Qiancheng Li

Qiancheng Li is an assistant professor of Chinese at Louisiana State University specializing in traditional Chinese fiction.


In On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought Jane Geaney attempts an analysis of the epistemological role of the senses in philosophical texts of the Warring States period' in an examination that identifies vision, hearing, and the heartmind as the primary players in sensorial epistemology. The main challenge for her is that the primary questions in the Western epistemology of perception, namely that of the gap between appearance and reality on the perceptual side and the justification of beliefs on the epistemological side, are absent in Chinese thought, leaving Geaney the task of uncovering lines of thinking involving the senses and their relationship to knowledge. This challenge is overcome first by devoting a chapter to identifying the roles of the major senses involved in thought and action and second by identifying their mental integration in a subsequent chapter. When this task is completed, Geaney turns to a discussion of how her conclusions contribute to an understanding of a common issue in the thought of the Warring States period, namely that of names and their “filling.” As a final chapter, she offers new interpretations of the epistemological foundations of four of her six early sources.

By surveying several early texts, Geaney provides broad evidence that knowledge in the Warring States was often stated in terms of, and even constituted by,
hearing and seeing. She finds that this is true to the point of descriptions falling naturally into aural/visual pairs. A familiar line from the *Lunyu* (1:3) demonstrates the kind of evidence she provides: "巧言令色鮮矣仁." (It is rare for clever speech and an insinuating look to accompany benevolence). Considering that hearing and vision are a human being’s most useful senses for picking up cues about the environment, it is not surprising that they are prominent in these texts, but it is rather striking to see this pattern of aural/visual pairing appear in passage after passage of the *Mozi*, *Mengzi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Xunzi* under Geaney’s fine-toothed comb. Checking the *Laozi* myself, I see that this pattern does continue with remarkable regularity, although not as a hard and fast rule.

With this emphasis on perception as knowledge, one would presume that, epistemologically speaking, the Warring States Chinese were naive realists. Geaney warns us against this presumption by noting that the conception of realism in the West arose in opposition to the notion of idealism and that neither of these theories, with their concomitant assumptions and arguments, is relevant to the thought of this period. Geaney suggests, instead, that the Chinese were realists who also took backgrounds and other hermeneutic connections into account in the creation and organization of knowledge, viewing the world by the important method of discrimination (*bian* 辨). This claim of Geaney’s, however, is presented as an opening remark and deserves more development and support than she provides.

In the very social philosophy of the times, the significance of knowledge garnered through hearing and seeing lies in judging the speech and actions of others. Geaney finds that this type of judgment often involves considerations of hearing speech and seeing actions, with the actions often held up as evidence for or against the reliability of speech.

Another of Geaney’s important claims is that the heartmind has a triple role: (1) it verifies knowledge of the senses, (2) it stands as ruler of the senses, and (3) it is depicted itself as a sense. Each of these aspects of the heartmind is supported with textual evidence.

How do the implications of Geaney’s theories play out in the texts themselves? Geaney takes her theory of aural/visual pairing and puts it to use in analyzing the relationship of *ming* 名 and *shi* 實. She claims that this itself is an aural/visual pair, *ming* being the aural element and *shi* the visual. This visual dimension of *shi* implies that it has a physical aspect, which leads Geaney to understand it in its early meaning of “fruit” or “fruition” and by extension as “filling.” This would mean that in the important program of rectifying names, names were originally singled out because they are less rooted and, as such, more open to modification than *shi*.

Finally, Geaney puts her theories to the test again by looking at the use of the senses in the four texts *Xunzi*, *Mengzi*, *Laozi*, and *Zhuangzi*. In the *Xunzi* and the
Mengzi she looks at how aural/visual pairs are used in conjunction with knowledge and action, noticing that in the Xunzi there is an emphasis on spontaneous responsiveness that arises from the correspondence of elements of a pair, while in the Mengzi aural/visual pairs are emphasized as arising from the heartmind. In the Laozi and the Zhuangzi, Geaney focuses on the senses and how they relate to desires. In the Laozi she finds a closing off of the senses in order to reduce desires, and in the Zhuangzi an opening up of the senses in order to extend into the boundless.

