

Binaries in early Chinese texts: locating entities on continuums

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Abstract This article presents a new interpretation of the role of binary oppositions in sense perception in early Chinese texts. It proposes an explanation for the ubiquitous appearance of oppositions like short-long, light-heavy, and black-white in the way early Chinese texts describe the process of sensing entities. Rather than explaining these binaries as “segments” or “clusters” that the human sense faculties carve out of masses, I argue that these are polarities (not structural either/or options) that reflect aspects of a world of transforming entities existing at relative levels of condensation or containment. My claim is that visually discriminated shapes and patterns can be cut with precision, resulting in standard measurements. By contrast, sounds and smells locate things more vaguely in place on binary continuums. The contained-uncontained continuum of entities implied in this contrast of visible and audible is what accounts for the prevalence of sensory binaries. A break in a range constitutes the identity of the thing in question.

Keywords Early China · Binary oppositions · Yin/yang · Sense perception · Ontology

Echoing Graham, it is safe to say that binary oppositions are central to Chinese culture.¹ Scholars do not agree, however, about the nature of Chinese binaries. Most scholarship in this area has focused on yin-yang and offered theories regarding the

¹ Graham (1986, p. 27).

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relations between its two sides.² This article investigates something slightly different. Early Chinese texts do not describe the body's sensory faculties as sensing something like data. Instead, they seem to sense by making binary discriminations—like black and white or sweet and bitter. Hence my question concerns the connection between yin-yang and binary sensory discriminations. Analytic philosopher, Hansen proposes a theory involving the sensory binaries in the philosophy of Early China.³ Binary sense discriminations are among the things (including the absence of unchanging substances) that motivate Hansen's "mass hypothesis" interpretation of early Chinese ontology. According to his part/whole ontology, the binaries associated with human sense faculties were not conceived as features of the cosmos, but as human ways of dividing input from the stuff of the world into smaller clusters.⁴ This paper presents a different theory of the binary discriminations of the sensory faculties, linking them explicitly to the more familiar yin-yang binary.

I agree with Hansen's point that the early Chinese cosmos is a world of transformation that does not feature unchanging substances with attributes, but I propose a new explanation of sensory binaries that replaces his focus on dividing input into clusters. In my view, the binaries in passages about sense discrimination do not concern groupings or masses. My claim is that, in the conception reflected in early Chinese texts, entities (using the term loosely—"entity-events" might also work) exist at relative levels of condensation or containment that correlate with different sensory faculties. What the sense faculties discriminate is the *location* of entities on various spectrums existing within an overarching continuum of contained-uncontained. One end of the continuum consists of visible shapes and patterns, which are easily distinguishable entities. The other is characterized by the barely containable entities that we hear and smell. Moreover, visually discriminated shapes and patterns can be located and cut with precision, resulting in standard measurements, whereas sounds and smells cannot. To coin a few terms, this is a continuum of "visibles" and "touchables," on the one hand, and "audibles" and "smellables" on the other.⁵ I argue that this contained-uncontained continuum of entities, which is itself a yin-yang continuum, accounts for the prevalence of sensory

² In translation, the notation for writing binaries like yin and yang with a slash mark "/" highlights a sense of either/or, while a dash "-" suggests a continuum. Because I am arguing for a continuum approach, I am using a dash. Modern Sinological scholarship in disciplines influenced by structuralism tends to interpret yin-yang through linguistic, sociological, or psychological systems, based on binary structures of thinking (like mind/body and on/off). There are many interesting structuralist interpretations of early Chinese texts, including Keightley's (1988), which cites and adapts structuralist ideas to explain the complementarity of divination charges in the Shang. With a pragmatist and process agenda, Hall and Ames recast early Chinese binaries as "polarities" in order to correct two common misapprehensions: that they are mutually exclusionary oppositions, and that they are dualisms in which one side is transcendent. Hall and Ames (1987, pp. 17–21).

³ In Hansen's theory, Pre-Qin philosophers viewed sensory binaries as human "action-guiding distinctions." Hansen (1992, p. 234). Yin-yang is not significant to his Daoist theory of Chinese thought.

⁴ The input, in Hansen's terms, is *qing* 情, which he understands as "feelings" or "reality feedback" in these contexts. The stuffs of the world are both corporeal and non-corporeal "kapok." For Hansen's notion of kapok, see Hansen (1992, p. 407).

⁵ In other words, the spectrum does not quite match those that we are more familiar with, such as spirit/matter or immaterial/material.

binaries in texts from Early China. In other words, sensory discrimination is more matter of locating on continuums than it is of grouping or clumping.

My argument here considers different kinds of evidence from several early Chinese texts, with an emphasis on the *Xunzi*'s "Zhengming" chapter. The constraints of space render my evidence more evocative than conclusive.

Binding rhetoric

Although my focus is on sensory discriminations, it is worth beginning with some observations about a more general use of binary rhetoric in early Chinese texts, because this usage can inform how we understand the function of sensory binaries. Early Chinese texts feature striking examples of binaries pertaining to location, like inside-outside and above-below. These binaries have a stylistic function, but at the same time they serve to locate things, and thereby identify them. I suspect that furthermore, their use might signal a need to fasten things into place, hinting that entities need to be bound. I will return to this in my conclusion.

