

The Sensorial Production of the Social

'I make social heat (*honghuo*), therefore I am.'
What a Chinese peasant philosopher might have said.

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ABSTRACT *In China temple festivals are replete with noises, sights, smells, tastes, and ambient sensory productions. When worshipers converge on a particular temple festival, they produce and experience honghuo (social heat or red-hot sociality). This native concept of honghuo highlights the importance of the social production of a heightened sensory ambience as well as the sensorial production of sociality. In co-producing honghuo the festivalgoers are exhibiting a 'resonant body-person' that is in accord with the spirit of mutual responsiveness. I propose a sensory-production model of sensory analysis that foregrounds the active participatory role of social agents in producing a sensorially rich social world. This model extends from, yet also critiques the prevalent cultural phenomenological approach to investigating sensory orders in different cultures. A 'mindful body' or an 'attentive body' is only the pre-condition for any person's action-full lifeworld.*

KEYWORDS *Red-hot sociality, social heat, temple festival*

In this paper I propose a sensory-production model of sensory analysis that foregrounds the active participatory role of social agents in *producing* a sensorially rich social world. This model expands on, yet also critiques the prevalent semiotic and cultural phenomenological approach to investigating sensory orders in different cultures. The ethnographic materials upon which I build my arguments are from rural Shaanbei, northern Shaanxi Province in north-central China, where I spent a total of 18 months conducting fieldwork for my doctoral research in the mid- and late 1990s (see Chau 2006).¹ My work was on the revival of popular religion in rural communities, and the most central locus of 'doing' popular religion in Shaanbei is temple festivals. The purpose of a temple festival is to hail all worshipers of the deity to come and celebrate the deity's 'birthday.' Temple festivals are 'hot and fiery' (*hong-*

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huo) or 'hot and noisy' (*re'nao*) folk event productions replete with noises, sights, smells, tastes, and ambient sensations.² When worshipers converge on a particular temple festival, they produce and experience *honghuo*, or what can be called *red-hot sociality*. This native concept of *honghuo* highlights the importance of the social production of a heightened sensory ambience as well as the sensorial production of sociality.

Knowing and Being versus Doing: Two Models of Sensory Studies

Knowing and Being: A Sensory-Interpretation Model

There has been a call in recent years among anthropologists for more sensory-oriented studies of other cultures (e.g., Bigenho 2000; Chuengsatansup 1999; Classen 1993; Classen *et al.* 1994; Desjarlais 2003; Feld 1990, 1991; Geurts 2002, 2003; Howes 1990, 1991; Stoller 1984, 1989, 1997). Robert Desjarlais defines the anthropology of the senses as 'the interpretive study of the cultural construction and social dimensions of human perception and sensate experience in different societies' (Desjarlais 2003:3). Most of the existing sensory-oriented ethnographies operate on two related modalities: (1) how different peoples can live in radically different sensory environments, and (2) how different cultures may have different configurations of the senses or 'sensory orders' (emphasizing different senses or having entirely different senses) (see Howes 1991). The underlying assumption is largely a receptive-interpretive model of the senses, in which the individual human agent, through his or her endowed (physiologically and culturally) sensory organs and abilities, receives sensory stimuli from the surrounding environment and perceives meanings in these stimuli. This model is built on the theoretical position that living in a sensorial world means *interpreting* this sensorial world. The theoretical bases of this model are diverse, though one can understand it as more or less a combination of a Geertzian 'senses as a cultural system' approach and a Csordasian cultural phenomenological approach. Two recent ethnographies of the senses will provide illustrations of this 'sensory-interpretation' approach.

Kathryn L. Geurts' work on the Anlo sensory models of *knowing* and *being* in the world perhaps best exemplifies the sensory-interpretation approach. A few select quotes from Geurts (2002) will illustrate her analytical strategies. She aims at constructing 'an indigenous Anlo sensorium' (Geurts 2002:38); she is interested in knowing how the Anlo know what they know (*ibid.*), their 'bodily modes' of gathering information and knowledge (*ibid.*), and the Anlo 'indigenous theory of inner states' (Geurts 2002:39). The prime

example of an Anlo cultural logic of sensory perception Geurts presents is the native concept of *seselelame*, which means feeling in or through the body, flesh, and skin or feel/perceive-feel/perceive-at-flesh-inside (Geurts 2002: 41). The embodied nature of this sensorial modality leads Geurts to explore and focus on the link between embodiment and sensory perception. The concept of *seselelame* is so versatile and multivalent that its usages blur the boundaries between sensation, perception, emotion, cognition, disposition, and moral sensibilities (Geurts 2002: 43). The sense of balance and balanced walk are indicative of, as well as affect, a person's balancedness in character and balance-headedness. Indeed, Geurts argues that for the Anlo sensory perceptions are inextricably intertwined with their ways of *being-in-the-world*. From 'habitual forms of bodily practice' (p. 39) to the wearing of traditional African clothes (p. 149) to the experiencing of 'inner states of being' (p. 43), an Anlo person is literally constituted by the senses.