By and large, Geaney’s book is solid sinology of the sort that accords the reader insights that can be taken back to the texts, which can then be reread with profit from the new perspective. Her chapters begin and end with succinct statements of her claims, and between these she provides evidence from the six source texts accompanied by brief analyses. Geaney’s strongest intellectual assertion is her staunch unwillingness to settle for received sinology or to read Western philosophical presumptions into early Chinese texts. She takes the terms of the texts at face value, wrestling with contextual coherence, refraining from overgeneralizations or glib conclusions. There are, however, some methodological issues to consider in her approach.

First, although cautious about importing Western assumptions, Geaney does not critically examine the use of key Western philosophical terms when applying them to early Chinese thought. An important example of this is her use of the term “knowledge,” which she uncritically uses as a translation of zhi 知. “Knowledge,” in the way she employs the term, with considerations of verification and a modified version of realism, implies that the Chinese held a type of correspondence theory of knowledge that would be amenable to contemporary Anglo-American tastes. Since this is a book on fundamental epistemology, the notion of knowledge itself deserves a more thorough treatment. In the commonsense role of everyday life, any cross-cultural differences between notions of knowledge may be negligible, but in a tract devoted to epistemology of a singularly moral and social philosophy, genuine philosophical differences must be addressed and clarified early, for they will have repercussions on later conclusions.

Second, Geaney’s quasi-scientific method of hypothesizing a claim and then locating supporting evidence in the texts has limitations that Geaney does not fully address. One of the most important limitations is that of representativeness. If I can excavate concept C from the background assumptions of text X, am I justified in extending that concept to text Y of the same period? Because Geaney is working with sources that she readily admits contain scarce references to her topics, and because she extrapolates from a single text or group of texts to claims that cover an entire period of philosophical speculation, this question is critical to how much weight one is willing to give to her conclusions. Another limitation to Geaney’s method of supporting claims is that while she may find evidence E for
claim C, the reader must trust that evidence E is neither compromised nor contradicted by F, G, and H, which may also appear in the same text or group of texts but go unmentioned by Geaney. To verify one of Geaney’s claims, one would have to go back through each text and read all relevant passages to be sure that they all accord with her claims. Not all textual sinology requires this. It is just that Geaney’s propositions are so broad, claiming as they do to cover an entire period of thought based on a small group of texts, that verification of her claims would require actually going over the texts of the entire period, looking for inconsistencies or contradictions. Whether one accepts Geaney’s conclusions, then, will depend on how they tally with one’s own understanding of the texts of the period.

A third methodological issue is Geaney’s choice of texts. To cover the period of “early China,” Geaney limits herself to six Warring States texts. In fact, she freely exchanges the terms “Warring States” and “early China” as if they unambiguously refer to the same period. She does not give a reason for limiting her research to the Warring States or to the six texts that she uses, but she does make clear in her Introduction that she sees a distinct philosophical demarcation between the Warring States period and the imperial period that follows. She notes that the cosmology of the Warring States period is not as fully systematized as the cosmology of later periods and that it is therefore not easy to understand certain key cosmological concepts of the Warring States period. But by limiting herself only to texts of the Warring States period, Geaney deprives her study of some ten centuries of early Chinese material surrounding the Warring States period. In addition, Geaney makes no use of excavated texts that clearly date from the same period and bear some relevance to her study.

As stated above, most of Geaney’s work, despite the aforementioned limitations, is solid sinology. Her weakest chapter is her Introduction, which I will take up in detail below.

Geaney begins with the observation that the senses are often characterized in early texts as bureaucratic and as associated with the wind (fēng 風). The importance of this observation is that it immediately removes the reader from any Western philosophical paradigms of the senses and places us squarely in a Chinese context, a reminder that is reinforced to good effect throughout Geaney’s book. Geaney wrestles with the significance of the metaphor of the senses as officials (guān 官), suggesting that they are identified as officials rather than leaders because although they exert some control, they are also inveterate followers of desire. Her section on the sensory aspects of the wind is more complicated.

