined in the formula "true both literally and metaphorically" (Saussy 1993, p. 14). Instead, Saussy contends that for Chinese speakers, virtue is naturally understood as one of the qualities that "fragrance" can modify, and that this usage is not perceived as particularly novel.[3]

The problem with Saussy's analysis, however, is that while the connection between virtue and fragrance in Chinese may not be as original as he suggests, his use of Qu Yuan's *Li Sao* 離騷 as an example is an ineffective way to support his argument. As one of ancient China's most distinguished and imaginative literati, Qu Yuan's works are inherently complex and rich in literary devices.[4] As supporting evidence, the recurring literary expressions in *Li Sao* do not demonstrate that ordinary Chinese speakers would perceive the relationship between the modified object and its modifier in a literal sense, rather than as a rhetorical device. In short, greater diversity is needed in the selection of materials for this argument. It would have been more effective to examine common clichés or more widely used expressions. By focusing on "*Li Sao*", Saussy and others risk conflating the creative innovations of a single writer with broader cultural practices, making it difficult to determine whether the associations are culturally ingrained or merely the result of individual poetic invention.[5]

To evaluate the persuasiveness of Saussy's argument, it is necessary to examine additional materials that reflect the expressions that are characteristic of Chinese literati.[6] I will explore similar modifications or references in the scriptures of Lu Xiujing. Lu Xiujing was one of the most prominent Daoists of early medieval China. Although he wrote extensively, only eight of his works survive in the Daoist canon today, representing less than one-fifth of his original output. In recent decades, much scholarly attention has focused on these surviving works. This study begins with two key considerations: first, Lu Xiujing's identity as a member of the literati of his time and second, how these expressions contribute to a deeper understanding of Chinese literature and language.

At first glance, these two objectives might seem contradictory. If Lu Xiujing is a well-trained literatus, does analyzing his works not become akin to analyzing those of Qu Yuan? Would demonstrating the first point not weaken the second?

First, it is important to note that Qu Yuan and Lu Xiujing lived more than seven hundred years apart, a period during which literary techniques and knowledge underwent significant development. In particular, the artistic methods employed by Qu Yuan and the interpretations of his works were extensively commented on during the Han Dynasty. One notable example is the commentary by Wang Yi (王逸, 89–158 CE), a writer of the Eastern Han Dynasty, who commented on Qu Yuan's works, stating, "Fragrance is the smell of virtue" (芳, 德之臭也; Jin et al. 1996, p. 52).

At the time of Wang Yi, the relationship between fragrance and virtue was not so self-evident that it did not require further explanation. As a passionate admirer and interpreter of Qu Yuan, Wang Yi affirmed this connection, though it is likely that it was not yet a widely accepted view among the literati of his time. In other words, Qu Yuan's use of fragrance as a metaphor for virtue was probably an original literary technique in Early China. Furthermore, this metaphorical relationship between fragrance and virtue may have gained wider attention and dissemination through Wang Yi's annotations. In the preface to his *Chuci zhangju* 楚辭章句, Wang Yi refers to himself as a "minister", suggesting that his commentary on Chuci was likely a state-sponsored project (Yi 1991). This official backing would have facilitated the spread of his interpretations within the intellectual circles of the time. By the time of the Six Dynasties, when Lu Xiujing lived, the association between virtue and fragrance had become a familiar rhetorical device within such circles, no longer considered an innovative or rare skill.

Secondly, Lu Xiujing is a more fitting example than Qu Yuan, not only because literary skills have been enriched, developed and disseminated over time but also due to his ability to employ literary techniques in his writing. While both Qu Yuan and Lu Xiujing are in the sense that they were educated and capable of producing written works, their roles in literature differ significantly. Qu Yuan, as a renowned poet, is a "littérateur" whose works are marked by high originality and aesthetic value, whereas Lu Xiujing, while a literatus, was primarily concerned with religious and philosophical writings rather than creating literary masterpieces for aesthetic purposes. While his works are not strictly literary in nature, but rather practical Daoist scriptures, they offer a different kind of insight.

If we aim to demonstrate that a literary device can be directly understood within that culture, it is more persuasive to select examples from non-literary works. This is particularly true when the cultural tradition in question downplays the literary aspect, as opposed to focusing on works that emphasize aesthetic qualities. Non-literary works are often written for readers who may be literate but lack the advanced aesthetic sensibilities needed to fully appreciate complex literary rhetorical techniques. Even for those who cannot read themselves, parts of Daoist scriptures were likely read aloud to the masses. The repeated use of words and expressions in such non-literary works may reflect a linguistic consensus or, at the very least, a shared understanding among the users of the language, particularly in written form.

Thus, the two objectives—examining Lu Xiujing as a literatus and analyzing expressions in his works to show how widely they are used—are not necessarily contradictory but rather complement one another in offering a more nuanced understanding of literary production in early medieval China.

3. Lu Xiujing as a Literatus

Although Lu Xiujing was one of the most influential figures in the history of Daoism, he is rarely mentioned in official historical records. The *Book of Song* (*Songshu* 宋書) notes that he performed a ceremony for the emperor, which highlights his connection with the royal family. The only other official historical reference to Lu Xiujing is an account of him gifting a white egret-feather fan to Zhang Rong 張融 (444–497), a notable littérateur and

calligrapher. The inscription on the fan reads: "This is a remarkable object for a remarkable man" (此既異物, 以奉異人; Xiao 1972, p. 721).