This "locational rhetoric" only implicitly alludes to the sense faculties (insofar as we sense location through sight), but the significance for sensing is present nonetheless. For example, the locational binaries that frame things in terms of above and below draw an invisible line, from whence something is above and something else below. The basic pattern is a single spectrum that sets up a point of contrast like this:

14.23 子曰：「君子上達，小人下達。」

The *junzi* (nobleman) reaches up to what is above, the small man reaches down to what is below.⁶

Lunyu 論語 〈憲問〉第十四

This contrast of above and below situates the *junzi* and, in this way, by means of space, identifies what counts as a *junzi*.

More complex locational binaries enhance the effect. For example, when the *Xunzi* makes a case for the complete inadequacy of certain advisors, boundaries of inside, outside, above, and below provide a sense of having surrounded the topic under discussion:

內不足使一民，外不足使拒難。 . . .
上不忠乎君，下善取譽乎民。

Footnote 5 continued

These ideas are further developments of my work in Geaney (2002, 2010). In this article, I am, for the first time, offering the beginnings of a theory about early Chinese ontology based on my work on the senses and metaphors of discriminating.

⁶ All citations to early Chinese texts are to the *CHinese ANcient Texts (CHANT)* 漢達文庫 database unless otherwise noted. All translations are my own.

The point in this passage is normative, as one of my anonymous readers noted, but my interest here lies in the geography that shapes normativity, which is conveyed with individual words (in this case, "high" and "low"). As a result, I beg the readers' patience with my translations' rather wooden focus on words.

Within the state, they cannot serve to unify the people. Without, they cannot serve to overcome difficulties...

Above, they are not loyal to their lord. Below, they are good at eliciting praise from the people.

Xunzi 荀子 臣道篇第十三

While it might be argued that all lists generally have the rhetorical goal of seeming to fully cover a topic, this particular form of spatial coverage is totalizing in a special way. Although even random lists can seem all-encompassing, rhetorically surrounding something encloses the subject. Such rhetoric encases the entity in question, leaving no room for potential slippage. This is most obvious in the following passage from the *Mozi*, where the binaries literally surround the subject matter (the benefits of a full treasury).

上有以絮為酒醴粢盛，以祭祀天鬼。外有以為皮幣，與四鄰諸侯交接。內有以食饑息勞，(將)〔持〕養其萬民，外有以懷天下之賢人。是故上者天鬼富之，外者諸侯與之，內者萬民親之，賢人歸之。

Above, the rulers will be supplied with wine and grain to sacrifice to heaven and the spirits: Outside, with hides and currency to use in their interactions with the four neighbors and feudal lords. Inside, with food for the hungry and rest for the weary, to nourish the ten-thousand people. Outside, wherewithal to embrace the world's virtuous people. Therefore, above, heaven and ghosts enrich them; outside, the feudal lords ally with them; inside, the ten-thousand people feel close to them, and the virtuous people come home to them.

Mozi 墨子卷二 2.2 《尚賢中第九》

Whether one deems this literary style clunky or logical, its spatial rhetoric operates to circumscribe a subject. Even with the imbalance here of a missing “below” and an extra “outside,” the effect is a sense of full encasement. The example is extreme, but it is indicative of a rhetoric of enclosure in early Chinese texts that is by no means limited to the *Mozi*.

Thus, the rhetoric of locational binaries, which seems ubiquitous in early Chinese texts, might do more than just situate things. As suggested by its sometimes extreme forms, it could imply a desire to keep things in place.

Binaries and the metaphors of “separating”

In early Chinese texts, sensory discriminating is a matter of dividing or making separations. Metaphors of separating frequently occur in passages about the entities that we might describe as things that we sense. The terms related to separation in these metaphors include *cai* 裁 (cut), *ge* 割 (cleave), *fen* 分 (divide), and *bie* 別 (separate). In addition, the *Xunzi*'s use of *yi* 異 (differentiate) and *bian* 辨 (distinguish) in the context of sense perception also implies something like separation. Thus, sensory discrimination and differentiation probably involve making separations.

The most direct discussion of separating entities occurs in the *Xunzi*'s "Zhengming" chapter that describes how we count entities. The passage is not explicitly about sensing or binaries, but it highlights separation in space in order to describe how we count (or individuate) entities.

物有同狀而異所者，有異狀而同所者，可別也。狀同而為異所者，雖可合，謂之二實。狀變而實無別而為異者，謂之化。有化而無別，謂之一實。

Things (*wu* 物) include those of the same look (*zhuang* 狀)⁷ and different locations and those of a different look in the same location, which can be separated (*bie* 別). If the look is the same but the location is deemed different, although they can be united, call them two *shi* 實. If the look changes but the *shi* 實 has no separation (*bie* 別), although it is deemed different, call it transformed. If it changes but does not separate (*bie* 別), call it one *shi* 實.

Xunzi 荀子 正名篇第二十二

This depiction of individuation by separation in location is important because, as I argue below, the endeavor to individuate entities by separating (*bie* 別) them is crucial to understanding what the senses do to (or by means of) binaries.

Metaphorically, our senses separate things. For example, a separation metaphor figures in the *Hanfeizi*'s discussion of the *Laozi* that describes patterns (*li* 理) and shapes (*xing* 形) as easily divided. The passage says that we easily cut shapes. We can take this literally, but we can also interpret it metaphorically, in which case it implies that our senses cut things.

凡物之有形者易裁也，易割也。何以論之？有形則有短長，有短長則有小大，有小大則有方圓，有方圓則有堅脆，有堅脆則有輕重，有輕重則有白黑。短長、大小、方圓、堅脆、輕重、白黑之謂理，理定而物易割也。

All things that have shape (*xing* 形) are easy to cut (*cai* 裁) and easy to cleave (*ge* 割). How do we sort them? If there are shapes, then there is short-long; if there is short-long, then there is small-big; if there is small-big, then there is square-round; if there is square-round, then there is strong-brittle; if there is strong-brittle, then there is light-heavy; there is light-heavy, then there is black-white.⁸ Short-long, big-small, square-round, strong-fragile, light-heavy, and white-black are called patterns (*li* 理). When patterns (*li* 理) are settled, things are easily cleaved (*ge* 割).