Through quotations from the Xunzi, Mengzi, Zhuangzi, Lunyu, and Mozi, Geaney attempts to establish the transformational power of the wind by way of the senses and in association with qì 氣 and de 德, but she goes too far in stating definitively that “the term qì did not connote the single basic component of all
things.” It is one thing to state that we cannot extend later theories backward to earlier periods, but another to state that later theories were unknown to earlier periods simply because we cannot find evidence of them. Sinologists today are still prudently heeding the reactionary claims of the Qing philologists not to read the Neo-Confucians into the classics, but we must not go so far as to claim that a theory or assumption was presupposed in a culture only when it was written down, and even further that the texts we have today are a complete record of what was recorded or believed some twenty centuries ago. Angus Graham made this presumption when he claimed that in pre-Han literature “‘qing’ never means ‘passions,’” as it does, he says, in Neo-Confucianism, when it is contrasted with xing, nature. There is certainly a difference between the qing of the Neo-Confucians and that of the pre-Han period, but excavated texts, specifically the Xingzi mingchu, have shown that there is a much closer link to qing and the emotions than Graham surmised and one that likely predated Xunzi, to whom Graham attributes the first association of qing and the emotions.

Geaney, by limiting herself only to transmitted texts of the Warring States period and then cordonning off the period to prevent philosophical infection from later periods, sacrifices a richer perspective than she might otherwise have gained. She cannot legitimately claim that qi did not connote the single basic component of all things during the fourth century (here she must move back from the end of the Warring States period, as a statement from the Xunzi reads “water and fire have qi”). All that she, and we, can say is that we do not know what the status of qi was during this period. The proof of Geaney’s strong claim lies in a single passage of the Lunyu, which mentions blood and qi together. From this Geaney infers that because the two are coordinate, the second cannot be the metaphysical basis of the first. If we are told that a ship docks with the sailors and the captain aboard, can we infer that the captain is not a sailor? Or if we hear that humans and animals were interacting at a dog show, can we presume that humans are not animals? We must be careful not to demand that philosophers of premodern China adhere to Anglo-American philosophical requirements of disambiguation. Perhaps rather than being coordinate terms, xue and qi are parts of a binomial term. Manfred Porkert, in fact, lists “xueqi” as one of thirty-two kinds of qi. Granted, he is working from later periods, but we cannot discount later periods as irrelevant, as we are justified in assuming that their theories and terminology did not arise out of a historical vacuum. Conversely, I would suggest that this mention of xueqi counts as evidence that later medical theories were current in some form at the time this part of the Lunyu was composed (a time that Bruce and Taeko Brooks identify as around 285 B.C.E.), which would in itself serve to refute Geaney’s claim.

Going back to Geaney’s section on wind, we find that it can be divided into three subsections on music and qi, music and de, and wind and food. In contrast
to her previous demands of disambiguation, here Geaney concludes from Zhuangzi’s famous passage on the music of nature that “to an extant, qi, wind, and music are interchangeable.” This lapse in analysis continues throughout the section, ending with the conclusion: “qi is the music that enters the senses as well as the wind that the music causes to emerge from them.” Geaney’s path of inference that identifies qi, music, and wind is not entirely clear but involves the observations that “wind and music are spoken of in terms of qi” (p. 23) and “qi is more closely associated with wind and music than it is with most things” (p. 23). I do not think it too much of a leap to take wind and qi as interchangeable in an atmospheric context, but music is quite different, taking wind/ qi as its vehicle of transmission. Geaney uses the following quotation from the Xunzi as evidence for a reference to “music as qi”:

凡蠢聲感人而逆氣應之
逆氣成象而亂生焉
正聲感人而順氣應之
順氣成象而治生焉

This passage, however, rather than identifying qi and music, states that when a person is stimulated by a certain kind of music, a certain kind of qi (in the person) arises in response. Geaney’s claim that qi is more closely associated with wind and music than with most things is obscuring her understanding of early Chinese cosmological anthropology, which, even from her restricted range of texts, we see is qi-based.

This is an example of the second methodological issue I mention above, namely that in order to verify Geaney’s claims, one must go back to the texts and attempt to find counterexamples. In this case, there happen to be many references that Geaney does not quote. Of the three mentions of qi in the Laozi, none refers to wind or music, instead referring in one instance to cosmogony (chapter 42) and in the other two to the qi of the person (chapters 10, 55). Three of four mentions in the Lunyu (8:4, 10:4, 16:7), as well, refer only to the physiology or breath of the person (the fourth, 10:8, is unclear in meaning but appears unrelated to wind or music). The same goes for the three sections in the Mengzi (3:2, 11:8, 13:36) that mention qi. Perhaps Geaney is limiting her comments here to only the Zhuangzi and the Xunzi, but she doesn’t say so explicitly, and there is no obvious reason for doing so. What Geaney does establish, rather than an identification of qi and music, is a responsiveness among qi-imbued things, what she calls “the power of resonating qi” (p. 24). Geaney needs identification of qi and music to make the case that the senses are directly involved in the process of resonance because there is no explicit mention of the sensorial involvement. But explicit mention is not necessary, nor is an identification of qi and music, for as long as music is involved, of course, the sense of hearing is necessary as well. There is a relationship between music and qi but not one of identification. Music, transmitted by qi/
wind, can move one through the sense of hearing, but \textit{qi} resonance is not limited to the transmission of music, and it would be a mistake to infer such from these limited passages.