From this record, we can infer that Lu Xiujing did have interactions, possibly even friendships, with members of the literati circle of his time. However, it is his writing style that more decisively reflects his literary identity. In ancient China, the abilities of a literatus were not solely demonstrated through literary works. Many types of writing outside traditional literary genres—such as histories, biographies, memorials to the emperor, correspondence, philosophical or political treatises, and commentaries on others' works—also employed literary techniques that could evoke empathy or aesthetic appreciation. Authors of such works, despite not writing in conventional literary genres, can still be considered literati due to their use of language and literary devices.

Lu Xiujing's primary contribution was to compile, select, and reorganize Daoist scriptures. As a result, distinguishing between the sections of these scriptures that are original to Lu Xiujing and those that he directly copied from earlier Daoist texts poses a challenge. In "The Early Lingbao Scriptures and the Origins of Daoist Monasticism", Bokenkamp offers three criteria for identifying the parts of Lu Xiujing's works that can be attributed to his own authorship:

> I will be concentrating not on citations, but on those passages he himself composed. These I distinguish on the basis of three criteria: (1) autograph passages are those not found in the surviving Lingbao scriptures; (2) they do not occur as continuations of or insertions within other passages that can be so identified; and (3) they are written in a literati style that seems to be that of Lu Xiujing himself. (Bokenkamp 2011, pp. 98–99)

On the third point, Bokenkamp provides further clarification, suggesting that this criterion is closely related to Lu Xiujing's background and knowledge:

> Lu Xiujing's writing is full of such allusions. Some are much less explainable than are Tiger Brook and Dragon Mountain and may even be unconscious bits of classical esoterica that floated to the surface whenever Lu wrote. The Lingbao scriptures themselves do not contain classical allusions, so it is fairly easy to separate Lu's citations of the scriptures from passages that he is likely to have composed himself. (Bokenkamp 2011, p. 100)

It is evident that, compared to many other authors of Daoist scriptures, Lu Xiujing's style of expression is more literary. The allusions he employs suggest that he had studied a wide range of traditional classics rather than focusing solely on Daoist texts. Moreover, he does not hesitate to incorporate these classical sources into his reconstruction and writing of Daoist scriptures, quoting them frequently. In the following sections, I will analyze some extra-literal uses of words related to smell and taste in Lu Xiujing's texts. These examples not only further support the argument for Lu Xiujing's literary identity but also help us understand how these words were perceived and understood by ancient Chinese literati.

3.1. Scatter the Fragrance

The first example comes from Lu Xiujing's *Lingbao jingmu xu* 靈寶經目序 (Preface to a Catalogue of Lingbao Scriptures; DZ 1032), where he uses the character fang 芳 not as a modifier but as an object. In this context, it does not literally refer to a pleasant smell:

> Gao Xin attracted the colonel, who took a chariot from the cloud; Great Yu got the text hidden in Zhong Mount, Lord Lao descended perfection to the Celestial Master, and the Transcendent Duke was granted the graph on the Celestial Platform. These are all because the Most High moved by their feats and wished them

> to achieve the holy program. Are these not to scatter the fragrance into the world and announce it universally to all existence?
>
> 雖高辛招雲輿之校, 大禹獲鐘山之書。老君降真於天師, 仙公授文於天臺。斯皆由勛感太上, 指成聖業。豈非揚芳於世, 普宣一切也？ (DZ 1032: 4.4b8-5a1)

It is not difficult to see that the "fragrance" here symbolizes the truth and teachings of Daoism. Daoist scriptures, believed to have descended from the heavens to the world to spread their teachings, are represented by this beautiful and abstract concept of "fragrance".

The phrase "scatter the fragrance" (yangfang 揚芳) later became common, often referring to the fair reputation of someone being conveyed to the world. The earliest recorded use may be found in an admonition by Cai Yong (蔡邕, 132 or 133–192) in Fan Ye's (範曄, 398–445) *Book of the Later Han* (*Hou hanshu* 後漢書, compiled in 445), which is already rich with supernatural overtones. Fan Ye writes: "[You are] not even able to stand out in the crowd, scatter the fragrance, spread your word, ascend the heavens, and rearrange human relationships" (曾不能拔萃出群, 揚芳飛文, 登天庭, 序彝倫; Fan 1965, p. 1981). Lu Xiujing likely encountered this expression in the *Book of the Later Han*. It is worth noting that Fan Ye, the compiler of the *Book of the Later Han*, was only eight years older than Lu Xiujing, and the Book of the Later Han was completed at the time of Fan Ye's death, when Lu Xiujing was nearly forty. As contemporaries, it is likely that they had access to similar corpora or that their works influenced each other.[7]

In the Shangqing scriptures from the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties, such as the *Dongzhen taishang suling dongyuan dayou miaojing* (洞真太上素靈洞元大有妙經, DZ 1314), the phrase "yang fang" (揚芳) does appear. However, in this context, it may refer to flowers or the literal sense of fragrance. The preceding phrase uses the word "fragrance" (xiang 香) to describe a smell, which suggests that "fang" here may refer to flowers. The text reads: "The mysterious dawn is tenebrous and stagnant, the fragrance flies [in the air], obscuring the light, scattered flowers purify the spirit, and the mist spreads in the Jade Capitoline" (玄晨冥滯, 飛香翳光, 揚芳濯靈, 散煙玉京; DZ 1314, 2a2–3).