Robert Desjarlais, in his *Sensory Biographies* (2003), reconstructs sensorially-informed life histories of an elderly lama and an elderly woman among the Yolmo people of Nepal with whom he conducted extensive fieldwork. Evoking a phenomenological methodology, Desjarlais tries to 'understand and describe in words *phenomena as they appear to the consciousness*' of his informants (p. 5; emphasis mine). The phenomena most relevant for his study include 'the workings of time, form, perception, selfhood, bodies, suffering, personal agency, morality, memory, vision, and language' as they have taken form in the informants' lives (p. 6). For reasons both cultural and personal, the elderly woman Kisang Omu's life history is full of concerns of sounds, especially the voices of others, while the elderly lama (Buddhist priest) Ghang Lama's life history is informed by memories of visions. In other words, Kisang Omu's life is more *aurally* constituted while Ghang Lama's life is more *visually* constituted. This discovery of the different weight the two Yolmo elders put on different sensory modalities in their respective lives is significant because it suggests the possibility of radically heterogeneous sensory engagements with the world for different individuals in the same culture.

Informed by a phenomenological preoccupation with elucidating the ways in which the individual engages the world through his or her consciousness and body and trying to ground cognitive categories on processes of embodiment, the works of both Geurts and Desjarlais (and of course those of Csordas and some others) expand our understandings of the inextricable connections between the senses, embodiment, and personhood. Yet something seems to be amiss in these often elegantly constructed ethnographies of the senses:

the role of the social, and not only how the senses receive and perceive the social but more importantly how social actors actively construct their social worlds in sensorially rich manners, and how moments of sensorialized sociality become institutionalized.

Doing: A Sensory-Production Model

We may come to understand how people in a particular culture know and are in the world through the senses, but there has been little explicit attention to the *active participatory role* of human agents themselves in producing the said sensory stimuli. In other words, the prevailing model in most sensory scholarship places the sources of sensory stimuli *outside* of the body (and bodily boundary) of the human agent and the reception of the sensory stimuli *inside* of the same body. Even the interoception sensory models (e.g. sense of balancing in Geurts 2002) presuppose the mostly involuntary source of the sensations inside the body. But what if the body and its actions themselves are key contributors to the production of the sensory event and the effect of the sensory event is located not in the individual body but rather in the social collectivity itself? To put it in more concrete terms, what if the body and its actions contribute heat (physical and metaphoric) and noise to a social event while the red-hot sociality thus produced is to characterize the social event itself rather than (or in addition to) any concrete individually-felt sensory experience? The Chinese folk theory of red-hot sociality points to such a modality of socio-sensory amalgam in which what is privileged is not so much the sensing subject as *the heat-and-noise-producing subject*. The heat in *honghuo* (red-fiery) and *re'nao* (hot-noisy) is thought to reside in the social gathering and is not necessarily a physical/physiological sensation felt by the people in the gathering. What is felt by the people, however, is what I would like to call 'sociothermic affect,' a diffuse psychosomatic sense of satisfaction and fulfillment resulting from having partaken in, and co-producing, red-hot sociality. In other words, the physical temperature of the participants' bodies might not be higher than normal, but they feel that they are in the middle of a satisfying, 'hot' event. In contrast to the above-mentioned 'sensory-interpretation model' of sensory studies, I shall call this the 'sensory-production model' to highlight *the active participatory role of human agents as makers of the social sensorium*.

My use of the expression 'social sensorium' might raise some eyebrows or provoke objections. One may ask: how can the sensorium be social? Is the sensorium not located in the human body? The Merriam-Webster online

dictionary defines 'sensorium' as 'the parts of the brain or the mind concerned with the reception and interpretation of sensory stimuli' or more broadly 'the entire sensory apparatus.' Geurts equates sensorium with sensory order, which she defines as 'a pattern of relative importance and differential elaboration of the various senses, through which children learn to perceive and to experience the world and in which pattern they develop their abilities' (Geurts 2002:5). In either case the sensorium is a function of the human perceptive capacities informed by both physiological and cultural processes. When I first used the word 'sensorium' in my book on the revival of popular religion in contemporary China I in fact made an embarrassing blunder of usage. Characterizing the richness of sensory stimulations at the Black Dragon King temple festival, I wrote that '[t]he temple ground is a huge sensorium' (Chau 2006:162). Unaware of its usual technical meaning, I had naively thought that, just as an aquarium is a place for aquatic life, a sensorium must be a place or space full of sensory stimulations. It is not clear since when the sensorium has been imprisoned in the human body, but perhaps it is too difficult to re-signify sensorium as external to the human brain or body. To distinguish from sensorium, I will use 'social sensorium' to refer to a *sensorially rich social space* such as found at a temple festival, a busy market, or a packed dance floor.

