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


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 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.


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

RELATED READING

RELATED READING

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.


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.


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.


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


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.


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.


A study of the Taoist 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.


Elucidates key ideas and practices from Daoist aesthetics that embrace the “everyday” and the “fantastical” (marvelous, imagined, or bizarre). Mattice focuses on the Zhuangzi to demonstrate the overlap between everyday practices and artistic skills, and to show how practices of creativity, spontaneity, simplicity, and imagination transform art into self-cultivation and self-cultivation into art.

RELATED READING

RELATED READING
Aesthetic Experience


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.


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.


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
AESTHETIC EXPRESSION


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.


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.


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 (6th c.) and Shi Tao (17th 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

RELATED READING
**AESTHETICS & ETHICS**


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.


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.


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.
Kim provides a needed discussion of the Korean cultural movement known as Joseonpoong or “Joseon wind,” through which unique aesthetic practices and values began to emerge as distinct from earlier Chinese influences. During this time, art’s value was reconceived in terms of identity expression rather than according to its relationship to metaphysics and morality. Kim argues this allowed art to become a tool for Koreans to reverse hermeneutic injustice and engage in new ways with their lived experiences.

**AESTHETICS OF CULTIVATION & REALIZATION**


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.


The writings of Kenkō, a 14th-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.

**RELATED READING**


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.

**COMPARATIVE AESTHETICS**


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.


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.

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.


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.


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 anukṛti, a term she considers cognate to mimesis.

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.

**THE ARTS**


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.


A compilation of writings on performance by the Japanese playwright, actor, and aesthete, 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.

**RELATED READING**


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.


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. Takeugchi 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.


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.


A 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, highlighting the unity of life, art, and thought in Chinese philosophy and medicine.

*Related Reading*

“The Aesthetic Concept of Yi 意 in Chinese Calligraphic Creation.”
Xiongbo Shi. Philosophy East and West, 2018, Vol. 68, 871-886. [NEW]

An examination of one of the most important aesthetic concepts in Chinese art theory—yi 意 ("intention" or "idea")—within the context of Chinese calligraphy creation, theory, and criticism. Shi argues for demarcating the concept into two distinct types (voluntative and cognitive) to accord with the calligrapher’s intention or will on the one hand, and the idea within the artist’s mind on the other. The voluntative is further divided into two aspects in order to elucidate the processes of improvisation in calligraphic creation, with the broader aim of clarifying the nature of creativity within wider Chinese aesthetic discourse.


Mukund Lath uses rāga music (Hindustānī classical music) to argue for the unconventional philosophical claim that identity is maintained because of rather than in spite of change, in musical works and in personal identity more broadly. In this republication of Lath’s landmark essay, David Shulman provides an explanatory introduction that contextualizes Lath’s work for a broader audience and elucidates the links between Hindustānī music theory and classical Indian philosophy.

COMPILATIONS


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.

The first collection of writings on everyday aesthetics that sets its sights on constructing and 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.


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.


A critical collection of twenty-seven new essays in Japanese aesthetics that brings together work from leading scholars on the aesthetic and artistic traditions of Japan. The wide-ranging essays cover topics as diverse as the philosophical grounds of Japanese aesthetics and art, the aesthetics of imperfection, bodily aesthetics and moral cultivation, aesthetic reverence for nature, aesthetic cultivation through martial arts, Zen cinematic sensibility, and the unique identity of Japanese aesthetics. This seminal collection is also notable for the sophisticated application of different aesthetic theories to specific Japanese arts.
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