In any case, in the Shangqing scriptures, "yang fang" does not refer to doctrine or teachings. Aside from these two examples, I did not find the expression "yang fang" in other texts from the Six Dynasties. Therefore, it is most likely that Lu Xiujing adopted this literary expression from non-Daoist traditions and applied it to his own writing.

As mentioned above, the word "fragrance" is more commonly used to indicate the spread of fame over great distances, a non-religious literary expression. This usage predates the Six Dynasties; for instance, in his "Rhapsody on the Parrot" (Yingwu fu 鸚鵡賦) of the Eastern Han Dynasty, Mi Heng 禰衡 (173–198) praised the parrot: "Thereupon, admiring its fair name that has spread afar, Prizing its wondrous form in which all delight"[8] (於是羨芳聲之遠暢, 偉靈表之可嘉; Knechtges and Xiao 2016, p. 53). The sheng 聲 here does not refer to a literal "sound" but to "name", "fame", or "reputation". This usage is common in literary or monumental texts, such as inscriptions. However, Lu Xiujing's use of "fragrance" to modify "sound" is a relatively rare expression.

3.2. The Fragrant Sound

In *Dongxuan lingbao wugan wen* 洞玄靈寶五感文 (Text on the Five Stimuli of Numinous Treasure of Comprehending the Mysteries; DZ 1278), Lu Xiujing includes a self-statement that summarizes his actions and choices during that time:

> The time I live in coincides with the end age when the teachings, laws, and principles have collapsed, and people are interested in other teachings, and only I am still here to keep this teaching. The teachings decreased day by day. I returned to the root and was nourished by the mother. I rolled up my ambition and rejected those fragrant and clean sounds. I opened my arms to accept the

> dusty and grimy filth. I pray to be spared the axe of strife and let me save my uselessness for self-sufficiency.
>
> 餘生值末世, 教法綱頹, 人皆趣彼, 而我竊守此, 法甚日損, 歸根食母, 卷志謝芳潔之聲, 開懷受塵垢之汙. 乞免分競之斧斤, 請保無用以自足. (DZ 1278, 1b2–5)

This passage not only serves as a personal statement but also employs the metaphor of "the axe to hack man's nature" (faxingzhifu 伐性之斧) from the Lüshi Chunqiu 呂氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü, compiled around 239 BCE). This suggests that the passage is unquestionably authored by Lu Xiujing himself.

In rhetorical terms, the phrase "fragrant and clean sounds" used here can be understood as an instance of synesthesia. Lu Xiujing suggests that "fragrant" can indeed modify sound, much as it is used to modify virtue. However, rather than implying melodiousness, the term "fragrant sound" emphasizes the moral nobility and purity of the discourse. In this context, Lu Xiujing uses the phrase to describe words that guide his search for the truth of Daoist teachings. However, if one were to extract the phrase "I rolled up my ambition, and rejected those fragrant and clean sounds. I opened my arms to accept the dusty and grimy filth", it could also be interpreted as a statement of self-reflection and humility on the part of a literatus, expressing a sense of helplessness and self-modesty.

This rhetorical device, in which sound is modified by smell—a phenomenon often classified as synesthesia in literary analysis—also appears in the poetry of the Six Dynasties. For instance, in his poem "Responding to Fu Manrong's Poem of Ascending the Old City Wall Built by Sun Quan in Wuchang" (He fu wuchang deng sunquan gucheng shi和伏武昌登孫權故城詩), written in 492, Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464–99) employs the same device, modifying sound with "fragrant": "Fortunately, there are many fragrant sounds to rely on. [I will] accept the style to gather the infinite brilliance" (幸藉芳音多. 承風采餘絢; Xie 2019, p. 335).

However, unlike Xie Tiao's carefully crafted verses, which engage in sophisticated exchanges with other literati, Lu Xiujing's expression is relatively straightforward and accessible, allowing the average reader to easily comprehend his meaning. Furthermore, this sentence pairs with the after one, where the "fragrant and clean sounds" are contrasted with "the dusty and grimy filth", and in the latter phrase, the relationship between "dusty and grimy" and "filth" is just a modification that follows a conventional collocation without the use of rhetorical devices. Therefore, rather than creatively modifying "sound" with "smell", it is more likely that the parallel structure used in these two contrasting phrases represents a common and natural linguistic pattern in Lu Xiujing's context. In other words, Lu Xiujing employs parallelism, a rhetorical device typical of Six Dynasties literature, without intentionally developing or highlighting a synesthetic effect.

Although modifying sound with fragrance is relatively rare, it is not unprecedented in the texts of the Six Dynasties. Writers sometimes demonstrated a flexible use of human senses and related concepts, creating predicate–object relationships that extended beyond the original meanings of words. In the following section, I will explore how some of the seemingly novel expressions employed by Lu Xiujing are, in fact, rooted in a broader and more established tradition of Chinese linguistic usage.

