

Comparison of Eastern Aesthetics and Malay Aesthetics: An Epistemological Framework

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Abstract

This study analyzes the comparison between the concepts of Eastern aesthetics and Malay aesthetics from an epistemological perspective. Eastern aesthetics, often associated with Chinese, Japanese, and Indian philosophies, has significantly influenced the formation of Asian cultural identity. In this context, Malay aesthetics, which has developed within the realm of Malay art, literature, and philosophy, exhibits its own uniqueness despite often overlapping with the broader Eastern aesthetics. This study proposes an epistemological framework that can serve as a foundation for understanding the differences and similarities between these two aesthetic concepts. By applying comparative and hermeneutic analysis methodologies, this study finds that Malay aesthetics reflects characteristics of harmony with nature, beauty with moral qualities, and the integration of the physical and metaphysical, which share similarities with Eastern aesthetics but with different emphases. This study contributes to the discourse on strengthening the identity of Malay aesthetics within the broader landscape of Asian aesthetics.

Keywords: Malay Aesthetics, Eastern Aesthetics, Epistemology, Philosophy of Art, Cultural Identity

Introduction

In discussions of art philosophy and aesthetics, the discourse on Eastern aesthetics often dominates academic conversations related to beauty and art in Asia. However, in this context, the position of Malay aesthetics often does not receive the attention it deserves as an autonomous entity. This study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the comparison between Eastern and Malay aesthetics, while outlining an epistemological framework that can serve as a foundation for understanding both aesthetic traditions.

Eastern aesthetics, primarily represented by Chinese, Japanese, and Indian traditions, has evolved over thousands of years and has had a significant influence on aesthetic thought in the Asian region. Concepts such as *wabi-sabi* (Japan), *li* and *qi* (China), and *rasa* (India) have

formed the basis of profound aesthetic thinking that reflects the worldview and cultural values of Eastern societies. In contrast, Malay aesthetics, rooted in the traditions of the Malay archipelago, has developed its own unique characteristics influenced by its environment, history, and cultural dynamics.

This study will explore an epistemological framework that can explain the similarities and differences between Eastern and Malay aesthetics. Through an examination of key concepts in both traditions, this study aims to develop a deeper understanding of how these two aesthetic systems interpret the concepts of beauty, creativity, and the meaning of art.

Furthermore, Malay aesthetics is not merely a small fragment of the broader Asian discourse but is a rich entity with its own meanings and symbolism. It reflects a worldview based on the balance between humans and nature, social harmony, and spiritual values deeply intertwined in the daily lives of Malay society. Elements such as refined manners (*halus budi*), politeness (*santun*), and implicit beauty (*indirect beauty*) play a significant role in shaping artistic taste and appreciation among this community. However, this uniqueness is often overlooked or seen as secondary in the hierarchy of Asian aesthetics, which tends to give more space to grand narratives such as Zen or Hindu-Buddhist aesthetics.

In an effort to elevate Malay aesthetics to a level equal to other Eastern traditions, this study emphasizes the need to build a discourse based on a local epistemological framework. This includes approaches that consider language, symbols, myths, and origin narratives that shape how Malay society understands beauty and meaning in art. By delving into the cultural and intellectual roots that form Malay aesthetics, this study not only aims to assert its autonomous existence but also proposes a critical dialogue among the diverse aesthetic traditions of Asia.

With a hermeneutic and contextual comparative approach, this study will analyze how differences in values, colonial history, and religious influences shape the aesthetic landscapes of each tradition. This, in turn, opens space for broader reflections on the meaning of beauty in different cultural contexts and how aesthetic discourse can expand beyond the Western framework that often dominates modern art theory.

Thus, this introduction serves as an important foundation for efforts to empower regional aesthetic thinking that is more inclusive and rooted in local realities.

Eastern Aesthetics: An Overview

The development of Eastern aesthetics has been a widely studied topic among scholars such as Okakura (1906), Ananda Coomaraswamy (1934), and François Cheng (1994). Okakura, in his work *The Book of Tea*, reveals the Japanese aesthetic philosophy that emphasizes simplicity, balance, and appreciation for imperfection. According to Okakura (1906), the concept of *wabi-sabi*, which highlights beauty in simplicity and transience, is central to understanding Japanese aesthetics.

Coomaraswamy (1934), in his study of Indian aesthetics, highlights the concept of *rasa* as an aesthetic experience that transcends the physical dimension and reaches into the metaphysical. He asserts that art in the Indian tradition is not only meant to provide pleasure but also to achieve spiritual enlightenment.

Cheng (1994), in his analysis of Chinese aesthetics, discusses the concepts of *li* (principle) and *qi* (vital energy) that underlie the understanding of art in the Chinese tradition. He emphasizes that Chinese aesthetics is deeply influenced by Taoist and Confucian philosophies, which stress harmony with nature and respect for tradition.