It might be instructive to examine some passages again from Geurts' ethnography (2002) to reveal the differences more concretely between the sensory-interpretation and the sensory-production models of sensory analysis. In her in-depth study of the importance of the sense of balance in Anlo culture, Geurts describes the 'heated' and 'cooling off' dances during an Anlo festival (Geurts 2002:156–59). During the 'heated' period of the festival, acrobatic dancers with knives and machetes dance heatedly and rigorously to music and the beats of drums (p. 156), and they engage in a host of 'heated' activities including, periodically, 'very hectic, almost frenetic styles of dancing,' pouring alcohol down the throats of other dancers, lighting cigarettes, puffing smoke sometimes from four cigarettes at a time and blowing smoke onto one another, applying coloured powder onto one another's bodies, faces, and hair, and frequently getting into possession trances (pp. 156–57). During the 'cooling off' period of the festival, participants dance in a more subdued and low-key style (p. 157). Geurts proceeds to interpret the juxtaposition and contrast between the heated and cool dances as epitomizing the Anlo cultural logic and sensory symbolism of balance, and, quoting Thomas Csordas, as a 'cultural elaboration of sensory engagement' (p. 159). Curiously, Geurts provides minimal interpretation of the heated and cool dances

themselves, as if each is not meaningful unless contrasted with the other in a pair of 'balanced' dance styles (perhaps betraying a lingering Structuralist influence?).

Going beyond these sensory interpretations, however, a sensory-production approach would instead focus on *the production side* of the participating agents. Typical of an interpretivist perspective, Geurts' analysis often posits a non-participatory observer floating amidst the natives, observing, in the case of the Anlo festival, the 'spectacle' of the sensorially rich dances and other activities. However, all of the Anlo natives are actively participating in the festival in various capacities (dancers, drummers, musicians, etc.) and constructing a sensorially rich *sociality* that they partake in and, one assumes, enjoy. When one is an active participant but not a passive spectator, the whole festival is not so much a spectacle as a social sensorium (i.e. a sensorially rich social space). The heat and noise and frenzied atmosphere in the heated dance are produced and consumed by the participants in what can be called a 'rite of convergence' (as opposed to rites of passage).³ The very cursory analytical treatment by Geurts of the heated dancing may have been due to the limitations of the sensory-interpretation approach, which would have difficulty accessing the 'interpretations' of the hot, sweating, noise-making, gyrating, and trancing natives. Are the natives simply *being* in the world? Or are they actively *producing* this world, and doing so sensorially?

A culture's sensory order is instrumental in forming its people's ways of perceiving, knowing, and being in the world, but what is left under-investigated is the nature of 'the world.' This 'world' is hardly a pre-given thing waiting to be perceived, known, and 'been-in.' For most if not all humans, this world is a thoroughly socialized world, and they participate actively and constantly in socializing this world. This process of socializing cannot be done without human sensorial productions of noise, heat, taste, smell, spectacle, etc. (through speaking, shouting, singing, drumming, making music, blasting the speakers, honking, chanting, clapping, dancing, sweating, getting hot, embracing, caressing, cooking, feasting, toasting, bathing, smoking, perfuming, dressing, setting off firecrackers, lighting incense or candles, processing, engaging in games or battles, torturing, etc.). In other words, we sensorialize our world, especially through engaging in intense social activities.

Resonant Body-Persons and Sensory Production

Shaanbei people who converge upon a festive occasion such as a temple festival or a banquet intuitively understand their role as noise- and *honghuo-*

makers. They are expected to contribute their body-persons to co-produce red-hot sociality and sociothermic affect for the occasion. Implicit in this expectation is the Chinese native concept of *ganying* (responding upon feeling), which foregrounds the moral obligation of responsiveness.

On the surface the concept of *ganying* resembles what the phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in an essay called 'Eye and Mind,' has said about the way people perceive and are stirred by paintings (or any other exterior objects): the 'quality, light, color and depth which are there before us are there only because they *awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them*' (1964:22). In his advocacy for a cultural phenomenological approach to the body and healing, Thomas Csordas elaborates on this Merleau-Ponty insight:

Because we are not isolated subjectivities trapped within our bodies, but share an intersubjective milieu with others, we must also specify that a somatic mode of attention means not only attention to and with one's own body, but includes attention to the bodies of others. Our concern is the cultural elaboration of sensory engagement, not preoccupation with one's own body as an isolated phenomenon (Csordas 1993:139).

This phenomenological insight does not, however, elaborate on how exactly sensory engagement is elaborated *socially*, which is typical of the interiorist preoccupation of most if not all phenomenological approaches. The Chinese concept of *ganying* stresses the *action* in response to the feeling rather than merely an interior 'echo' (Merleau-Ponty) or 'attention,' somatic or otherwise, to one's own and others' bodies (Csordas). As a matter of fact, the term *ganying* is often used by worshipers to praise the deities who have responded to their prayers by having *done* something (e.g. granting them a son, making their business prosper, etc.). Grateful worshipers would present large decorated plaques to the deity during the temple festival to be hung at the temple with expressions like 'the god felt (and) responded' (*shenling ganying*).