3.3. Dao That Can Be Tasted

In several of Lu Xiujing's writings, doctrines and principles are conceptualized as objects that can be eaten or tasted. This idea is not original to Lu Xiujing; earlier references to "tasting the Dao" (weidao 味道) and "tasting the Perfection" (weizhen 味真) can be found in both Daoist scriptures and philosophical texts. While the modern interpretation of "taste" often extends to mean "deep understanding" or "comprehension", we must acknowledge that this metaphorical use of "taste" evolved from its original, literal sense

of tasting physical substances to the more abstract notion of grasping or understanding intangible concepts.

Modern scholars often interpret wei (味) as meaning "to understand deeply" or "to comprehend". It is important to recognize the link between the metaphorical use of the word "wei" and the extended meaning, that is, the transformation of the object from concrete to abstract. For Chinese writers in Lu Xiujing's time, this dual usage of taste—as both a concrete and abstract concept—was well known and commonly accepted. The distinction between abstract and concrete objects often blurred, as many objects themselves possess a dual nature or are, in some sense, inherently vague. An example of this usage can be found in Lu Xiujing's *Lingbao jingmu xu*:

> In addition, later learners popularized and believed in these scriptures and did not further clarify and examine them, so the fine and the rough were jumbled together, and the true and the false were mixed. It was confusing to those who saw and heard and was annoying to those who practiced and tasted.
>
> 既晚學推信, 弗加澄研, 遂令精麤糅雜, 真偽混行。視聽者疑惑, 修味者悶煩. (DZ 1032, 4.5b9-6a1)

Literally, the object of "taste" here should be the Daoist scriptures. If we focus on the actions of seeing and listening, to be more precise, the object is the specific words of the scriptures. However, when we consider the subsequent actions of practicing and tasting, the object shifts to the abstract principles and teachings conveyed by the scriptures. Given that seeing, hearing, and practicing are all common sensory actions, taste in this context is also a typical sensory experience in the writer's mind. In this sense, the writer does not appear to see an essential difference between perceiving the concrete aspects of an object through sight and sound, and "tasting" its more abstract qualities. This suggests that the object of taste can be either abstract in nature or the abstract aspect of a concrete object, which is a normal and accepted usage. A further example of this can be found in Lu Xiujing's *Taishang Dongxuan Lingbao Shouduyi Biao* 太上洞玄靈寶授度儀表 (*Petition of the Ritual for the Transmission of the Most High Cavern Mysterious Numinous Treasure Scriptures*; DZ 528):

> For seventeen years since I had the audacity to occupy this position, [during which time] I have endeavored, with all sincerity, to obey, revere, practice, and examine the doctrines. I enjoyed studying the sacred texts and was addicted to tasting the pleasures of mystery.
>
> 自從叨竊以來一十七年, 竭誠盡思, 遵奉修研, 翫習神文, 耽味玄趣. (DZ 528, 1a4-6)

The use of "taste" in this self-statement parallels the previous analysis, as it conveys the enjoyment of the mysterious as an abstract concept—that is, the object being "tasted". In this case, Lu Xiujing expresses his pursuit of religious doctrine and truth. The following sentence, also from the *Lingbao jingmu xu*, conveys the same idea but uses "taste" in a slightly different way: "When I was young, I was addicted to the taste of mystery, loved the scriptures in my heart, accumulated them from tiny pieces, and hoped to attain even one of the myriad truths" (餘少躭玄味, 志愛經書, 積累錙銖, 冀其萬一; DZ 1032, 4.6a4-5).

Both of these instances represent self-statements by Lu Xiujing about his past experiences, and they essentially convey the same message. However, in one case, "taste" functions as a verb, while in the other, it serves as a noun. The term xuanwei 玄味 does not refer to a literal "mysterious taste" that one could physically sample, but rather to an abstract "taste" derived from "mystery", unrelated to any sensory experience of the tongue or mouth. Lu Xiujing's use of "taste" as both a verb and a noun in these two sentences is a natural expression of the same idea. Readers are unlikely to interpret this shift in usage

as a deliberate attempt to create nuanced literary effects. Instead, it seems that Lu Xiujing is simply articulating his past, not striving for superior literary expression.

The following example from Dongxuan Lingbao Zhai Shuo Guang Zhu Jie Fa Deng Zhuyuan Yi 洞玄靈寶齋說光燭戒罰燈祝願儀 (Retreat Ritual on the Lingbao Retreat of Comprehending the Mysteries, [Especially on] Lights, Candles, Precepts, Punishments, Lamps, and Vows; DZ 524) is similar. However, this example does not relate to diet. Nevertheless, Lu Xiujing still describes how these worthies "eat the numinous taste":

> All worthies had great blessings in their previous lives, leading to their bodies meeting together to celebrate in this life. They come across the three treasures and hear the sound of the Law. They are keen on and admire Purity and Vacuity and eat and ingest numinous tastes.
>
> 諸賢前生, 並有大福, 致慶會今身, 得值三寶, 聞見法音, 好尚清虛, 餐納靈味. (DZ 524, 3b9-10)

This illustrates the acceptance and practice of Dao. In Lu Xiujing's works, abstract religious concepts, such as teachings and truths, are imbued with the quality of "taste" and are described as something that can be "eaten". The following patterns are used in parallel across the three sentences above:

1. Verb + concrete noun: 翫習神文 (study the sacred texts): 志愛經書 (love scriptures in my heart);
2. Taste + abstract noun: 耽味玄趣 (addict to taste pleasures of mystery);
3. Verb + abstract taste: 少躭玄味 (addict to the taste of mystery); 餐納靈味 (eat and ingest numinous tastes);
4. Verb + abstract noun: 好尚清虛 (are keen on and admire purity and vacuity).