Hanfeizi 韓非子 解老第二十

⁷ For this translation of *zhuang* 狀, see Note 15 below.

⁸ The "if...then" structure of the passage raises the question of whether this should be read as a sorites. I think not, because it seems more like a kind of rhetorical chain-reasoning whose function is to assert that shapes generally imply these various binaries. As Legge puts it, this style of writing belongs to rhetoric rather than logic (Legge 1867, p. 30). Regarding similar pattern in the "Da Xue," Keightley rightly notes that it resembles magico-religious faith in patterns (Keightley 2014, p. 112).

Because light-heavy does not *possess* black-white, if we are consistent in translating *you* 有 here, this also argues against taking it to mean that a *wu* 物 (thing) "possesses" something like black-white as an attribute.

In a subtler example, the same chapter asserts that patterns (*li* 理) consist of the divisions (*fen* 分) of short and long, coarse and slight, etc.—in other words, what we might call a list of visible or tactile binaries. It says,

凡理者，方圓、短長、麤靡、堅脆之分也。

Patterns (*li* 理) are divisions (*fen* 分) of square-round, short-long, coarse-slight, and strong-fragile.

Hanfeizi 韓非子 解老第二十

Another statement in the *Lushichunqiu* that we can interpret metaphorically uses binary terms and foregrounds separation-rhetoric, along with standardization.

同異之分，貴賤之別，長少之義，此先王之所慎，而治亂之紀也。

The divisions (*fen* 分) of sameness-difference, the separations (*bie* 別) of noble-base, the models of long-short, these are things about which the ancient kings were careful, and they are the warp thread of order and chaos.

Lushichunqiu 呂氏春秋 似順論第五 《處(方)〔分〕》

Although not explicitly about sense discrimination, this *Lushichunqiu* passage, like the *Hanfeizi*'s “Jie Lao” passages, employs binaries while affirming the importance of separating. Thus, early Chinese texts use metaphors of separation to depict what people do with binaries, which has implications for how we understand their treatment of the senses, as I will now argue.

Turning to the *Xunzi*'s explicit discussions of the sense faculties, its terms for sensing—distinguish (*bian* 辨) and differentiate (*yi* 異)—are not identical to divide (*fen* 分), cut (*cai* 裁), cleave (*ge* 割), or separate (*bie* 別), but they serve the same type of function. The different choice of terminology might seem to indicate that the phenomena are not the same, but the presence of binaries makes them similar. Moreover, several of the visual terms that the *Xunzi* uses are the same as those that occur in the passages just discussed. That is, shape (*xing* 形), pattern (*li* 理), and light-heavy (*qingzhong* 輕重) occur in both sets of passages. Describing the senses' operations, the *Xunzi* says that each sense “distinguishes.”

目辨白黑美惡，而耳辨音聲清濁，口辨酸鹹甘苦，鼻辨芬芳腥臊，骨體膚理辨寒暑疾養。

The eyes distinguish (*bian* 辨) white-black and beautiful-ugly; the ears distinguish tones, sounds and clear-muddy; the mouth distinguishes sour, salty, and sweet-bitter; the nose distinguishes perfumed, musky, and foul; and the bones, body, and skin lines distinguish cold-hot and unhealthy-nourishing. *Xunzi* 荀子 榮辱篇第四

Similarly, the *Xunzi*'s “Zhengming” chapter claims that each sense “differentiates”:

形體色理以目異，聲音清濁、調竽奇聲以耳異，甘苦鹹淡辛酸奇味以口異，香臭芬鬱腥臊(酒)〔漏〕(酸)〔腐〕奇臭以鼻異，疾養滄熱、滑鉞輕重以形體異，說故喜(怨)〔怒〕哀樂愛惡欲以心異。

Shapes, bodies, colors, and patterns are differentiated (*yi* 異) by the eyes. Sounds, tones, clear-muddy, modes and harmony, and strange sounds are differentiated by the ears. Sweet-bitter, salty, bland, pungent, sour and strange

tastes are differentiated by the mouth. Fragrant-foul, perfumed, musky, foul, dank and sour, as well as strange smells are differentiated by the nose. Unhealthy-nourishing, cold-hot, smooth-sharp, light-heavy are differentiated by the form and body. Explanations and causes, happiness-anger, sadness-joy, love-hate, and desire are differentiated by the heartmind.⁹

Xunzi 荀子 正名篇第二十二

Distinguishing and differentiating occur at different levels in these passages. With regard to some items, the act of differentiating applies to binaries (for example, clear-muddy).¹⁰ Other items are more general terms, like “patterns” (*li* 理), which contain their own binary continuums (as patterns do, according to the *Hanfeizi* passage above). Still other items like “sour” do not seem to belong to a specific polarity. It is important, however, that the next section of the “Zhengming” describes a failure to separate (*bie* 別) sameness from difference, which implies that all of these items belong to a general polarity of same-different (*tongyi* 同異).¹¹ Thus, it appears that in general the senses differentiate and distinguish between sameness and difference.