Elisabeth Hsu's work on acute pain infliction as therapy (Hsu 2005) helps us see the role of the senses in constructing sociality in a way that in my view highlights responsiveness, which expresses the essence of the idea of *ganying*. In the context of asking why many forms of traditional healing involve a stage in which pain is inflicted on the patient, Hsu argues that:

Acute pain... has an eminently social potential for enhancing a sense of togetherness between individuals and for making real social relatedness. In other words,

the sensory experience of acute pain is essential to community building. It is the cross-culturally observed disposition of human beings to respond instantly to an acute pain event that makes possible the intense experience of commonality, even if only for a brief moment (Hsu 2005: 85–86).

Hsu's research highlights the impact of sensorial experience on garnering and enhancing sociality, and the social origins of many forms and genres of sensorial productions. When the acupuncturist needles the patient (thus penetrating and working with the largest sensory organ of the patient's body, the skin), when the patient cries out in pain in response to the feeling of 'getting the *qi*,' and when the acupuncturist and others in the immediate social environment respond to the patient's cry with multi-sensorial attention, we are witnessing the active sensorial production of the social. The synchronicity and sensorialized sociality that pain produces between patient, practitioner and bystanders, which in acupuncture is exploited for healing purposes, is also put to use in torture, which can range from relatively harmless scenarios to gruesome ones. For a relatively harmless scenario, I have in mind the practice of bride teasing quite common in Chinese weddings. For example, young children (of the groom's village) in Shaanbei prick the newly-arrived bride with needles and pinch her until she cries in despair while they laugh and joke cheerfully. The groom is supposed to look on in tolerance without interfering. Should we be surprised that here too needles are used?! For a gruesome scenario I have in mind torturers who engage in humiliating and torturing prisoners such as documented in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse case. Perhaps too obscene to be enumerated here, the sensorial productions in the Abu Ghraib prison remind us the equally potent but sinister possibilities of sensorialized sociality.

In co-producing *honghuo* Shaanbei festivalgoers are exhibiting a 'resonant body-person' that is in accord with the spirit of *ganying*.⁴ I use 'resonant' rather than 'respondent' to stress the highly sonic/acoustic aspect of *honghuo*-making.⁵ Crucially also, I use 'body-person' rather than simply 'body' because I want to stress the agency of the participating social actor.⁶ Despite the many merits of Csordas' and others' embodiment approaches to cultural analysis (especially in medical anthropology), their over-attention to the body tends inevitably to overshadow and obscure the social person. A 'mindful body' or an 'attentive body' is simply the pre-condition for any person's action-full lifeworld. Below I shall illustrate the workings of a resonant body-person with the example of drinking and drinking games in Shaanbei.

In Shaanbei, drinking is always a social activity, and many social events incorporate drinking and drinking games to heighten the *honghuo* level. Liquor is used to treat visitors and guests. Drinking can take place anywhere; at home, in a restaurant, and at banquets and temple festivals. The most common alcoholic drink is clear, distilled liquor (from grains such as sorghum, millet, wheat) that is called 'spicy liquor' or 'burning liquor' (*lajiu* or *shaojiu*). Liquor is a crucial ingredient in *honghuo*-making not only because it causes a burning sensation in the throat and warms up the body. It is also the most important medium of intensified social interaction between men. Liquor is usually served with small, white porcelain shot cups put in front of each person around the table. The cups are always filled as soon as they are emptied. No one is supposed to drink from his cup by himself unannounced. A call to empty the cups together as a group has to be made, or someone invites a particular person with a toast to drink up with him in a pair (called *jingjiu*, i.e., to pay respect to you via the invitation to drink up). In other words, the very act of raising one's cup is always social and relational. Drinking together reaffirms and deepens existing relationships (*guanxi*) and builds new ones.

Drinking is also an art form in Shaanbei. Instead of using words, Shaanbei men often sing a short song to invite their drinking partners to empty their cups. The lyrics of these songs (called *jingjiuge*, drink invitation songs, or *jiuqu*, liquor tunes) are often composed on the spot to existing folk tunes, and others usually have to sing back a song in a return invitation to drink up. A lot of persuading and attempts to decline invitations to drink also go on as hosts and guests loudly and ever drunkenly negotiate their relations of social indebtedness. The singing and pleading immediately raise the *honghuo* level of the occasion. Sometimes at restaurants a professional hostess is hired to sing liquor tunes and help persuade the guests to drink.