These patterns serve to convey Lu's subjective love for and dedication to a particular pursuit. Unless the object is a specific noun, "taste" can function both as a verb and as a noun. The parallel structures demonstrate that the distinction between "taste" as a noun or verb does not impact the reader's understanding. Moreover, Lu Xiujing, as the writer, appears unconcerned with this distinction since these patterns do not carry any aesthetic or literary priority over one another.

An intriguing aspect of the ancient Daoist classic *Daodejing* 道德經 is its attitude toward "wei". The *Daodejing* explicitly criticizes the preference for specific tastes as a manifestation of desire, which is detrimental to individuals. It states, "the five tastes damage the taste buds", (五味令人口爽; Laozi and Lau 1963, p. 16), and emphasizes that the Dao 道 (the way) is inherently tasteless, described as "bland and tasteless" (淡乎其無味; Laozi 2021, p. 329). Practitioners of the Dao are encouraged to experience the Dao through the act of "tasting no taste" (味無味; Laozi 2021, p. 336), which aligns with the principle of "doing what is no action" (為無為; Laozi 2021, p. 336). "No taste" (無味), along with "no action" (無為), constitutes one of the most essential characteristics of the Dao. This reflects the *Daodejing*'s distinctive approach to "wei": while the Dao can be "tasted", it is unwise to associate it with any specific flavor.

In this context, we see that Lu Xiujing, as a Daoist priest, engages in "tasting" the object of "mystery" or "numinous" rather than comparing Daoist truths to any concrete taste, such as sweet or bitter. Similarly, the concept of "fragrance" discussed in Section 3.2 should be understood in this light. Lu Xiujing never equates the highest truth with the fragrance of flowers or delicious meals. Instead, he employs a vague yet positive valuation to guide readers in distinguishing what is good from what is not among the objects he describes. In short, as a Daoist, Lu Xiujing adheres to the *Daodejing* tradition of using "tasting" as a practical means to pursue the Dao, while carefully avoiding any association with specific "tastes" or "fragrances" that would contradict the Dao's fundamental characteristics.

4. The Mind as a Participant in Synesthetic Metaphors

Reuven Tsur defines literary synesthesia as the exploitation of the joining of terms derived from the vocabularies of various sensory domains to achieve specific literary effects (Tsur 2007, p. 30). Most scholars limit the scope of "various sensory" to the five traditional senses—touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight—which correspond to the body, mouth, nose, ears, and eyes, respectively (Ullmann 1957, p. 280; Qian 2011, p. 68; Zheng 2018, p. 189). However, in the perspective of ancient Chinese writers, the mind was often regarded as a sensory organ parallel to the aforementioned five senses.

For instance, the *Daodejing* states: "The five colours make man's eyes blind; The five notes make his ears deaf; The five tastes injure his palate; Riding and hunting, make his mind go wild with excitement" (五色令人目盲; 五音令人耳聾; 五味令人口爽; 馳騁畋獵, 令人心發狂; Laozi and Lau 1963, p. 16). Here, the mind is explicitly juxtaposed with the eyes, ears, and mouth, highlighting its role as a sensory organ. Wang Bi's 王弼 (227–249) commentary on this passage further elucidates this parallel relationship: "The ears, eyes, mouth, and mind all follow their inherent nature. If one deviates from the natural course of life and harms this nature, the result is what is termed as blindness, deafness, confusion, and madness" (夫耳, 目, 口, 心, 皆順其性也. 不以順性命, 反以傷自然, 故曰盲, 聾, 爽, 狂也; Wang 2008, p. 28). This interpretation underscores the conceptual alignment of the mind with the other senses in classical Chinese thought.

We cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that writers who positioned the mind last in such parallel structures may have intended to imply its superior status compared to the other senses. However, it is also worth noting that in some cases, the mind is not placed at the end of the parallel structure. For example, in the following passage, Xunzi 荀子 (c. 316–238 BCE) places the tactile body after the mind:

> If the eyes desire beauty, the ears desire sound, the mouth desires flavor, the mind desires gain, and the bones, body, and skin desire comfort and ease, these all arise from the inherent nature of human emotions and instincts. They are naturally felt and not something that happens after one experience them.
>
> 若夫目好色, 耳好聲, 口好味, 心好利, 骨體膚理好愉佚, 是皆生於人之情性者也；感而自然, 不待事而後生之者也. (Wang 1988, pp. 437–38)

Similar examples can also be found in the *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳:

> When the ear does not hear the harmony of the five sounds, it is deafness. When the eye does not distinguish the resplendence of the five colors, it is blindness. When the mind does not take as model the principles of virtue and duty, it is waywardness. When the mouth does not speak words of loyalty and good faith, it is perfidy. In all cases the Di take these as models. These four iniquities are all present in them!
>
> 耳不聽五聲之和為聾, 目不別五色之章為昧, 心不則德義之經為頑, 口不道忠信之言為嚚, 狄皆則之, 四姦具矣! (Durrant et al. 2017, pp. 382–83)

