



# ASIAN AESTHETICS

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR AESTHETICS  
CURRICULUM DIVERSIFICATION PROJECT

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## OVERVIEW & AIMS

While it is common to hear that we are living in an era of global education, academic philosophy and aesthetics continue to reflect a heavy bias toward Western philosophies, thinkers, and arts. This curriculum project has two central aims. The first aim is to support the diversification of aesthetics curricula through the inclusion of Asian philosophical perspectives. The second aim is to present reading modules in a way that highlights the rich possibilities for cross-cultural and comparative work in aesthetics. Aesthetics often succeeds in philosophizing across borders where other methods fail for a number of reasons. Aesthetics brings together a wide range of philosophical methods and considerations, including but not limited to epistemological, hermeneutical, metaphysical, political, and ethical. The fundamental role of perception in aesthetics should encourage appropriate cultural reflexivity and reflection. Additionally, the philosophical interpretation of a work of art can place demands and yield results in a manner similar to ideal cross-cultural philosophizing.

Asian philosophy of art and aesthetics contributes to these aims in at least two important ways. First, the arts were often treated as philosophical practices in a number of Asian traditions. Second, aesthetics occupied a principal place in the philosophies included here, arguably on par with the preeminent role that metaphysics has played in the history of European philosophy. Complementing the first two aims of diversifying contemporary aesthetics and highlighting opportunities for comparative and cross-cultural work, this reading list is designed to also strengthen the role of aesthetics in philosophy more broadly by showcasing traditions for which aesthetics was at the center of philosophical practices and methods. This project therefore supports the importance of non-Western traditions in the discipline of aesthetics and confirms aesthetics at the center of philosophy.

While consideration for tradition and canon was certainly given in gathering this collection of readings, the scope of the project cannot adequately represent the long and complex histories of philosophical aesthetics in Asia. The readings here were primarily chosen for their relevance to contemporary aesthetics, their challenges to the discipline of aesthetics education, and their cross-cultural promise. Many of the readings are related to one another and these connections are noted in the “Related Readings” section next to the central entries in each module. A list of compilations is included at the end to highlight additional important and burgeoning areas of research, as well as to indicate the depth of research in the current field of Asian aesthetics.

Modules may be used topically for core areas of aesthetics and for courses that focus on a particular historical time or culture. For example, in the Chinese tradition, there is a longstanding debate over the emotive content of music that parallels contemporary debates in western philosophy about the relationship of music to the emotions and whether music has meaningful content. As a consequence of the priority given to aesthetics in Chinese philosophy, this debate also played a significant role in discussions of ethics and society. The readings on music could be used in a wide range of courses, including aesthetics, philosophy of art, philosophy of music, Chinese, Asian, or global aesthetics, and art and society.

## BEAUTY

***The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China.* Ronald C. Egan. Boston: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2006.**

A groundbreaking study of several innovative aesthetic activities during the Northern Song dynasty in China. Egan uses the “problem of beauty,” especially as it challenged class distinctions, to organize issues surrounding the new aesthetic pursuits of the time and the anxieties they provoked among the Confucian literati.

***The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan.* Toshihiko & Toyo Izutsu. The Hague: Martibus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981.**

The authors clarify key aspects of what they consider to be the Japanese sense of beauty and artistic experience in terms of their philosophical structures. The first part of the book theorizes the major philosophical ideas related to beauty, while the second part is an illustration of these ideas by way of representative Japanese arts, including *waka*-poetry, *nō* drama, the art of tea, and haiku.

***Saundarya: The Perception and Practice of Beauty in India.* Harsha V. Dehejia & Makarand Paranjape, eds. Samvad India Foundation, 2003.**

Wide-ranging volume on the concept of beauty (*saundarya*) in both traditional and modern Indian aesthetics. Includes essays on the ontology, expression, politics, and embodiment of beauty.

### RELATED READING

Xunzi, *Xunzi*. In *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. Eric Hutton, trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

### RELATED READING

Dōgen, *Sanshōdōei*. In Steven Heine, *Japanese Poetry and Aesthetics in Dogen Zen*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1989.

### RELATED READING

K. Krishnamoorthy, *Indian Theories of Beauty*. Bangalore: Indian Institute of World Culture, 1981 (Transaction No. 53).

## THE AESTHETIC

***The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition.* Li Zehou. Majia Bell Samei, trans. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.**

Li's synthesis of Chinese aesthetic thought from ancient to early modern times. Li incorporates pre-Confucian, Confucian, Daoist, and Chan Buddhist ideas to discuss art and the central role of aesthetics in Chinese culture and philosophy. Government, self-cultivation and realization, and ethics are all approached here as aesthetic activities.