But it is the finger-guessing drinking games that really raise the noise and *honghuo* level of the occasion. These games are played almost exclusively by men.⁷ In fact, older men typically tend to be savvier at these games, a result of decades of practice. Men play these games whenever they drink alcohol. There are a few different kinds of drinking games but the most common is called *huaquan* (literally, swinging the fists). The game is played by men in pairs. Both simultaneously swing out their right hands with varying numbers of fingers and shout out a number which each thinks would be the sum total of all the fingers in both men's hands. The one who has guessed it correctly wins and the loser has to drink up a cup of *shaojiu* or a glass of beer. These drinking occasions most commonly take place at engagement, wedding, or



Two Shaanbei opera troupe members engage in animated finger-guessing drinking game. Note the bottle of liquor and bowl of snacks half visible in the foreground.

funeral banquets but also transpire in restaurants, homes, or at temple festivals. The clamorous noise the men make together and the red-hot sociality they create and share infuse them with a sense of camaraderie and vitality.

The fist-swinging, number-shouting, tune-singing, and liquor-cup-emptying Shaanbei natives exemplify a Bakhtinian dialogic body-person that is not only attentive to each other's bodies (quite literally in the case of finger guessing) but more importantly co-producing a sensorialized sociality enjoyed by all who are present. Not trapped in the *cogito* or the corporeal, a Shaanbei person would say: 'I make *honghuo* (social heat), therefore I am.' And in Shaanbei there is no social heat hotter than that at a temple festival.

Temple Festivals and Social Heat

Describing the high-spirited, chaotic scenes typically found at local temples in Taiwan and invoking the southern Hokkien term *lauziat* ('noisy and hot,' i.e. *re'nao, honghuo*), the anthropologist Robert Weller aptly calls Chinese popular religion 'hot and noisy religion' (1994:113-128). As Weller observes, '[a]ny

successful large event in Taiwan, from a market to a ritual, provides plenty of heat and noise – *it should be* packed with people, chaotically boisterous, loud with different voices, and clashingly colorful' (italics mine). This 'should-be-ness' captures the often tyrannical force of such a cultural imperative. We might call this cultural imperative of *honghuo*-making the 'festive regime.'⁸ A large event that is not hot and noisy is a failed event; people *have to* produce heat and noise on a festive occasion. Similarly, a market is a successful market when it is hot and noisy (see Yu 2004). Temple festivals epitomize such an 'aesthetics of 'heat and noise' (Weller 1994:118).⁹ But what take place at a temple festival that makes it *honghuo*?

The forms and contents of temple festivals in China are quite varied. Some temple festivals have elaborate formal ritual events while others are minimalist in formal ritual matters. The common denominator of all temple festivals, however, is the attempt of all participants (organizers as well as visitors) to make the atmosphere as *honghuo* as possible.

Imagine yourself as a Shaanbei peasant villager, living on the famed yellow earth plateau, and a worshiper of the Black Dragon King deity (Heilongdawang).¹⁰ Imagine also that today is the thirteenth of the sixth month of the lunar calendar (i.e. in mid-July in most years), the birthday of the Black Dragon King and the most *honghuo* or 'red and fiery' day of the six-day temple festival at Longwanggou (the Dragon King Valley). You get up early, have a quick breakfast, dress up in clean and finest clothes, and head off in the direction of the temple ground, walking, or biking, or riding your motorcycle, or taking a three-wheel tractor truck or minibus. The sun is already up and it is going to be a hot, mid-summer day. From morning till late at night, you and tens of thousand others will be participating in co-producing and co-consuming all kinds of 'sensory utterances': ambient/participatory, heat, proprioception, kinesthetic, noises, sights, smells and tastes.

You get off the minibus or tractor-truck, whichever is your means of transportation to get to the temple festival, follow the swarms of other worshipers up and along the Dragon King Valley, passing through noodle stands, watermelon stands, gambling circles, sing-dance tents; you buy a few bundles of incense and spirit money from the incense hawkers, climb up the steep steps to the main temple hall, throw the spirit money into the large bonfire of spirit money, light a string of firecrackers, kneel and pray in front of the Black Dragon King deity statue, burn sticks of incense, put some money in the donation bowl, shake the divination cylinder to divine your fortune in the coming months and obtain your divination slip number, get immediately

pushed aside by worshipers coming up from behind, go to the divination slips room to the back of the main temple hall and have the divination poem interpreted, then squeeze your way through the crowd to catch a glimpse of the opera performance, and wander through different parts of the festival ground, snack or eat a bowl of spicy soup noodle, chat with acquaintances and co-villagers or complete strangers, play a few rounds of games, watch the fireworks at night, and always find yourself in the company of tens of thousand other worshipers.