This passage from the *Zuo Zhuan* provides an important insight into the object of the mind. Just as the object of the eye is color and the object of the ear is sound, the object of the mind is morality. The object of the mind is "virtue and duty". The following examples from the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 further elucidate the function of the mind:

> When the eye does not see, the ear does not hear, and the mind does not know, then your spirit will protect the body, and the body will enjoy long life.
>
> 目無所見, 耳無所聞, 心無所知, 女神將守形, 形乃長生. (Zhuangzi and Watson 2013, p. 78)

> When the essence is concentrated in the eyes, vision becomes clear and sharp; when it resides in the ears, hearing becomes acute and discerning; when it remains in the mouth, speech becomes appropriate and precise; and when it gathers in the mind, thoughts become penetrating and coherent.
>
> 精泄於目, 則其視明；在於耳, 則其聽聰；留於口, 則其言當；集於心, 則其慮通. (Liu and He 1998, pp. 588–89)

Such a pattern of thought can also be found in Buddhism, which was introduced to China during the Han Dynasty. A fundamental tenet of Buddhist philosophy involves categorizing human senses into the "six roots" (liugen 六根): eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. These correspond to their respective cognitive objects—color, sound, scent, taste, touch, and dharma—collectively referred to as the "six dusts" (liuchen 六塵). Moreover, under certain conditions, any one of these senses can assume the functions of the others. *Miaofalianhuajing youbotishe* 妙法蓮華經憂波提舍 (The Treatise on the *Lotus Sutra*; T26) said:

> Furthermore, those who have purified the six roots are capable of fully perceiving forms, hearing sounds, discerning scents, distinguishing tastes, feeling tactile sensations, and understanding dharmas through each individual sense faculty. It should be understood that the faculties can be used interchangeably in this context.
>
> 又六根清淨者, 於一一根中悉能具足見色、聞聲、辨香、別味、覺觸、知法, 諸根互用此義應知. (T26, no. 1519, p. 10a19-21)

These cases imply that the subject, object, and action associated with the mind can become one of the participants in synesthesia was also regarded as part of conventional doctrine.[9] While the extent of Buddhism's influence on early medieval Chinese writers remains uncertain,[10] the various sources mentioned above demonstrate that Chinese writers were not unfamiliar with expressions that placed the mind in parallel with other senses. In other words, they frequently treated the mind as one of the senses, primarily responsible for receiving and recognizing abstract objects.

Consequently, the primary function of the mind in these contexts is to know, to think, and to understand. Abstract entities that can be known, thought, and understood—such as principles, teachings, and morals—are thus the objects corresponding to the mind's function. In other words, in the view of many Chinese writers, these concepts also belong to the vocabularies of the various sensory domains as described by Tsur. When authors combine these with vocabularies from other sensory domains, literary synesthesia is formed.

When Lu Xiujing employs "fragrance" to symbolize "reputation" and "sound" to represent "truth", he is engaging in synesthetic metaphor. This involves using terms associated with the senses of smell and hearing to symbolize abstract concepts of the mind. Building on this framework, Lu further integrates vocabulary from additional sensory domains. For instance, the phrase "fragrant and clean sounds" exemplifies a collective synesthesia that engages the senses of smell (nose), sight (eyes), hearing (ears), and the abstract realm of the mind. Moreover, when he combines the concept of "taste" (whether as a noun or a verb) with notions such as truth, mystery, and the Dao, he creates a synesthetic metaphor by pairing terms related to the mind with those associated with other sensory modalities. This is exemplified in expressions like "fragrant morality", where vocabularies from different sensory domains are interwoven to evoke a multisensory and intellectual experience.

Lap Lam cites Xiaorong Li's definition of one of the two types of sensual poetry in Chinese literary history, which "derives from the allegorical tradition of the Chu elegies, in which feminine beauty and related objects such as plants and flowers are interpreted as virtuous persons or qualities in accordance with Confucian ethics". This tradition, known as Xiangcao meiren 香草美人 (fragrant flora and beautiful women; Lam 2023, p. 183), is

exemplified by Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232). As Trever McKay notes, "Cao Zhi continued developing Qu Yuan's political symbolism of fragrant plants representing talented ministers and virtuous abilities" (McKay 2025, p. 30). My focus lies in how writers employ plants or women as analogies for individuals, attaching sensory attributes such as fragrance and beauty to symbolize the moral and intellectual qualities of gentlemen. In some cases, the physical representations of plants or women are omitted entirely, leaving only certain sensory attributes to convey abstract virtues. For instance, the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 states, "Today in one stroke you have satisfied the requirements of both difficulties. This is what is meant by the statement, 'Illustrious virtue is a far-reaching fragrance'" (今君一面盡二難之道, 可謂明德惟馨; Mather 2002, p. 298). Similarly, Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842) writes, "This is a simple house, only my morals make it fragrant" (斯是陋室, 惟吾德馨; Liu 2019, p. 2446).