The cutting in the *Hanfeizi* passages seems related to the differentiating and discriminating in the *Xunzi*. If shapes and patterns are divisions and cuts, then all sensory discriminating probably consists in creating separations along a binary of same-different. To sense, then, is to separate, which is to say, locate a space on a continuum.

The visibility of separating

The eyes are conspicuous within this rhetoric of separation. The various descriptions of cutting in the “Jie Lao” chapter of the *Hanfeizi* foreground things perceived by the eyes, which suggests that the eyes’ capacity for cutting serves as the model for the very idea of separating.

Consider again the examples that the “Jie Lao” presents when using terms related to separation or division:

凡理者,方圓、短長、麤靡、堅脆之分也。

Patterns (*li* 理) are divisions (*fen* 分) of square-round, short-long, coarse-slight, and strong-fragile.¹²

⁹ For more in-depth discussions of the senses in the *Xunzi* “Zhengming,” see Geaney (2002, forthcoming) *Language as Bodily Practice in Early China*.

¹⁰ I indicate the things I deem to be binaries with a dash mark “-”, but there might be more of them implied here than the ones that I flag.

¹¹ In saying this, I am assuming textual coherence in the chapter, such that the subsequent passage comments on the prior one—an assumption that is not necessarily justified. On the same lines, it *might* also be relevant that elsewhere the “Zhengming” implies that the senses are something like the origin/cause of sameness and difference (緣而以同異) and that the knower (using the senses) “discriminates” same from different (辨同異).

¹² This can be taken in two ways: it could mean that *li* 理 (patterns) consist of different portions of square/round, long/short etc. Or it could mean that portions of each binary alone constitute a pattern.

Hanfeizi 韓非子 解老第二十
凡物之有形者易裁也，易割也。

All things that have shape (*xing* 形) are easy to cut (*cai* 裁) and easy to cleave (*ge* 割).

Hanfeizi 韓非子 解老第二十

As noted above, the “Zhengming” categorizes both patterns and shapes as visible.

形體、色理以目異。

Shapes (*xing* 形), bodies, colors, and patterns (*li* 理) are differentiated by the eyes.

Xunzi 荀子 正名篇第二十二

Thus, *xing* 形 (shapes) and *li* 理 (patterns) are paradigmatically visible, and we should read the *Hanfeizi*'s discussion with that in mind. One might challenge my claim by observing that the *Hanfeizi*'s list of patterns veers off into tangible items before returning to color.

短長、大小、方圓、堅脆、輕重、白黑之謂理。理定而物易割也。

Short-long, big-small, square-round, strong-fragile, light-heavy, and white-black are called patterns (*li* 理). When patterns (*li* 理) are settled, things are easily cleaved.

Hanfeizi 韓非子 解老第二十

Lightness and fragility are indeed tactile, but the circulation of terms reinforces my point. That is, in the *Xunzi*, something that the eyes discriminate—form and body (*xingtǐ* 形體)—itself discriminates light-heavy (輕重), which is a “pattern” according to the *Hanfeizi*, and therefore something discriminated by the eyes, according to the *Xunzi*. Moreover, while the sense of touch discerns light-heavy and strong-fragile, these distinctions are also visible to the eyes. In other words, it is possible to both see and touch something's lightness or fragility. Furthermore, in general, touch seems to coincide with vision more so than other senses in early Chinese texts.¹³ Hence, things that can be separated with the precision of “cutting” are visual (and incidentally tactile).

In the “Zhengming” chapter's statement on individuating, seeing is also implicitly a matter of separating. The discussion's unstated reliance on vision is complex enough to require quoting again in full:

物有同狀而異所者，有異狀而同所者，可別也。

狀同而為異所者，雖可合，謂之二實。

狀變而實無別而為異者，謂之化。

有化而無別，謂之一實。

Things (*wu* 物) include those of the same look (*zhuang* 狀) and different locations and those of a different look in the same location, which can be separated (*bie* 別). If the look is the same but the location is deemed different,

¹³ The fact that the “Zhengming” includes “shape” (*xing* 形) in both its list of things that the eyes see and its list of agents that feel things (*xingtǐ* 形體) narrows the gap between seeing and touching: what we use to touch (the form and body) is paradigmatically what we see.

although they can be united, call them two *shi* 實. If the look changes but the *shi* 實 has no separation (*bie* 別), although it is deemed different, call it transformed. If it changes but does not separate (*bie* 別), call it one *shi* 實.
Xunzi 荀子 正名篇第二十二

Wu 物 is a general term that *might* not have any special association with visibility, but the entities that are counted here—*shi* 實—are things that early Chinese texts typically describe as being visible, rather than audible.¹⁴ This means that it is best to interpret the “Zhengming” individuation passage as applying, not just to any entities, but specifically to *shi* 實 (actions or things), which are visible. Furthermore, *zhuang* 狀 is used for visible features, and not as a sensory-neutral term, which confirms that we should think of this use of *shi* 實 as referring to something sensed by the eyes.¹⁵ Hence the similarities at issue here are similarities of visual appearance. Moreover, insofar as we do not hear, smell, or taste where something is located, this too limits these rules of individuation to things that foreground vision (and perhaps to a lesser degree, touch). Thus the passage preemptively restricts the sensory mode by which it addresses individuation. In other words, it is significant that the discussion of individuating things starts from visibly similar things, not from, for instance, things that sound or smell similar. This focus on visible entities could imply that other kinds of sensed entities are less plausible foundations for making a point about individuation.