Geaney makes a similar overstatement in the succeeding subsection on music and \textit{de}, which she concludes by saying that “the wind [carrying \textit{de}] enters the ears and transforms the person who hears it” (p. 27). It would be enough to observe that \textit{de} is sometimes depicted aurally in early texts, for which Geaney provides two excellent citations. But then she moves on to a quotation from the \textit{Zhuangzi}, 德者成和之修 (5:47), from which she concludes that the instance of harmony is referring to music “because the \textit{Zhuangzi} also speaks of the harmony of \textit{de} via a metaphor suggestive of wind,” the carrier of music. Here she seems to be overstepping the bounds of logical inference. Certainly in the \textit{Zhuangzi} one can have harmony without necessarily referring to wind or music—many more citations would be required to establish such a necessary relation. Although Geaney couches her statements regarding such links in suppositional terms, her conclusion remains unqualified.

Geaney’s purpose in the section comprised of these subsections is to establish a link between the wind and the senses because she believes that there is an important contrast between the images of the senses as orderly bureaucrats and as easily disrupted by the blowing about of the wind. Although this is an interesting supposition, it awaits conclusive textual support. Rather than focusing on an association between the wind and the senses, it may be helpful to note that in medical theory the wind enters the person through the skin.\footnote{The connection of the wind and the senses does not bear significantly on later issues in the book.}

Another claim in this chapter is that “there is sensory knowledge in these texts that is independent of the heartmind” (p. 35). This is a provocative statement and certainly counterintuitive. It is based on statements such as 耳知 and 口不知. What could it mean to say that the senses have knowledge rather than the person? Knowledge contributes to understanding and acting, neither of which the senses can do. Knowledge of each sense is assimilated to knowledge of the others, which no single sense can do. Geaney’s interpretation here is an example of her willingness to take locutions at face value, but this kind of counterintuitive claim deserves some elaboration in regard to its implications. It is unclear how to make sense of these passages other than as condensations of the sort, “based on the sense of hearing, the person knows.” To verify Geaney’s claim, one would need to look at other texts to demonstrate that in other cases of sensing and knowledge it was not the person who knew but the senses, and one would need to conceptualize how to make such a position cogent. The \textit{Laozi} says: 天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已。皆知善之為善，斯不善已 (chapter 2). Here we find a similar syntax, but it would be difficult to make a case for interpreting the passage as re-
erring to a world (”subcelestial realm”) that knows rather than to the people of the world.

I’ve tried to make the case that despite the overall high quality of Geaney’s scholarship, there are limitations built into her methodology and that these are most evident in her introductory chapter. These limitations should not be construed as detracting significantly from the ultimate value of the scholarship, however. Geaney’s work may not always be conclusive, but it is often persuasive, pregnant with insight, and suggestive of further research and interpretive possibilities.

Brian Bruya

Brian Bruya is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Hawai‘i writing his dissertation on spontaneity in early Chinese philosophy.

NOTES

1. Although her title says “Early Chinese,” Geaney limits her study to texts of the Warring States period. Of these, she again limits herself to six philosophical texts, specifically the Lunyu, Mozi, Mengzi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Laozi.

2. We may grant that because this work is derived from her 1996 dissertation and that because the most relevant excavated texts, the Guodian material, were excavated only in 1993, recensions of them came too late to be incorporated into her research. But one may also argue that when a dissertation is converted for publication as a book, a scholar has the obligation to take into account scholarship that has become available in the intervening years.


7. Passage numbering in my references are according to Chinese University of Hong Kong Institute of Chinese Studies ancient Chinese text concordance series, edited by D. C. Lau and found online at Shuhai Wenyuan: Classical Chinese Digital Database and Interactive Internet Worktable, ed. Brian Bruya <http://www.shuhai.hawaii.edu>.