**"The Creation of the Vocabulary of Aesthetics in Meiji Japan." Michael Marra. In *Essays on Japan: Between Aesthetics and Literature*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010.**

A fine-grained historical analysis of the vocabulary of Japanese aesthetics and philosophy of art set in the context of the reconfiguration of knowledge in the Meiji period. Marra analyzes the impact that the importation of outside aesthetics categories had on the meaning of the aesthetic in Japanese culture.

**"Ōnishi Yoshinori and the Category of the Aesthetic." Michele Marra. In *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i-Press, 1999.**

An introduction to and translation of Ōnishi Yoshinori's study of the Japanese aesthetic concept of *aware* as sorrow, aesthetic consciousness, metaphysical absence, the Beautiful, and as the possible basis for the category of the aesthetic.

**"Korean Aesthetic Consciousness and the Problem of Aesthetic Rationality." Kwang-Myung Kim. *Canadian Aesthetics Journal*, Volume 2 (Winter 1998).**

Kim argues for aesthetic rationality, as a kind of aesthetic consciousness, at the heart of Korean identity. He traces its unique cultural legacy in Korean shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism in order to account for the characteristic vitality and spontaneity in Korean art.

## IMAGINATION & CREATIVITY

***More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India.* David Shulman. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012.**

A systematic account of Indian theories of imagination in poetry, painting, ritual, theater, and yoga. Shulman argues for the central place of imagination in Indian philosophy and the tradition's focus on the ontological power of imagination to create reality.

**“Clarifying the Images (*Ming xiang*).” Wang Bi. In *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*. Richard John Lynn, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.**

From Wang Bi's (226-249) seminal commentary on the *Yi Jing* (*I Ching*) or *Classic of Changes*. Bi catalogues and explains the relationship between images, ideas, language, and meaning. A key text that continues to be of importance in Chinese aesthetics, philosophy of language, and hermeneutics.

**“Immeasurable potentialities of creativity (Chapter 2).” In *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry*. Chung-Yuan Chang. London & Philadelphia: Singing Dragon, 2011.**

A study of the Taoist (Daoist) concept of creativity as a non-instrumental process in which all things create themselves. Chang argues for the foundational place of this understanding of self-emergent creativity in the aesthetics of Chinese art.

RELATED READING  
Ch. 26 of the *Zhuangzi* in *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. A.C. Graham, trans. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001.

RELATED READING  
*Laozi, Tao Te Ching*. D. C. Lau, trans. New York: Addison Wesley, 2000.

## AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

***The Structure of Iki.* Kuki Shūzō. In *The Structure of Detachment: The Aesthetic Vision of Kuki Shūzō.* Hiroshi Nara, ed. & trans., Thomas J. Rimer, Jon Mark Mikkelsen. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005.**

One of the most important and creative works in modern Japanese aesthetics. Kuki develops a description of a uniquely Japanese sense of taste (*iki*) that brings together characteristics of the geisha, samurai, and Buddhist priest.

**“Samvega, ‘Aesthetic Shock’.” Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies.* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Feb. 1943). 174-179.**

An explication of the Pali aesthetic term *samvega* as the state of shock and wonder at a work of art that occurs when the implications of its aesthetic qualities are experienced. Despite being an emotion, Coomaraswamy associates *samvega* with disinterested aesthetic contemplation.

**“Ownerless Emotions in Rasa-Aesthetics.” Arindam Chakrabarti. *Asian Aesthetics.* Ken-ichi Sasaki, ed. Singapore: NUS Press, 2010.**

Chakrabarti explores the possibilities of *rasa* theory via the question of whose emotion is experienced when an audience relishes a work of art. Chakrabarti argues for the existence of a “centerless non-singular subjectivity” according to which the special emotions savored in aesthetic experience do not have specific owners. These personless sentiments indicate an ethical relationship between aesthetic imagination and moral unselfishness.

### RELATED READING

*Abhinavabhāratī.*  
Abhinavagupta. In  
*Nāṭyaśāstra of*  
*Bharatamuni: Text,*  
*Commentary of Abhinava*  
*Bharati by*  
*Abhinavaguptacarya and*  
*English Translation.*  
M.M. Ghosh, trans.  
Pushpendra Kumar,  
ed. 3 Volumes. Delhi:  
New Bharatiya Book  
Corporation, 2006.