Tractors, motorcycles, minivans, and buses are constantly bringing people into and out of the festival site; on the roads leading to Longwanggou the bus operators are shouting: 'Longwanggou! Longwanggou!'; at the mouth of the valley the bus operators heading out shout out the destinations or directions (names of towns): 'Mizhi! Mizhi!' 'Yulin! Yulin!' 'Zhenchuan! Zhenchuan!' 'Quick, quick, we are leaving!'; the diesel motors are relentless with their staccato 'tok tok tok tok tok tok tok,' rhyming with the different pitches of honking; loudspeakers tout people into freak show or sing-dance tents; people are shouting, laughing, chatting, playing games, gambling; firecrackers explode; drums, gongs, trumpets of the *yangge* dance troupes are playing; the sacrificial pigs and goats squeal; the sound of opera singing and music pierces the air.

People are everywhere, people in festive colorful clothes; an ocean of people, a few you know but most you don't; game stands, trinket sellers, incense and firecracker sellers, watermelon stands, noodle tent, freak-show tent, sing-dance tent, fortune tellers, folk music bands; men, women, children, old people; people climbing up the steps to the main temple hall; people kneeling down in front of the deity, burning incense and spirit money, praying and offering thanks, and putting money into the donation box or bowl; the pile of bright yellow spirit money burning like a bonfire; the brightly-lit opera stage and the opera singers in colorful costumes; the *yangge* dance performances; the fireworks at night; the dazzling chaos.

The smells and tastes of all kinds of food: noodles made of wheat and potato flour, griddle cakes, goat intestine soup, stir-fried dishes, garlic and scallion, vinegar and red pepper, watermelons, small yellow melons, icicles, soft drinks, burning liquor, beer; the pungency of diesel exhaust, exploding firecrackers, freshly slaughtered pigs and goats, and their warm raw blood; the mixed fragrance and pungency of incense and burning spirit money; the thirst-quenching and cold taste of the divine spring water; the faint smell of sweat from so many people squeezing through the main temple hall...



Crowds of worshipers at the Black Dragon King Temple festival.

Most if not all of these sensory stimulations are not naturally-occurring but are produced by the festivelgoers themselves. Because of the principle of resonant body-persons, the key instrument of *honghuo*-making is people; the more people the more *honghuo*; the more heterogeneous activities people are engaged in the more *honghuo*. Embedded in this belief is a premium put on the warmth or heat generated from human sociality and a fear of, or distaste for, social isolation, which is associated with loneliness and coldness.¹¹ Shaanbei people make a sharp contrast between the dull and bland drudgery of everyday life and the lively and exciting social events such as funeral and wedding banquets or temple festivals. These social events are *honghuo* because there are always large gatherings of people, people doing any number of things: milling around, talking and shouting, eating and drinking, smoking, playing, singing, dancing, drumming, setting off firecrackers and fireworks, burning incense, gambling, or simply watching and being part of the scene.

Massing (i.e. the convergence of a lot of people) is a necessary condition for *honghuo*-making.¹² It is as if the simple convergence of many people will generate *honghuo*, which is why I choose to translate *honghuo* not simply as 'exciting,' but also as 'social heat' or 'red-hot sociality.' The convergence of people generates *honghuo*, and *honghuo* generates a greater convergence of

people because people are predisposed to being attracted to the noise and colors of *honghuo* (because they are resonating with their body-persons). A small crowd is sure to generate a bigger crowd. Shaanbei people say that they are 'in a hurry to get to or rush to a *honghuo* event' (S. *gan honghuo*) the same way they say they are 'in a hurry to get to or rush to the market' (*ganji*). They hurry to the market because the most *honghuo* time of a market day is in the early morning; by noon most people will have dispersed. They hurry as well to a *honghuo* event such as a temple festival because they fear that they might miss the action, miss the *honghuo*. If they are not the protagonists in a *honghuo* event (e.g., a brawl or a funeral procession in the street), they rush to the scene so that they can 'watch the *honghuo*' (S. *kan honghuo*; M. *kan re'nao*). But by rushing to the scene they become part of the *honghuo* and partake in producing a bigger *honghuo*. So the expression 'to watch the *honghuo*' somehow makes people continue to regard themselves as mere spectators while they have actually become full participants. Often, it is not the incident or scene itself that is *honghuo* but rather the crowd that surrounds it. The generation of social heat bears a striking resemblance to the generation of physical heat. According to thermodynamic laws, when molecules are compressed mechanically they generate more heat due to increased collisions between molecules. So when people converge they generate more social heat (i.e., *honghuo*). One may call this native conception of sociality a *sociothermic theory of sociality*.

It was of course Durkheim who first expounded on the role massing plays in generating intense sociality (Durkheim 1965:245–252) The Australian aborigines are dispersed most of the year as separate family units in search of food, but at regular intervals they gather into a larger group (the totemic clan) and celebrate. The dispersed state is characterized by 'very mediocre intensity' it is 'uniform, languishing and dull.' On the other hand, when the group comes together, 'everything changes.'

The very fact of the concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant. When they are once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation... [W]hen arrived at this state of exaltation, a man does not recognize himself any longer... [E]verything is just as though he really were transported into a special world, entirely different from the one where he ordinarily lives, and into an environment filled with exceptionally intense forces that take hold of him and metamorphose him (Durkheim 1965:246–47; 249–50).