Furthermore, both of the *Xunzi* passages cited above arguably foreground vision insofar as the eyes occur first in their lists. Because of the leading placement of vision, the lists of the senses’ differentiating and discriminating potentially imply that, to some degree, vision might serve as a paradigm for the other senses. In sum, when these early Chinese texts set about describing cutting and separating, the entities involved are visually perceived. Hence, separation might rely on the sense of sight more so than the other senses.

¹⁴ The term *wu* 物 might have an association with visual things as well as a general use:

聲一無聽，物一無文，味一無果，物一不講。

If sounds are all one, there is no listening. If things (*wu* 物) are all one, there is no pattern. If tastes are all one, there is no fruit. If things (*wu* 物) are all one, there is no thoroughness.

Guoyu 國語 鄭語 《史伯為桓公論興衰》

For the argument that the entities/actions referred to as *shi* 實 are considered to be visible, see Geaney (2002, pp. 68–80).

¹⁵ *Zhuang* 狀 is specifically used for aspects of visual appearance. As the opposition to physiognomizing in the *Xunzi* indicates, the *zhuang* is one of the visible features interpreted by those who “physiognomize people’s shape, *zhuang*, face, and color” (相人之形狀顏色). Another example from the *Jiayi Xinshu* indicates that *zhuang* is used to mean visible appearance in other contexts as well:

人之情不異面目，狀貌同類，貴賤之別，非(人)天根着於形容也。

The motivations of people are not different, their faces, eyes, looks (*zhuang* 狀), and appearance are of the same kind. The separation of noble and base is not something inscribed on their face or form.

Xinshu 新書 賈誼新書卷一 《等齊》

The other end of the sensory continuum: from condensed to dispersed

If we consider how the other senses operate, we can better understand the implications of an emphasis on the eyes separating things. The *Xunzi* passages depict each of the senses performing a similar operation (i.e. they all differentiate or they all discriminate), but this need not imply that the senses face similar challenges.

A bit of background about the treatment of the senses in early Chinese texts is relevant here: they tend to draw contrasts between hearing and seeing.¹⁶ The things heard and seen are different insofar as the boundaries of what is heard (and probably smelled, *wen* 聞) are less easily drawn than those of what is seen (and probably touched).¹⁷ This contrast of hearing and seeing is subtly implied in a series of patterns in the *Liji* that equate warm weather with music, *ren* 仁 (kindness), and harmony. By contrast, the passage associates coldness with ritual, *yi* 義 (duty), and separation (*bie* 別):

19.6 春作夏長，仁也；秋斂冬藏，義也。仁近於樂，義近於禮。樂者敦和，率神而從天，禮者別宜，居鬼而從地。

In the spring there is creation and in the summer there is growth. This is *ren* 仁. In the autumn there is holding back and in winter there is storing. This is *yi* 義. *Ren* is close to music. *Yi* is close to ritual. Music is kindly and harmonious. It leads spirit-souls and follows heaven. Ritual is separating (*bie* 別) and appropriate. It stores ghost-souls and follows the earth.

Liji 禮記 〈樂記〉

Hence, sound, warmth, and harmony belong to heaven, with its ethereal lightness. Ritual, coldness, and separations belong to earth, with its dense weight. This passage does not mention the senses at all, but another chapter in the *Liji* expands the pattern by indicating that warm harmony corresponds with drinking and hearing music. The contrast to cold separations corresponds with eating, and it entails something other than sound because it excludes sound. The passage poses this as a yin-yang polarity.¹⁸

11.3 饗禘有樂，而食嘗無樂，陰陽之義也。凡飲，養陽氣也；凡食，養陰氣也。故春禘而秋嘗；春饗孤子，秋食耆老，其義一也。而食嘗無樂。飲，養陽氣也，故有樂；食，養陰氣也，故無聲。凡聲，陽也。

¹⁶ See Geaney (2002, pp. 50–83).

¹⁷ Hearing and smelling are often associated, perhaps because the emptiness of the cavities of the ears and nose implies the use of non-action, as in this comment in the *Huainanzi*.

鼻之所以息，耳之所以聽，終以其無用者為用矣

That by which the nose breathes, that by which the ear listens: in the end, it treats that which has no use as useful.

Huainanzi 淮南子 說山訓。

¹⁸ The associations of yin-yang in binary constellations occur in two different forms in early Chinese texts, but this is the dominant pattern. For a longer discussion of these passages, see Geaney (forthcoming) *The Emergence of Word Meaning*.

All drinking nourishes yang qi; all eating nourishes yin qi. Therefore, there were the spring sacrifices and autumnal sacrifices. When feasting the orphaned young in spring and the feeding the aged in autumn, the model was the same. But in the feeding and at the autumnal sacrifice, there was no music. Drinking nourishes yang qi and therefore it occurs with music. Eating nourishes yin qi, and therefore it does not occur with sound. All sound is yang.

Liji 禮記 〈郊特牲〉

In this formulation, sounds are fluid, yang, warm, and heavenly.¹⁹ On the basis of patterns in early Chinese texts (contrasts of hearing and seeing, as well as assertions about ritual action being visible), we can infer that seeing ritual lies at the other end of the continuum from hearing music.²⁰ The plausible contrast to hearing sounds that are dispersed and fluid would be seeing visible things that are condensed or fill space in a contained way. In that case, the yin-yang correlations are as follows: Yin corresponds to condensed, cold, and earthly things that we can see. Yang corresponds to fluid, warm, and heavenly things that we can hear. Insofar as the senses separate things when they differentiate, this means that the ears have a harder task than the eyes. Harmony, warmth, and fluidity lend themselves to free and loose bonding, which increases the difficulty of separating the boundaries of the phenomena sensed by the ears.²¹ The eyes sense things whose boundaries are more readily rendered as fixed, which is why separation (*bie* 別) is aligned with things that are yin. If the task of sensing is to identify what is sensed, identity is more easily grasped by the eyes. This explains both why the eyes' capacity to discriminate can be referred to as cutting, and why the same is not said of other senses. Perhaps the differentiating or discriminating of the other senses are less "clear-cut" ways of separating.