## AESTHETIC EXPRESSION

***Abhinavabhāratī. Abhinavagupta. In Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharatamuni: Text, Commentary of Abhinava Bharati by Abhinavaguptacarya and English Translation. M.M. Ghosh, trans. Pushpendra Kumar, ed. 3 Volumes. Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2006.***

Abhinavagupta's famed commentary on Bharatamuni's treatise on drama, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in which he details aesthetic expression and experience according to a theory of *rasa*, or aesthetic relish. Abhinavagupta's theory is the most influential account of how the *rasas* or aesthetic emotions transcend the bounds of the spectator and artwork in a three-part process including depersonalization, universalization, and identification.

**“Mask and Shadow in Japanese Culture: Implicit Ontology in Japanese Thought.” Sakabe Megumi. In *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*. Michele Marra, ed. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.**

Through a study of the Japanese concept of *omote*, meaning both “mask” and “face,” Megumi explores the lack of dualisms in traditional Japanese thought between soul and body, exterior and interior, seen and unseen. Instead, as demonstrated in the Japanese art of *nō* theater, there are only reversible and reciprocal surfaces.

**“Water and Stone: Contemporary Chinese Art and the Spirit Resonance of the World.” Mary Bittner Wiseman. *Contemporary Aesthetics. Volume 8* (2010).**

Wiseman draws key links between contemporary art and traditional Chinese aesthetics to show that new art in China operates below the level of discourse, at the level of “matter and gesture.” She argues that the influential principles of painting outlined by Xie He (6<sup>th</sup> c.) and Shi Tao (17<sup>th</sup> c.) are exemplified in much new Chinese art and reveal how experimental Chinese artists approach the inseparability of matter and energy in their work.

### RELATED READING

Zeami Motoyiko, *Zeami: Performance Notes*. Tom Hare, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

### RELATED READING

Xie He, *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters (Guhua Pinlu)*. In James F. Cahill, “The Six Laws and How to Read Them.” *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961): 372-381.

## AESTHETICS & ETHICS

**Xunzi. Xunzi. In *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. Eric Hutton, trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.**

The collected writings of the key early Confucian philosopher, Xun Kuang (Xunzi). A central theme of his work is the importance of ritual and music in the ethical cultivation of self and community. Books 19 and 20 address the effectiveness of ritual and music in transforming turbulent individual emotions into refined character and social chaos into harmonious order.

**“Li Yu’s Theory of Drama: A Moderate Moralism.” Peng Feng. *Philosophy East and West*. Vol. 66, No. 1. January 2016, 73-91.**

Peng gives an account of the development of Chinese drama according to a contrast between Confucian moralism, in which morality controls aesthetics, and Daoist autonomism, in which aesthetics are autonomous from morality. He argues for an understanding of Li Yu’s theory of drama as a moderate moralism that evaluates drama according to a possible, yet contingent and unnecessary relation between moral and aesthetic virtue.

**“The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics.” Yuriko Saito. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 65, No. 1 (Jan. 2007). 85-97.**

Saito presents the moral dimension of Japanese aesthetics in terms of two design principles: respect for the quintessential, innate characteristics of things and honor and responsiveness to human needs. She analyzes the sensitivity to objects and people at work in a wide range of Japanese arts and crafts, including garden design, haiku, painting, pottery, and food, emphasizing that the cultivation of a moral attitude toward things is often practiced through aesthetic means.

## AESTHETICS OF CULTIVATION & REALIZATION

***A Blade of Grass: Japanese Poetry and Aesthetics in Dōgen Zen.***  
**Steven Heine. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1989.**

Sōtō Zen founder Dōgen taught his students to renounce literary activities as impediments to enlightenment, and yet he composed a collection of *waka* poetry, the *Sanshōdōei*, that reveals a more nuanced understanding of language. Heine examines the paradoxical role of aesthetics and language in Dōgen's work, tracing elements of traditional Japanese aesthetics in his writing, and arguing that, for Dōgen, aesthetics is an essential stage of symbolic awareness on the path to enlightenment. The book includes a translation and annotation of Dōgen's poems.

***Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō.*** Yoshida Kenkō.  
**Donald Keene, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.**

The writings of Kenkō, a 14<sup>th</sup> century court poet turned Japanese Buddhist priest, reflecting on a wide range of ordinary and extraordinary subjects in the random style of *zuihitsu* ("follow the brush") Japanese composition. His essays were highly influential on Japanese aesthetics, especially the value placed on impermanent, irregular, and imperfect beauty, and the place of understatedness in a turbulent world.

