The Synaesthetic and Metaphorical Uses of 味 wei ‘taste’
in Chinese Buddhist Texts

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Abstract

This paper investigates the non-gustatory uses of the gustatory word 味 wei ‘taste’ in Chinese Buddhist texts, in particular, in the Āgamas. The non-gustatory uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ basically fall into two categories: the synaesthetic category and the metaphorical category. The former features the use of 味 wei ‘taste’ as an umbrella sensory term which can collocate with all the other sensory words, whereas the latter shows that 味 wei ‘taste’ can modify abstract and sublime Buddhist terms, such as 法 fa ‘dhamma’ and 解脱 jietuo ‘enlightenment’, for the sake of concretization. These two categories of uses have one sense in common: the sense of “pleasure and joy”, which can be interpreted in both mundane and supra-mundane levels, depending on the context. Moreover, we find that the versatile uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ are most likely to be influenced by its equivalent in the Pāli Buddhist texts. This finding sheds light on the history of Chinese language development, specifically, how Chinese language has been influenced by Buddhist text translation.

1 The gustatory word 味 wei ‘taste’

In the Chinese Buddhist texts, 味 wei ‘taste’ is basically used as a gustatory word, referring to ‘taste’, as shown in (1).

(1) 我眼見色，我耳聞聲，我鼻嗅香，我舌嘗味，我身覺觸，我意識法。【雜阿含經】
Wo yan jian se, wo er wen sheng, wo bi xiu xiang, wo she
sound I nose smell smell I tongue
chang wei, wo shen jue chu, taste taste I body feel tangible
wo yi shi fa. (Samyutta Nikāya)
I mind perceive object
‘My eyes see the forms, my ears hear the sounds, my nose smells the smells, my tongue tastes the taste, my body feels tangible things and my mind perceives objects.’

In the Chinese Buddhist texts, the gustatory and olfactory words are clearly distinguished, as represented by 味 wei ‘taste’ and 香 xiang ‘smell’, respectively. Devoid of the convergence between gustatory and olfactory expressions, which is now shown in Modern Chinese, Chinese Buddhist texts feature some other special uses of 味 wei ‘taste’, as follows:

First, 味 wei ‘taste’ is attested to be able to collocate
with all the sensory words, i.e. 色 se ‘form’, 声 sheng ‘sound’, 香 xiang ‘smell’, 味 wei ‘taste’, 触 chu ‘touch’, to give rise to the Buddhist expressions such as 色味 sewei ‘form-taste’, 味味 shengwei ‘sound-taste’, 香味 xiangwei ‘smell-taste’, 味味 weiwei ‘taste-taste’, 触味 chuwei ‘touch-taste’; Second, 味 wei ‘taste’ can follow some abstract, as well as philosophically important, terms to concretize their meaning-taste, such as 義味 yiwei ‘meaning-taste’, 法味 fawei ‘Dhamma-taste’ and 解脫味 jietuowei ‘emancipation-taste’. In Section 2, we present the synaesthetic uses of 味 wei ‘taste’. The origin of the synaesthetic uses is reported in Section 3. Subsequently in Section 4, we examine the implicit synaesthetic uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ in collocation with Five Aggregates, which are apparently non-sensory but essentially sensory. Next, the metaphorical uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ are presented and analyzed in Section 5. Section 6 concludes this paper.

2 Synaesthetic Uses of 味 wei ‘taste’

In this section, we analyze the uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ which transcend the gustatory sense per se but extend to other non-gustatory sensory meanings. The data are grouped into two types, viz. nominal and verbal types, along the grammatical line.

2.1 The nominal use of synaesthetic 味 wei ‘taste’

We go through the uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ in Āgamas (CBETA 2015) and find out that 味 wei ‘taste’ is not limited to the TASTE use. Apart from being a gustatory word, it serves as an umbrella sensory word to collocate with all the sensory words. This is illustrated in (2). In this dialogue, a visiting Brahmin used the expression “tasteless” to refer to the Buddha’s lack of conventional hospitality. The Buddha, in reply, uttered a statement, which is an apparent consent to the Brahmin’s comment but a de facto refutation.

(2) 梵志復白：「瞿昙無味。」 (Madhyama Āgama 157)
Fanzhi fu bai: qutan wu wei.
Brahmin reply say Gotama NEG taste ‘Master Gotama lacks taste.’