Arguably, these contrasts of hearing and seeing have implications not just for how early Chinese texts understand the senses, but also for their conception of the nature of the entities we sense. The boundaries of things that are paradigmatically visible (like *xing* 形 and *shi* 實) might be understood to be more contained or more condensed than those of things that are paradigmatically audible (like *sheng* 聲). Accordingly, entities would be structured to different degrees, and the entities we sense on the dispersed side of the continuum would be a challenge to separate.

¹⁹ The term for sound (*sheng* 聲) is used for speech as well as other kinds of sounds. See Geaney 2011.

²⁰ For a discussion of treating *li* 禮 as "ritual action," rather than "ritual," and a discussion of its visibility, see Geaney (forthcoming) *Language as Bodily Practice*.

²¹ While here qi is simply loosely or densely contained, it does not always seem like that. For instance, a comment in the *Guanzi* suggests a more specific use of qi: that qi is to the eyes as sound is to the ears.

故明王懼聲以感耳，懼氣以感目，以此二者，有天下矣，可毋慎乎？

Therefore a wise ruler is diffident of sound as it stimulates the ear and diffident of qi as it stimulates the eyes. With these two, a person possesses the whole world, so how could one not be careful?

Guanzi 管子 管子卷第十一 小稱第三十二.

Locating separations as a means of identifying

In this section, I return to the direct claim about individuating things by means of (visible) location in the *Xunzi*'s "Zhengming" chapter, and then use the *Hanfeizi*'s metaphor of compasses for standardizing to argue that the senses do not cluster entities into groups.

Separating as individuating

Spatial location is where dispersed entities contrast with concentrated or well-marked shapes that are easily divisible. As noted in the beginning of this argument, the importance of the location of things is also evident in the "Zhengming" passage about individuation. Again, the fact that the lines implicitly restrict the discussion of individuation to the sense of sight suggests that vision supplies the model for individuation. This form of privileging vision seems reasonable if the text is presuming that a large quantity of the entities that people sense have no firm boundaries, while the sense of vision perceives things that are well-bounded enough to be cut. Because the passage is complex and its interpretation is controversial, I cite it again in full.²²

物有同狀而異所者，有異狀而同所者，可別也。

狀同而為異所者，雖可合，謂之二實。

狀變而實無別而為異者，謂之化。

有化而無別，謂之一實。

Things (*wu* 物) include those of the same look (*zhuang* 狀) and different locations and those of a different look in the same location, which can be separated (*bie* 別). If the look is the same but the location is deemed different, although they can be united, call them two *shi* 實. If the look changes but the *shi* 實 has no separation (*bie* 別), although it is deemed different, call it transformed. If it changes but does not separate (*bie* 別), call it one *shi* 實.

Xunzi 荀子 正名篇第二十二

In my view, the passage effectively defines *shi* 實 as fillings in space.²³ It says that both 'shi in different locations at the same time' and 'shi that separates from itself' count as two *shi*, presumably because they both fill different space. Something whose visual appearance differs over time—while not separating—counts as a single *shi*. In short, I take the first assertion to claim that similarity in visual

²² The line that I translate as "If the look (*zhuang* 狀) is the same but the location is deemed different, although they can be united, call them two *shi* 實," is one that Hansen takes as evidence supporting his mass hypothesis (Hansen 1992, p. 328). I discuss Hansen's use of this line in more detail below.

In an article where he rejects Hansen's "stuff ontology," Chris Fraser describes this passage as plausible but weak evidence for a mereological view, noting that this sort of claim would only be likely to arise in a context where someone might think that two horses in different places at the same time could count as one (Fraser 2007, p. 444).

²³ Graham makes a similar claim about the *Mo Bian* treatment of *shi* 實, but he understands *shi* to mean an "object," while I do not, because *shi* is also used of deeds—a use that he acknowledges but deems "non-philosophical" (Graham 1978, pp. 199, 202).

appearance is not sufficient for making a judgment about individuation. This could plausibly be a response to an inclination toward over-reliance on similarity in appearance for individuation, possibly for the purpose of identification. The passage asserts that, in addition to similar looks, location needs to be considered.²⁴ That is, *shi* that look similar but are in different places (*at one time*, although it does not spell that part out) are not one thing. Second, the passage adds that things that change appearance but do not become separated (from themselves) are still one thing. This could be an answer to knotty questions about the status of something like a pregnant mother or a rhizome. If the appearance changes and a *shi* 實 (filling) becomes different (*yi* 異), as long as the *shi* does not become separated, it is still one thing. On the other hand, if a baby or a rhizome separates from the *shi* and shows up in another place, then there are two *shi*. In short, the idea is that, instead of relying on similar appearances, we should rely on locational difference and spatial separation to determine how to individuate, and, presumably, identify things.

Location is decisive, and spatial separation is the key factor for this feature of identity. Moreover, because the eyes perceive the locations of entities in space, the capacity of vision to discern boundaries plays an important role. Insofar as there is individuation, it is primarily the result of the eyes' capacity to see location, which is to say, find separations between things.