***Record of Music (Yue Ji).*** "Yue Ji 樂記—Record of Music:  
**Introduction, Translation, Notes, and Commentary."** Scott Cook.  
***Asian Music*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (Spring—Summer, 1995), pp. 1-96.**

The earliest extant Chinese treatise on music. The *Yue Ji* presents largely Confucian ideas on the connections between music, self-cultivation, proper governance, and the realization of natural patterns. Human character is described as a musical progression with ties to the transformation of sound into a kind of music that is distinguished by its relationship to virtue

RELATED READING  
Robert E. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.

## COMPARATIVE AESTHETICS

***Everyday Aesthetics.* Yuriko Saito. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.**

A call to advance the field of everyday aesthetics and a critique of the predominance of art-centered aesthetics in contemporary aesthetics and philosophy of art. Saito draws on the lack of strong distinctions between fine and applied arts in Japan, as well as feminist insights and environmental aesthetics, to explore topics such as the non-disinterested nature of day to day aesthetic judgment, attitudes toward mess and disorder, and the aesthetics of domestic life. Her detailed work opens up the extraordinary complexity, including moral dimensions, of ordinary aesthetic responses to everyday objects and experiences.

***This Strange Idea of the Beautiful.* François Jullien. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.**

A comparative study in which Jullien contrasts the Greek metaphysical idea of the beautiful with the Chinese understanding of beauty as an event of valency, resonance, and pregnancy. Jullien utilizes Xie He's Six Principles of painting to help demonstrate the telling absence of "the" beautiful in Chinese philosophy and art in contrast to its necessity in European metaphysics.

***Issues of Contemporary Art and Aesthetics in Chinese Context.* Eva Kit Wah Man. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2015.**

A timely discussion of the influence of the last century's political, economic, and cultural changes in China upon its philosophical aesthetics. Man's book addresses a number of key neglected topics of comparative aesthetics between China and the West, contemporary aesthetics and art in Hong Kong, the relation of gender and art in the politics of identity, and the role of tradition in new creative practices. Chapter 4 introduces the leaders of the major schools of aesthetics in new China, including Li Zehou.

### RELATED READING

*The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition.* Li Zehou.

Majia Bell Samei, trans.  
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.

**“From Puzzling Pleasures to Moral Practices: Aristotle and Abhinavagupta on the Aesthetics and Ethics of Tragedy.” Geoff Ashton & Sonja Tanner. *Philosophy East and West*. Vol. 66, No. 1. January 2016, 13-39.**

A comparative treatment of the perennial question of why we relish tragic theater. Tanner and Ashton employ the ideas of the most significant philosophers of the aesthetics of theater in classical India (Abhinavagupta) and ancient Greece (Aristotle) to provide an argument for the positive moral, social, and political effects of tragic theater, which include cultivating a positive concern for others, a sense of wonder, and a passion for our social-moral roles.

**“Who is afraid of Mimesis? Contesting the Common Sense of Indian Aesthetics through the Theory of ‘Mimesis’ or Anukaraṇa Vāda.” Parul Dave-Mukherji. *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Arindam Chakrabarti, ed. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 71-92.**

A rejoinder to the claim that mimesis is unimportant in Indian art and aesthetics. Dave-Mukherji seeks to decolonize Indian aesthetics from its internalized Western ethnocentrism, according to which mimesis belongs to the domain of Western art and aesthetics, and open new, non-binary terrain for comparative aesthetics. She seeks to revive the complex theory of visual representation theorized in ancient Indian art treatises, particularly the concept of *anukrti*, a term she considers cognate to mimesis.

**“Reception and Elucidation: Ko Yuseop’s Foundation of Modern Korean Aesthetics.” Joosik Min. *Mihak (Aesthetics)*. Korean Society of Aesthetics. Vol. 42 (June 2005), 270-307.**

An overview of the work of Ko Yuseop, the founder of modern Korean aesthetics, including an examination of Ko’s theory of beauty as he developed it in contrast to western aesthetic theories. For Ko, beauty is an embodied contradiction that is at once universal and historical, unchangeable and changeable.

RELATED READING  
*Essays on Aesthetics and Art*. Ko Yuseop. In *The Complete Works of Ko Yuseop*, Volume 8. Gyeonggi-do: Youlhwadang Publishers, 2012.