世尊告曰：「梵志！有事令我無味，然不如汝言。若有色味、聲味、香味、觸味者，彼如來斷智絕滅拔根本不復生，是謂有事令我無味，然不如汝言。」
Shizun gao yue: fanzhi! You shi Buddha reply say Brahmin have thing ling wo wu wei, ran make me NEG taste however bu ru ru yan. Ruo you NEG like you say if have se-wei, sheng-wei, xiang-wei, form-taste sound-taste smell-taste chu-wei zhe, bi rulai duanzhi touch-taste etc. that Tathagata break juemie bagen zhong bu fu destroy disroot finally NEG again sheng, shi wei you shi ling wo grow be call have thing make me wu wei, ran bu ru ru yan. NEG taste but NEG like you say ‘The Buddha said: ‘Brahmin! There are indeed things that make me tasteless. Suppose that there are form-taste, sound-taste, smell-taste and touch-taste, the Tathagata destroys them and makes them cease to be. Thus we say that there are things, different from what you said, that make me tasteless.’

According to the Brahmin, the Buddha’s lack of taste is due to his observation that the Buddha does not follow the cultural convention to salute visitors. The Buddha, in order to eschew confrontation with the Brahmin, literally admits to the comment but interprets it in a different way, i.e., the Buddha lacks taste with regard to forms, sounds, smells and tangibles, indicating the Buddha’s disenchantment with sensory gratification. Crucially, in this passage, the gustatory word 味 wei ‘taste’ is applied to all the other sensory words, transcends the gustatory sense and refers to sensory gratification. With regard to this use of 味 wei ‘taste’, it functions as a noun.

2.2 The verbal use of synaesthetic 味 wei ‘taste’

The example in (2) is not the single case of the non-gustatory use of 味 wei ‘taste’. In the Sanyuttāgama, 味 wei ‘taste’, together with 著 zhuo ‘attach’, is attested to function as a verb, meaning “attach to; attract”, as exemplified in (3). The verb 味著 weizhuo ‘attach to; attract’ connects the six internal organs, viz. 眼 yan ‘eye’, 耳 er ‘ear’, 鼻 bi ‘nose’, 舌 she ‘tongue’, 身 shen ‘body’ and 意 yi ‘mind’, and the six external objects, viz. 色 se ‘form’, 声 sheng ‘sound’,
At that time, the Buddha told the monks: “There are six types of additive hooks. What are the six? The eye-taste, due to its attraction to forms, is reckoned as an additive hook; the ear-taste, due to its attraction to sounds, is reckoned as an additive hook; the nose-taste, due to its attraction to smell, is reckoned as an additive hook; the tongue-taste, due to its attraction to taste, is reckoned as an additive hook; the body-taste, due to its attraction to tangibles, is reckoned as an additive hook; the mind-taste, due to its attraction to things, is reckoned as an additive hook. As for an ascetic or a Brahmin, if their eye is attached to forms, gets stuck by the additive hook, and then they cannot be away from freedom.’

The examples of (2) and (3) converge to a focal point regarding the non-gustatory use of 味 wei ‘taste’, be it a noun or a verb. Crucially, 味 wei ‘taste’ transcends the gustatory sense but retains its sensual meaning. Specifically, it refers to “sensual gratification” or “get sensually gratified”, depending on its part of speech.

3 The synaesthetic uses of 味 wei ‘taste’: inherent or induced?

味 wei ‘taste’, according to its uses in the Āgamas, can be semantically bleached, in the sense that the gustatory meaning recedes to give way to the general sensual meaning. Going beyond the gustatory meaning, 味 wei ‘taste’ can thus collocate with all the sensory words. The question that naturally ensues is why 味 wei ‘taste’, out of the inventory of sensory words, is selected as an umbrella term to signify “sensual gratification” or “get sensually gratified”. Considering the fact that Chinese Buddhist scriptures were translated from South Asian languages, e.g., Sanskrit or Pāli, we need to figure out whether the choice of 味 wei ‘taste’ as an umbrella sensory term happened in the original South Asian languages or in Chinese language during the process of translating. To answer this question, we checked the uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ in Chinese Nikayas (CBETA 2015), which were translated from Pāli to Chinese via Japanese. Importantly, the original Pāli scriptures were translated independently to English in Modern time by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi. The availability of two versions from the same source enables us to compare the Chinese and the English versions to determine whether the use of TASTE for SENSUAL PLEASURE is induced by translation or inherent in Chinese language.

The example shown in (4) is extracted from Anguttara Nikaya (CBETA 2015) and the free translation is cited from the English translation provided by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012). It is interesting to note that, in both Chinese and English versions, the gustatory word TASTE is used in this context.