Separating to create standards of measurement

As a concept, however, we can interpret “separating” in different ways. Do binaries separate things into groups? For instance, Hansen claims that the *Xunzi*'s depiction of the senses, “rests on the natural fact that all members of the same species cluster things in a similar way. Thus our sense organs emphasize certain similarities and differences in a natural clustering.”²⁵ Now, what if, unlike Hansen, we doubt that sensory polarities *cluster things* into groups? How else might we interpret these polarities and this theme of separating? In what follows, I draw upon the prior discussion of cutting to answer this.

As metaphors, cutting and separating are potentially ambiguous.²⁶ If they are taken to mean clustering into groups, then our senses identify long, short, black, white, clear, muddy, fragrant, and foul as groups of things. This seems to be what Hansen is arguing when he says that the human species' cutting and dividing “selects” clusters and groups in the world. Hansen's interpretation of the *Xunzi*'s “Zhengming” chapter makes this point:

²⁴ Among other things, this could answer a concern about ghost-doppelgangers like the one in the *Lushichunqiu* chapter on “Doubting Resemblances” (Yi Si 疑似), where a ghost takes on the *zhuang* 狀 of a man's son, which results in him killing his own son because he forgot that there were two “people” with the same *zhuang*.

²⁵ Hansen (1992, p. 325).

²⁶ For some, the metaphor of cutting might imply chiseling wood, as in the “nameless simplicity” (無名之樸) of the *Laozi*, but this overlooks an important difference between cleaving and carving out of something.

Nature does not draw the lines between thing-kinds. Species sensory clustering selects certain similarities and differences; then convention and custom take over. Social practices underwrite one way of stringing similarities together and assigning names to stuffs...The similarities and differences are in nature, but the way we cluster and group the similarities in naming and where we cut and divide (say between color ranges) are matters first of human nature and then of human convention (Hansen 1992, 328).²⁷

According to this interpretation of the “Zhengming,” nature is without thing-kinds, but it possesses similarities and differences. It is not clear, however, where Hansen’s language of clustering and grouping comes from. Does he posit a difference between, on the one hand, clustering and grouping, and on the other, cutting and dividing? Do the senses cluster? Or do they divide? Or do they cluster *as* they divide? Regarding the *Xunzi*’s view of sense discriminations, he writes,

The empirical data do not consist of pictures of individual objects in relation to each other. The empirical *data* consist in an inclination to discriminate. He [Xunzi] does not represent the eyes, for example, as conveying a picture of position in space, or of temporal succession, or relative size. The eyes make certain discriminations: shape, color, line, and part-whole distinctions (emphasis in original, Hansen 1992, p. 326).

This implies that, in Hansen’s view, discriminating shape, color, and line is not exactly the same thing as discriminating into groups, although all are forms of discriminating. In the prior quote, however, Hansen describes the senses as cutting and dividing “between” color ranges, rather than “on” a color range. That is, he refers to “the way we cluster and group the similarities in naming and where we cut and divide (say *between* color ranges) are matters first of human nature and then of human convention.” (Emphasis added). There are potentially two different actions here: grouping by names and cutting between color ranges. But to say that we divide *between* color ranges suggests that black and white are each ranges, and that we divide between, on the one hand, the range of colors that count as black, and on the other hand, the range of colors that count as white. This is different from saying that we divide on a single continuum that ranges from black to white. Hence Hansen’s notion of “sensory clustering” seems to mean that the senses divide and cut the similarities and differences *into groups* (the white colors and the black colors). Further, Hansen argues that, for Xunzi, ordinary individual objects are “distinctions,” in other words, segments or parts of whole ranges. Regarding the “Zhengming” passage on individuation, he writes,

Here we see Xunzi *constructing* the notion of *an individual object* as a special case of distinguishing parts from wholes. What we call an individual is a possibility of regarding the same thing-kind in different places as *two*... Ordinary individuals are one possible range generated by different applications of the part-whole structure. They are merely comparatively small

²⁷ The relation of naming and sensing is too complex to address here. For an analysis of this subject, see Chapter Two of Geaney (forthcoming) *Language as Bodily Practice*.

segments, distinctions. Individuals are neither ontologically nor linguistically basic. They are referenced by space–time bases for counting, regarding things as one or *the same*. But they fit into one end of the part-whole scheme (emphasis in original, Hansen 1992, pp. 328–329).

By using language like “we can” and “possibility,” this presents the “Zhengming” line as proposing locational difference as only a *possible* way of seeing things as two. My interpretation presumes, to the contrary, that the passage addresses genuine uncertainty about whether a case involves one or two things, and it directs people who are in doubt to secure the answer by checking the location at a single time, and not relying on visible similarities.²⁸ Thus, in both his treatment of the senses’ discrimination and his treatment of the individuation passage in the *Xunzi*’s “Zhengming” chapter, Hansen favors interpreting *shi* 實 as thing-kinds, and interpreting the senses as distinguishing things into segments cut from a mass.