This intense sociality has since been known as 'collective effervescence.' Any festive occasion depends on and demands such an intense sociality, a product of massing.

Even though the festivalgoers in Shaanbei are super-loaded by sensory stimulation, no one quite becomes frenzied. Even though they might experience a mild form of collective effervescence, it would be going too far to suggest that they, like the Australian aboriginals described by Durkheim, are metamorphosed and can no longer recognize themselves. The festivalgoers do not appear ecstatic, as many people around the world might during intense ritualistic situations (e.g., going into trance, being possessed by spirits, dancing and singing, convulsing, foaming at the mouth, eyes rolling, etc.). Many festivalgoers look excited, happy, and engaged, while some others are quite calm; some look awed, even disoriented and confused; many seem not to know where they are or where to go, and are simply being pushed by the momentum of the crowd to wherever there is action; and some look tired or simply exhausted. It is difficult to assess or characterize precisely the kinds of affective state the festivalgoers are experiencing, but the common usage of the idiom of *honghuo* and *re'nao* suggest that they are suffused with some kind of *sociothermic affect* (more diffused than 'feelings' and more complex than simple excitement) that resonates with the kind of sociothermic affect they experience at wedding and funeral banquets, crowded markets, and other temple festivals.¹³ The source of this affect is not only all the sensory stimulation at these *honghuo* events, but more important, the very convergence of a lot of people.

Honghuo events become memorable events to be savored long afterwards, and it is almost as if participants or witnesses become imbued with *honghuo* as an intangible quality the way a person is endowed with *mana* (life force, vitality, spiritual power) in Melanesian societies. Taiwanese pilgrims who go on long and often arduous pilgrimages to centers of divine power to attend temple festivals (e.g., the temple at Beigang dedicated to the goddess Mazu) experience similar feelings of the endowment of renewed energy and personal vitality. They even liken the experience to dead batteries getting recharged. Even though they believe the power comes from Mazu, it is equally plausible that they derive renewed vitality from the extreme social heat (i.e., *honghuo*, or the Minnan expression *lauziat*) generated at the crowded and exciting temple festival scene. It might not be too far-fetched to speak of *honghuo* events as therapeutic, as someone who is deprived of the opportunity to experience sociothermic affect might feel a craving for it. Sangren (2000) has

convincingly argued that the masses of worshipers at Mazu festivals constitute a kind of collective testimonialism that confirms and authenticates an individual worshiper's faith in the magical efficacy of the deity. The same can be said about Shaanbei deities, temple festivals, worshipers, and magical efficacy. Temple festivals are not simply expressions of people's relationships with the deities; they at the same time construct and affirm such relationships. In addition, temple festivals construct and confirm an imagined community of fellow beneficiaries of the deities in a yearly communion of godly efficacy and red-hot sociality.

Conclusion

Why do *mahjong* players loudly bang their tiles on the table and make such clamorous noise when they mix the tiles? Why do charismatic Christians engage in 'loud praises' that include jumping up and down, exuberant clapping, and glossolalic chanting (Csordas 1997:108-113)? Why do singers and DJs work up the crowd at a concert or in a dance club? Why do football fans do the human wave in the stadium? Why do members of the audience clap in unison after a performance (Connor 2003)? Why have huge sound systems become such a ubiquitous component in street fairs? Why does the audience of Bollywood films sing along with their favorite film stars in cinemas? Why has the barbecue become a fixture in outdoor festivities? Is it absurd to claim that the senses can lie outside of our bodies in a human collectivity, that human sociality is fundamentally sensorial? The imperative to produce *honghuo* (red-hot sociality) through the techniques of sensorialized massing points to the need in theorizing about the body, the senses, and being-in-the-world to bring *the social* back into the picture. The body is not simply the existential ground for the self and experience, nor does it merely react passively to external stimuli; more often than not, the body (or what I prefer to call the body-person) partakes in producing the world around it, by generating sensorialized sociality.