This rhetorical strategy relies on sensory attributes—such as fragrance and beauty—that can be perceived by the senses to analogize abstract moral and intellectual qualities, which are discernible only through the mind. By doing so, the writers enable readers to comprehend the pleasure of virtue and exceptional ability through the sensory experiences of smelling fragrance and admiring beauty.

In literary criticism, it is common to employ other senses to describe abstract concepts that are typically understood through the mind. For instance, in Lu Ji's 陸機 (261–303) Wen Fu 文賦, it is stated: "Some (works) are pure and subtle, delicate and restrained, often eliminating the superfluous and removing the excessive, lacking the lingering taste of the grand sacrificial broth, akin to the clear resonance of the red strings" (或清虛以婉約, 每除煩而去濫, 闕大羹之遺味, 同朱絃之清氾; Lu 2007, p. 44). Here, taste and sound are used to characterize the style of literary works. Similarly, Zhong Rong's 鍾嶸 (468–518) Shi Pin 詩品critiques certain writings that overly emphasize expounding principles while neglecting rhetorical embellishment as "insipid and lacking in flavor" (淡乎寡味; Zhong 2019, p. 6), again employing the metaphor of taste to describe the aesthetic qualities of the text.

Similar to the texts of Lu Xiujing, there has long been a tradition in Buddhism of using the metaphor of fragrance to represent virtues or Buddhist teachings. For example, in the *Dhammapada* (*Faju jing* 法句經; T04) translated during the Wu State (229–280), the positive influence of a wise person is compared to being permeated by the fragrance of incense: "Being influenced by the worthy is like being near incense—one's wisdom is refined, good deeds are cultivated, and behavior becomes pure and fragrant" (賢夫染人, 如近香熏, 進智習善, 行成潔芳; T04, no. 210, p. 562b6-7). In the fifth century, during Lu Xiujing's lifetime, Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416), in his correspondence with Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369–404) discussing etiquette of Sramana, stated: "It is hoped that the Three Treasures will flourish in this era, and that bright virtue will leave a lasting fragrance for hundreds of generations". (蓋欲令三寶中興於命世之運, 明德流芳於百代之下耳; T52, no. 2102, p. 84b2-3). Similarly, Zhu Daosheng 竺道生 (355–434) remarked: "Disseminating or upholding this sutra enables its teachings to nourish the present age, ensuring that the fragrance of morality endures and resonates for thousands of years" (傳持斯經, 令道化沾澤於當時, 德芳流聲於千載; X27, no. 577, p. 16b21-22). In these contexts, the morality referred to often signifies the Dharma advocated by Buddhism, just as the virtues promoted by Lu Xiujing pertain to the teachings of Daoism. In both cases, the moral framework diverges from the traditional Confucian ethical principles.

5. Conclusions

From the examples cited above in early medieval China, it is evident that writers, including Lu Xiujing, frequently paired objects processed by the mind with vocabulary

related to other senses such as smell and taste, forming a kind of synesthetic metaphor. This practice was consistent across both literary and non-literary texts. Although it is unclear whether these expressions were used by ordinary people in daily life, writers did not consider such usage unusual: virtues could have scents, and abstract concepts, such as doctrines and truths, could also be described as having fragrances or flavors, allowing people to metaphorically "taste" them. The frequent appearance of these examples in Daoist scriptures, Buddhist sutras, and other texts aimed at general readers—works not traditionally classified as literary genres—suggests that for educated Chinese writers, such synesthetic metaphors could be employed quite naturally, rather than as a display of literary prowess. In short, this mode of expression belongs to the literati tradition but does not necessarily occupy a special rhetorical status.

These analyses support Saussy's central argument that what translators and comparatists regard as special devices of expression and rhetoric may, over time, have become standard writing tools that writers no longer found unusual. The examples from Daoist scriptures are more persuasive than those from Qu Yuan. Unlike Qu Yuan, who wrote works of aesthetic significance and personal expression, Lu Xiujing composed practical religious texts. As such, his goal was for his expressions to be understood by contemporary readers with a basic literacy level rather than by modern literary scholars. At the same time, we must pay close attention to the specific historical context; it would be erroneous to assume that, in Qu Yuan's time, expressions that became conventional in the hands of later littérateurs, like those 700 years later, were already viewed as such. The attitude toward these expressions may have undergone significant shifts.

Taking Lu Xiujing, as discussed in this paper, as an example, we can see that literary studies of Daoist texts not only explore whether they offer sophisticated and innovative literary techniques but also reveal whether certain literary devices and rhetorical strategies had transcended elite circles to become conventional expressions. Unlike some ancient works, we have access to the dates of composition for certain Daoist scriptures and even know specific authors. These texts occupy an intermediate position: on the one hand, they are the creations of a creative individual; on the other hand, they are written for a broad readership and may employ familiar expressions and traditional phrases. This approach is applicable not only to Daoist scriptures but also to a variety of materials. We should anticipate further exploration in the future into the particularities and conventionalities of literary expression in religious texts.

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Abbreviations

DZ Zhengtong daozang 正統道藏 (Zhang 1977). DZ numbers follow Schipper and Verellen (2004). *The Taoist Canon*. T Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新修大藏經. Tōkyō: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1935. X Manji Shinsan Dainihon Zokuzōkyō 卍新纂大日本續藏經 Tōkyō: Kabushiki-gaisha Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975–1989.