To appreciate my argument that the senses locate rather than cluster things, it helps to notice the prominence of compasses and squares as forms of measurement that indirectly highlight the importance of the eyes. The use of compasses and squares as metaphors is common. For instance, the *Xunzi* contains one example that compares ritual to a marking cord, a balance, a compass, and a square. It notes that, “If the compass and square are sincerely established, there can be no cheating with square and round.”²⁹ Moreover, in the “Jie Lao” passages about cutting patterns (discussed above), compasses and squares represent separating spatially in order to produce measured standards. The feature is apparent from the point that the “Jie Lao” proceeds to make. The passage compares the use of a compass or square with the process of speaking in public communal discussions. Having just noted the ease of cutting patterns, it introduces the benefits of following the speech of others, comparing it to “following” a compass or square:

故議於大庭而後言則立，權議之士知之矣。故欲成方圓而隨其規矩，則萬事之功形矣。而萬物莫不有規矩，議言之士，計會規矩也。聖人盡隨於萬物之規矩，故曰：「不敢為天下先。」

Therefore, in discussions in the Great Court, speak after others and thus be established. This is something known by scholars who are measured and critical. If you want to form a square or circle and you follow compasses and squares, then the efforts of ten thousand affairs will take shape. As with the ten-thousand things each having a compass or square, critical speaking scholars are compasses and squares for calculating and reckoning. The sages

²⁸ See above.

²⁹ The passage says,

故繩墨誠陳矣，則不可欺以曲直；衡誠縣矣，則不可欺以輕重；規矩誠設矣，則不可欺以方圓；君子審於禮，則不可欺以詐偽。

Thus, if the marking cord is sincerely laid out, then there can be no cheating with crooked and straight. If the weights are sincerely hung, there can be no cheating regarding light and heavy, if the compass and square are sincerely established, there can be no cheating with square and round. If the *junzi* is careful about ritual action, there can be no cheating or falseness.

Xunzi 荀子 禮論篇第十九.

entirely follow the compass and square of the ten-thousand things, thus it is said, “Not daring to precede the world.”

Hanfeizi 韓非子 解老第二十

Because circles and squares are among the easily cut patterns, and because following the standards of compasses and squares facilitates ten-thousand affairs taking shape, this implies that compasses and squares cut and create standard circles and squares with great ease. As standards of measure, compasses and squares produce shapes and patterns by spatially separating them. The passage does not draw attention to the idea that circles and squares are visible shapes, but it presumes it insofar as cutting and cleaving is visibly separating. The analogy between these tools and a scholars’ delayed speech also suggests that the eyes’ cutting can serve as a model that one should emulate in one’s speech. Thus, the patterns that the eyes cut (like compasses and squares) are binary divisions that serve as standards for measurement.

Hence, the metaphor of cutting has nothing to do with cutting clusters from masses for five reasons:

(1) There is no language of “clustering” or “grouping” in these passages that describe what the senses do.

(2) The reason why shapes (*xing* 形) and patterns (*li* 理) are said to be easily cut is that they are distinguished by the eyes. Indeed, it is likely that all of the things sensed by the eyes are equally easy to cut. For instance, black and white are also used as tropes for things that are easily distinguished:

為人主者誠明於臣之所言，則別賢不肖如黑白矣。

If the ruler is sincerely clear about the speech of his ministers, then separating (*bie* 別) virtuous from degenerate is [as easy as] black and white.

Hanfeizi 韓非子 說疑第四十四

Habit might lead us to assume that black and white separate easily because they represent extreme differences, but my suggestion is that black-white is no more extreme than short-long, and that they are easily distinguished because they are visible. The implied context for the metaphor of cutting is a contrast between, on the one hand, easily cut shapes and patterns, and on the other, distinctions like fragrant or foul (which are not as easily cut). Thus, the senses work on a range from more or less easily cut. This suggests that the cutting metaphor is motivated by something other than the idea that all senses cut clusters out of masses. Furthermore, if some of them do not cut clusters out of masses, then there is no reason to think that any of them do.

(3) The “Jie Lao” chapter says that cutting facilitates productive calculation (ten-thousand things taking shape). In that passage, being easily cut means being ideal for standardized measurement through compasses and squares, the goal of which is to form (*cheng* 成) squares or circles. If the goal of cutting is to form measured shapes, then it is not to cluster masses into different kinds of groups (i.e. either squares or circles). Cutting patterns with compasses does not suggest a clustering function: it produces circles, not groups of circles.

(4) Moreover, if the outcome of using such tools were limited to sorting into groups/clusters of circles and squares, then all kinds of shapes with different levels of curvature would be left out. This makes it more plausible that squares and compasses serve to measure degrees of curvature and produce standard squares and circles.

(5) Finally, if cutting were merely a matter of sorting things into clusters/groups, then square-circle would be no easier to cut than clear-muddy or fragrant-foul. Something other than grouping must be the goal that makes the “Jie Lao” praise the divisibility of shapes and patterns. And indeed, visual cutting best illustrates what the senses aim to do, with relative degrees of success.

Binaries in early Chinese texts attract a great deal of attention, because on any interpretation their implications are important. To understand their contribution to early Chinese ideas about sense discrimination, we must detach them from either/or structuralist frameworks. Once we conceptualize the binaries as polarities, we face the challenge of interpreting the rhetoric that describes the actions that the senses perform on (or with) binary discriminations. Cutting and cleaving bear a misleading resemblance to the either/or “slash” of structural binaries. But if we keep in mind that the binaries are polarities, which is compelling enough in the case of yin-yang, it makes sense to think of cutting as slicing along a continuum rather than cutting into groups or clusters. The break in the range marks the (temporary) identity of the thing in question. Several things make this explanation of the senses’ operations plausible. The ears and eyes sense entities on a continuum from loosely to tightly structured. Thus, some entities are diffuse. Even visible entities do not stay in one place, but the eyes separate things more easily than other senses. The eyes locate things, and location plays a crucial role in discussions of individuation. The fact that location is significant for individuation and constituting identity reverberates in a rhetorical style that locates things by surrounding them. In the absence of an assumption that things possess essential characteristics, such rhetoric strives to bind entities in place in order to stabilize identities.

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