(4)「尊瞿昙乃無色味。」 Anguttara Nikaya (2012: 1125)
Zun qutan nai wu se wei.
Venerable Gotama indeed NEG form taste
‘Master Gotama lacks taste.’
「婆羅門！有事由，依此事由之故，正說者謂
In order to corroborate this conjecture, we checked the way that one could rightly say of me: ‘The ascetic Gotama lacks taste.’ The Tathagata has abandoned his taste for forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and tactile objects; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, obliterated it so that it is no more subject to future arising. It is in this way that one could rightly say of me: ‘The ascetic Gotama lacks taste.’

Since the Chinese version and the English version are not supposed to be influenced by each other, we come to a conjecture that the use of TASTE as “sensual gratification” derives from the Pāli source. In order to corroborate this conjecture, we checked the original Pāli scripture for the corresponding expressions, as shown in (5). This conjecture is borne out, as the Pāli word rasā ‘taste’ is proven to collocate with other sensory words, as illustrated by rūparasā ‘taste of forms’, saddharasā ‘taste of sounds’, gandharasā ‘taste of smells’ and phoṭṭhabbarasā ‘taste of tangibles’.

So far, we have established the fact that the gustatory TASTE in Pāli is versatile and capable of collocating with all the other sensory words. This feature, through the process of translation of Buddhist scriptures, has been adopted in Chinese language.

To strengthen our understanding of 味 wei ‘taste’ in the Āgamas, we take a close look at the data and figure out an extended context in which 味 wei ‘taste’ occurs. Other than the sensory words, e.g., 色 se ‘form’, 聲 sheng ‘sound’, 香 xiāng ‘smell’, 味 wei ‘taste’, 触 chu ‘tangibles’, the words for “five aggregates”, viz. 色 se ‘form’, 受 shou ‘feeling’, 想 xiang ‘perception’, 行 xing ‘preparation’, 識 shi ‘consciousness’, can collocate with 味 wei ‘taste’, when the five aggregates are understood in terms of the five sense faculties. As shown in (6), our understanding of the five aggregates relies on the six sense faculties, viz., 眼 yan ‘eye’, 耳 er ‘ear’, 鼻 bi ‘nose’, 舌 she ‘tongue’, 身 shen ‘body’ and 意 yi ‘mind’. Dependent on our knowledge of the five aggregates gleaned from the sensory data, there arise pleasures, which are termed as the 味 wei ‘taste’ of the five aggregates.

4. More on 味 wei ‘taste’ : synaesthetically-motivated uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ on Five Aggregates

Ershi, shizun gao zhu biqu: wo then Buddha speak to PL monk I xi yu se-wei youqi in_the_past at form-taste have_expectation youxing, ruo yu se-wei have_preparation if at suishunjue ze yu se-wei yi zhihu follow_naturally then at rushi jian. Rushi yu shou, xiang.
thus see thus at feeling perception xing, shi-wei youqi
preparations consciousness-taste have expectation youxing, ruo yu shou xiang,
have preparations if at feeling perception xing, shi-wei suishunjue,
preparations consciousness-taste follow naturally ze yu shi-wei yi zihui rushi
then at consciousness-taste by wisdom as such jian. Yunhe se-wei rushi zhi? Wei
see why form-taste as such understand such se yinyuan er sheng xiyue, shi ming
form reason then arise pleasure thus call se-wei, rushi se-wei rushi zhi.
form-taste thus form-taste thus understand
‘At that time, the Buddha spoke to the monks: I used to have expectations and preparations with regard to the taste of forms; if I were in tune with the taste of forms without expectations, I see the taste of forms as it is with the help of wisdom. Likewise, with regard to feeling, perception, preparations, and consciousness, I used to have expectations and preparations; if I were in tune with the tastes of feeling, perception, preparations and consciousness without expectations, I were in tune with the tastes of feeling, perception, preparations and consciousness as they are, I see the taste of consciousness as it is with the help of wisdom. Why do we see the taste of form as it is? Dependent on forms, there arise pleasures. This is called the taste of forms. It is in this sense that we see the taste of forms as it is.’

Yunhe xing rushi zhi? Why preparations as such understand Yun-chu sheng si, er, eye-touch arise mental formation ear bi, she, shen, yi-chu sheng nose tongue body mind-touch arise xiang, shi ming xiang, rushi perception be call perception as such xiang rushi zhi. Yunhe perception as such understand why xiang-wei rushi zhi? Xiang perception-taste as such understand perception yinyuan sheng xiyue, shi ming reason arise pleasure be call xiang-wei, rushi xiangwei-wei
feeling-taste as such perception-taste rushi zhi.
as such understands
‘Dependent on eye-touch, there arise perceptions. Dependent on ear-, nose-, tongue-, body- and mind-touch, there arise perceptions. They are called perceptions. It is in this sense that we understand perceptions as they are… Why do we understand the taste of perceptions as it is? Dependent on perceptions, there arise pleasures. This is called the taste of perceptions. It is in this sense that we see the taste of perceptions as it is.’