Notes

1 In ancient China, the boundaries between literature and religion were often blurred, with many texts possessing multiple attributes. For instance, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 was not only a philosophical classic but also highly regarded for its literary value, while the *Shijing* 詩經, though a collection of poetry, was canonized by Confucianism and became a significant subject of philosophical and religious study. However, by the early medieval China, the distinction between literature and religion became more pronounced, particularly in the realms of literary criticism and the compilation of religious canons. During this period, a substantial body of literary criticism emerged, such as *Dianlue* 典略, *Wenfu* 文賦, *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, *Shipin* 詩品, and *Wenxuan* 文選, which discussed literary genres and evaluative standards. Yet, none of these works classified Buddhist or Daoist scriptures, written or translated during this time, as literary texts. Similarly, the compilations and catalogs of Buddhist and Daoist scriptures during this period made clear distinctions regarding the religious texts recognized within their respective traditions. Under such criteria, certain literary works, such as *Youxian* poetry 遊仙詩 (poems on wandering transcendents), while reflecting the religious beliefs prevalent among the aristocracy of the time, were not regarded by Daoist practitioners as Daoist texts. Of course, it is neither possible nor necessary to confine any text exclusively to a single domain such as literature, history, philosophy, or religion, as many texts inherently possess multiple attributes and values. Nevertheless, previous research has not yet explored the literary value of the Daoist scriptures compiled by Lu Xiujing, which this study seeks to address.

2 Saussy's use of the term "white" is derived from Jacques Derrida's well-known essay on metaphor (Derrida and Moore 1974). However, to avoid potential misunderstandings, I have chosen to use the terms "colorful" and "colorless" to convey the same meanings as Saussy's "color" and "white".

3 I am grateful to one of the reviewers for pointing out that the concept of "fragrant virtue" may not have been as surprising to Western readers as Saussy suggested. In this regard, researchers may consider examining Christian references, such as St. Paul's mention of "the sweet aroma of Christ" in *2 Corinthians*, interpretations of the *Song of Songs*, and other analogous examples. These parallels could provide valuable comparative insights into the cross-cultural use of olfactory metaphors in conceptualizing virtue.

4 There is extensive scholarly research on Qu Yuan and *Li Sao*, and their originality and literary skill are consistently highly regarded. For instance, David Hawkes argues that Qu Yuan was not only China's first poet but also far greater than his successors. Hawkes further claims that *Li Sao* is the only work that successfully combines the two themes of "the imperial epiphanies of the successful courtier-poet and the unsuccessful or banished courtier's complaints". He goes on to assert that "the most remarkable thing about this very remarkable poem is that we can see a genius at work, actually in the process of inventing a completely new sort of poetry out of an old oral tradition. Qu Yuan's despairing cry signals, paradoxically—or perhaps not so paradoxically—the birth of literature" (Hawkes 1985, pp. 51, 68).

5 In fact, prior to Qu Yuan, the Confucian classic *Shangshu* 尚書, in the chapter *Chen Jun* 陳君, which was composed during the Western Zhou period (1046–771 BCE), already contained the expression, "The fragrance of millet and grain is not the true fragrance; only the fragrance of bright virtue is genuine" (黍稷非馨, 明德惟馨; Shangshu 2018, p. 475). This explicitly links virtue with fragrance, demonstrating that the metaphorical association between moral excellence and aromatic qualities was established well before Qu Yuan's time.

6 For the purpose of this discussion, I would like to clarify the terms used in this article. The terms "littérateur" and "littérateurs" refer to individuals who have actively created literary works of significant originality and aesthetic value, leaving behind works that can be classified within established literary genres, such as poetry, fiction, rhapsody, prose, and drama. On the other hand, the terms "literatus" and "literati" refer to well-educated individuals who are capable of appreciating and producing elegant works. However, their works are not necessarily of high aesthetic value; instead, their written words or examples serve as evidence of their literacy and ability to appreciate literary art. Such individuals might include nobles, officials, monks, Daoists, and ordinary scholars from history who did not leave behind major literary works but were clearly educated. For example, Qu Yuan is considered a littérateur, while Lu Xiujing, the focus of this article, is a literatus. When discussing Saussy's argument, literati provides more compelling evidence than littérateurs.

7 According to my research, Lu Xiujing also used other expressions that first appeared in the *Book of the Later Han*, suggesting that he may have drawn from Fan Ye's work to expand his own literary corpus. Alternatively, it is possible that they shared a common corpus of terms that were not frequently used, or were not used at all, in earlier writings.

8 The translation came from David R. Knechtges's. In order to facilitate our discussion, I have modified the original translation of "fair" to "fragrant". According to our analysis, "fragrant" is a literal translation of "fang" while fair is a free translation.

9 In some cases, of course, the mind takes on a higher position as the master of the other senses. We can say that these two modes, the mind being higher and parallel to the other senses, are widely present in ancient Chinese texts, and which one to follow depends on the choice of the authors in the context.

10 However, we can be sure that Lu Xiujing was familiar with Buddhist theory, see Bokenkamp "Lu Xiujing, Buddhism, and the First Daoist Canon" (Bokenkamp 2001).

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