## THE ARTS

***Music Has Neither Grief Nor Joy. Xi Kang. In *Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-Century China*. Translated by Robert G. Hendricks. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.***

The controversial essay in which Xi Kang offered a distinct counterargument to the orthodox Confucian view that music contains and transfers emotions between musicians and listeners. Xi Kang crafts a series of arguments against the presence of emotions and images in music and contends that the widespread belief to the contrary leads to the misuse of music for political and moral agendas.

***Zeami Motoyiko, *Zeami: Performance Notes*. Translated by Tom Hare. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.***

A compilation of writings on performance by the Japanese playwright, actor, and aesthetician, Zeami Motoyiko. His work addresses the principles of *nō* theater, including dramatic imitation, music, and movement, as well as ideas from Japanese philosophical aesthetics such as *yūgen* (“dark” or “mysterious”). Zeami also maintains a focus throughout his writings on *jo-ha-kyū*, a style of movement found in many Japanese arts, including theater, tea ceremony, and martial arts.

***Xie He, *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters (Guhua Pinlu)*. James F. Cahill, “The Six Laws and How to Read Them.” *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961): 372-381.***

Xie He’s “Six Laws” are recognized as the first systematic treatment of painting theory in China, written in 550 CE, and continue to exert influence in art and aesthetics today. His six principles of painting are terse, ambiguous, and challenging to translate. Cahill’s article explores these translation issues and suggests readings of the laws.

RELATED READING  
*Essay on Music*. Ruan Ji.  
In Reed Andrew Criddle’s “Rectifying Lasciviousness through Mystical Learning: An Exposition and Translation of Ruan Ji’s *Essay on Music*.” *Asian Music*, Vol. 38, Number 2, Summer/Fall 2007.

RELATED READING  
*This Strange Idea of the Beautiful*. François Jullien. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

***Taiga's True Views: The Language of Landscape Painting in Eighteenth-Century Japan.* Melinda Takeuchi. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.**

A study of the work of Edo period painter Ike no Taiga that illuminates the relationship between topography and the language of visual symbols in painting. Takeuchi treats Taiga's paintings as a coherent group and connects their meaning to the artistic and intellectual context of his times, including his eclectic influences from Chinese brush techniques, Western spatial conceptions, and Japanese design aesthetics.

**"Validity in Interpretation: Some Indian Views." V.K. Chari. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 36, No. 3 (March 1978). 329-41.**

An outline of the theory of interpretation within the language philosophies of ancient India. Chari organizes this extensive history according to topics such as verbal autonomy, intention, unity of meaning, polysemy, contextualism, and interpretation.

**"The Human Body as a Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy." John Hay. In *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, 179-212. Originally published in *Theories of the Arts in China*. Bush and Murck, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.**

A now classic essay on the relationship of Chinese calligraphy to the body and the epistemic possibilities of embodied aesthetics. Hay analyses the physiological imagery of Chinese calligraphy and the value placed on its presentation of energy in transformation, in order to highlight the way life, art, and thought were united in both Chinese philosophy and medicine.

## COMPILATIONS

***The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art.* Arindam Chakrabarti, ed. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.**

An extensive, diverse collection of essays organized under two main headings. The first group are contemporary, historical, comparative, and creative treatments of *rasa* theory. The second group of writings address philosophies of artistic practices across many genres. These essays represent some of the most important work by leading thinkers in the field of twenty-first century Indian aesthetics.

***Aesthetics of Everyday Life: East and West.* Liu Yuedi & Curtis L. Carter, eds. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.**

The first collection of writings on everyday aesthetics that sets its sights on constructing an aesthetics of everyday life through cultural dialogue between Asia and the West. Within the volume are sophisticated pieces on the relation of aesthetics to ethics, the continuity between aesthetic/artistic experience and everyday life, and original arguments for the central role of aesthetics in both human flourishing and philosophy. The essays here demonstrate some of the important philosophical benefits of using everyday existence and objects as a focus of East-West comparative aesthetics.

***Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics.* Zhu Liyuan & Gene Blocker, eds. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012.**

A collection of translations of recent work by important Chinese aestheticians, including essays on traditional Chinese, western, and cross-cultural aesthetics and art. The work here addresses mainstream aesthetics topics such as beauty, art appreciation and criticism, aesthetic judgment, and images, as well as more rarified topics such as space-consciousness in Chinese art.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the American Society for Aesthetics for funding this project with a 2016 Curriculum Diversification Grant, and to Anne Eaton for organizing the program. My thanks as well go to Geoff Ashton, Leah Kalmanson, and Joosik Min for advice on the content, and to the anonymous reviewers who provided helpful suggestions and feedback.