Why do we understand the taste of perceptions as it is?
Dependent on perceptions, there arise pleasures. This is called the taste of perceptions. It is in this sense that we see the taste of perceptions as it is.

Wei yan chu sheng xiang, er, call eye touch arise perception ear
Dependent on preparation, there arise pleasures. This is called preparation-taste. It is in this sense that we understand preparation-taste as it is.

Why do we understand consciousness as it is? It is called the substance of the six consciousnesses. The substance of eye consciousness, that of the ear consciousness, that of the nose consciousness, that of the tongue consciousness, and that of the body consciousness, are collectively called the substance of consciousnesses. It is in this way that we understand consciousness as it is. Why do we understand the taste of consciousness as it is? This is called consciousness-taste. It is in this way that we understand the taste of consciousness as it is.

In addition to the nominal use of 味 wei ‘taste’ in collocation with the five aggregates, 味 wei ‘taste’ can be used as a verb, meaning “be gratified by sensual pleasures”. This can be exemplified in (7) below.

(7) 既時，世尊告諸比丘：既生於色不味者，則不染於識；以既生於色味故，則有染著。
fa ‘dhamma’, yi ‘meaning’ and jietuo ‘liberation’. Since these words are devoid of sensory meanings, we ‘taste’ in this use is said to be further semantically bleached.

(8) 如我今日說法，上中下言，皆悉真正，義味具足，梵行清淨。(長阿含經 佛說長阿含第二分轉輪聖王修行經第二)
Ru wo jinri shuofa, shang zhong xia yan, jiexi zhenzheng, yi-wei down speech all authentic meaning-taste juzu, fanxing qingjing.

As I am preaching Dhamma for now, the beginning, the middle and the end of the Dhamma is authentic and meaningful. And the holy practice is clean.

(9) 比丘！行此十念者，便獲大果報，得甘露法味。（增壹阿含經卷第三十四七日品第四十之一（五））
Biqiu! Xing ci shi nian zhe, monk practice this ten thinking person bian huo da guobao, de nectar fa-wei.

Monks! If you practice the ten thinking patterns, you will reap great benefits and gain the nectar taste of Dhamma.

(10) 行法得樂果，解脫味中上，智慧除老死，是為壽中勝。(增壹阿含經卷第五十)
Xing fa de le guo, practice dhamma gain happiness fruit jietuo-wei zhong shang, zhihui liberation-taste in up wisdom chu lao si, shi wei rid aging death be as shou zhong sheng.

The fruit of happiness gained by one’s Dhamma practice is the upmost one in the taste of liberation; the elimination of aging and death by means of wisdom is the superb one in one’s life.

(11) 正如此，能得義味、法味、解脫味之有情少；反於者，不能得義味、法味、解脫味之有情更多。諸比丘！是故，今汝等應如是學，謂：我等欲得義味、法味、解脫味。諸

The above examples show that味 wei ‘taste’ could fully transcend the sensory meaning. Moreover,味 wei ‘taste’ of this use, unlike that in the sensory context, carries commendatory sense. As shown in (8)-(11), 義味 yiwei ‘meaning-taste’, 法味 fawei ‘dhamma-taste’, 解脫味 jietuowei ‘liberation-taste’ are positive qualities that Buddhist practitioners are encouraged to procure through diligent practice. Though “pleasure and joy” component of meaning is retained, this “pleasure and joy” are not derived from sensory input. As is well-known, sensual pleasures are something unwholesome in Buddhist teachings, 味 wei ‘taste’ derived out of sensory data is naturally negative in the sense that practitioners should forgo this kind of sensory taste. By contrast, “pleasure and joy” gained through one’s knowledge of dhamma or one’s experience of liberation, at the supra-mundane level, is something wholesome and thus commendatory.
This polarity value can be well captured by two types of emotional evaluation: the spontaneous emotion and the evaluative emotion (Xiong and Huang 2015). The synaesthetic uses of 味 wei ‘taste’ are usually associated with spontaneous or embodied emotion, as they are sense-related, whereas the metaphorical ones can be evaluative, as they are more abstract and less embodied.

6. Concluding Remarks:

This paper investigates the non-gustatory uses of 味 wei ‘taste’, which can be generally classified into two types: one is the synaesthetic usage and the other is the metaphorical usage. The former one features its collocation with all the other sensory words, directly or indirectly. The latter one is not sense-related but it inherits the “joy and pleasure” meaning, which is interpreted in the supra-mundane level and thus commendatory.

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