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Notes

1. Some sections of this article are derived from chapter 8 of my book (Chau 2006). However, with these materials I am making a new argument on the dialectic relations between the social and the sensorial.
2. *Honghuo* literally means 'red and fiery,' and it can be variably translated as red-hot, fun, lively, crowded, hectic, chaotic, confused, messy, exciting, enthusing, hustle and bustle, festive, carnivalesque, intense, frenzied, sensational, social heat, red-hot sociality, or even 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 1965). In an extended usage it also means prosperous. The word *honghuo* is composed of two characters: *hong*, meaning red, and *huo*, meaning fire. Red is the most highly valued color in Chinese culture. It is the color of happiness, success, and good fortune. Red is thus the dominant color at weddings and the Lunar New Year. On these occasions people wear red clothes, give out red packets with gift money inside, hang couplets written on red paper, release red-coated firecrackers, and generally indulge in red-themed merrymaking. Fire (*huo*) symbolizes the stove, hearth, warmth, heat, and excitement. *Honghuo* is the Shaanbei colloquial equivalent of the Mandarin word *re'nao*. The word *re'nao* is composed of the two characters *re* and *nao*. *Re* means hot, heat, heady, emotional, passionate, fervent, or feverish. *Nao* means to stir up and connotes a wide range of excitement: rambunctious, agitated, hustle bustle, playful, busy, noisy, conflicted, exuberant, colorful, to express dissatisfaction, to vent, to plague, to turn upside down, to be naughty, to make a scene.
3. We have been seduced by the elegance of the rite of passage model (and that of the rites themselves) as well as the exuberance of native symbols while neglecting what is felt but often not remarked upon, experienced but poorly articulated: sociality.
4. Though Shaanbei villagers do not use the expression *ganying* in the context of producing red-hot sociality, I believe the concept points to the underlying inter-subjective and inter-responsive nature of sensorialized sociality.
5. Similar to the Indonesian concept of *ramai/ramé*, the essence of *honghuo* is noise: loud, chaotic, and heterogeneous noise. I thank Kostas Retsikas for discussions on the similarities between *ramai* and *honghuo*.
6. I build my concept of a resonant body-person partially upon Elisabeth Hsu's concept of the 'body ecologic' (Hsu 1999:78), though the latter stresses the interpenetration of the corporeal and the environmental while my concept stresses the mutually responsive social body-persons.
7. Playing drinking games is probably the most important social skill for Shaanbei men. Being good at swinging the fist is a sign of cultural competence and mastery of good human relationships (it has to be played with appropriate courtesy and good humor). It is also one of the most important means of fostering brotherhood and friendship among male peers (usually one only drinks and plays the drinking game with partners of similar age and of the same generational cohort).
8. This concept draws inspiration from Bakhtin's concept of the 'popular-festive form,' though it differs significantly from his more influential concept of the 'carnival-esque.'
9. Many non-Chinese societies have concepts similar to *honghuo* or *re'nao*: *hlermu* (fun, pleasurable, exciting) among the Sherpas (Ortner 1978:81), *ramé* (crowded, noisy, and active) among the Balinese (Geertz 1973:446), *ramai* among Javanese, *marua'* among the Toraja in Sulawesi (Volkman 1985:69). The Japanese use the term *nekkii*

(literally 'hot air') to refer to the heated ambience at a concert or political rally. They also use the term *ninki* (literally 'people breath/air') to mean popularity (i.e. a person or event drawing many people and their breaths). This word has entered the Chinese language in recent years as a loan word to also mean popularity (*renqi*). Its usage has evolved into more Chinese ones such as the expression *renqi henwang* ('teeming popularity'). The *Ethnos* reviewer suggests that *renqi* is a common Chinese term to mean 'vitality generated at social gatherings'; however, I am not aware of this usage except in the sense that popularity would mean the gathering of a lot of people. Shaanbei people also use the expression *renqi* (not as a loan word but as an indigenous word), but referring to quite different things. A person with *renqi* in Shaanbei means that he or she behaves morally, has a good reputation, and is respected by others.

10. Traditionally dragon kings (*longwang*) were agrarian deities *par excellence* in North China, responsible for granting timely rain for the crops. Each dragon king in each local area has its own legends of origin and magical exploits. In Shaanbei, as in other North China regions, there are a large number of deities being worshiped, the most common of which are dragon kings and fertility goddesses (see Chau 2006).
11. The ultimate happiness and good fortune in traditional Chinese culture is expressed by the phrase 'the hall (house) filled with sons and grandchildren' (*ersun mantang*). It is not good enough if one has many sons and grandchildren if they are dispersed; the cultural ideal or ideal imagery is to have them all (crowded) under one roof. The opposite of a full, crowded, and joyous house is living by oneself: the worst fate imaginable.
12. Massing is originally a concept used in architecture referring to the volume (massiveness) of built structures. I have pilfered it for my purpose to describe the large volume of people at a gathering. I prefer massing over crowd because the latter word has accrued a negative connotation (though of course the word 'mass' also has negative connotations, such as in 'the masses'). It is important to point out here that there are of course occasions where a large gathering of people do not generate social heat, though mostly due to the conscious suppression of *honghuo*-generating interactions: a group meditation session, a mass vigil, etc.
13. This experience is akin to what Richard Schechner has characterized in the Indian theatre: 'This blending of theatre, dance, music, food, and religious devotion is to many participants a full, satisfying, and pleasurable experience that cannot be reduced to any single category – religious, aesthetic, personal, or gustatory' (Schechner 2001: 35). I thank Caroline Osella for bringing my attention to this piece and for wider discussions on comparisons between Chinese and Indian ways of producing sensorialized sociality.

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