Overall, Eastern aesthetics presents an approach to art and beauty rooted in a worldview that is holistic, spiritual, and contemplative. In these three major traditions—Japanese, Indian, and Chinese—art is seen not merely as an external product or visual object but as a medium that unites humans with nature, spirituality, and inner balance (Coomaraswamy, 1934; Okakura, 1906; Cheng, 1994).

Concepts such as *mu* (emptiness) in Japanese Zen aesthetics, *shanta rasa* (peaceful emotion) in classical Indian art, and *wu wei* (non-forced action) in Taoist philosophy illustrate that aesthetic experiences in the East are often introspective, emphasizing internal processes and inner experiences (Cheng, 1994; Coomaraswamy, 1934). This approach differs from Western aesthetics, which tends to separate subject and object and evaluates art from purely formalistic or expressive perspectives.

Additionally, Eastern aesthetics also reflects the profound influence of natural elements such as water, stone, wind, and empty space, which are used not only as physical elements in artworks but also as symbols of transience, the cycle of life, and cosmic balance. In Chinese ink paintings, for example, the extensive use of white space does not signify emptiness but manifests a quiet presence that leaves room for imagination (Cheng, 1994). Similarly, in Japanese gardens, the arrangement of stones and plants is not random but is imbued with meaning and symbolism to reflect Zen principles and natural harmony (Okakura, 1906).

All these approaches demonstrate that Eastern aesthetics emphasizes deep interconnectedness between form and meaning, between art and life, and between humans and nature. Therefore, understanding Eastern aesthetics requires more than visual evaluation; it demands an appreciation of the belief systems, cultural values, and philosophies of life that underlie the creation and appreciation of art in the Eastern context. In this discourse, it can be seen how Eastern aesthetics forms a distinct system of thought—one that is not only visually beautiful but also rich with profound philosophical, spiritual, and ethical dimensions (Coomaraswamy, 1934; Okakura, 1906; Cheng, 1994).

Malay Aesthetics: Development and Concepts

Malay aesthetics, in a broader context, is not limited to artistic expressions such as literature, fine arts, or oratory but reflects the entire way of life and value system of Malay society. It is based on the concept of balance between humans, nature, and the Divine. Beauty is not judged solely by external appearance or form but also by aspects of *budi* (wisdom), *hikmah* (wisdom), and *tatasusila* (ethics), which are core values in traditional Malay culture (Hashim, 2008).

In the context of literature, Haji Salleh (2006) states that Malay poetics is built on the principle of *beautifying meaning through language*, which serves not only to convey messages but also to refine thoughts and emotions. The *pantun*, for example, is a form of Malay poetry that demonstrates skill in crafting language symbolically, deeply, and with rich aesthetic value.

Asmah (2021) further emphasizes that language use in Malay society is closely tied to the *Malay cultural worldview*, which prioritizes politeness, gentleness, and respect for customs. Aesthetics in speech, the delivery of advice, and the art of *pantun* reflect the refinement of culture and value systems that make art a medium for teaching, not just entertainment.

Moreover, Hashim (2008) focuses on the concept of *budi* as the core of Malay philosophy and aesthetics. *Budi* does not merely mean politeness or morality but also encompasses intelligence, wisdom, and beauty in actions and speech. In this regard, something is considered beautiful not solely because of its appearance but because it embodies *budi*—possessing ethical value and benefiting society. Thus, Malay aesthetics is an approach that unites artistic and spiritual elements in harmonious balance.

Overall, Malay aesthetics presents a holistic aesthetic framework—rooted in values, morally oriented, and grounded in local culture. It is not merely a reflection of external beauty but embodies the *cultural identity of the Malays*, emphasizing the relationship between humans and their Creator, among humans, and with the natural environment. Therefore, understanding Malay aesthetics requires an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, and literature.

Comparative Study of Eastern and Malay Aesthetics

Although both aesthetic traditions—Eastern and Malay—are rooted in distinct historical, cultural, and philosophical experiences, they share an emphasis on harmony, balance, and spiritual values as the foundation of beauty. However, comparative approaches to these two systems remain fragmented and often limited to formal or textual dimensions.

For example, Hussein (1974), in his study of traditional Malay literature, highlights elements of values, ethics, and teachings in literature but compares them indirectly with Eastern narratives without exploring deeper philosophical foundations. Similarly, Hassan (1994) attempts to trace similarities between Malay poetry and Japanese poetry such as haiku and tanka, but the study focuses more on literary form and structure than on the epistemology of their aesthetics.

Harun and Lubis (2014), in their study on Islamic calligraphy and Chinese calligraphy, state that both are artistic expressions of the soul that produce balanced forms of anatomy between ideas and creativity, whether on paper or canvas. These expressions are applications of the properties of writing that serve as symbols and philosophies of the characters of local communities, particularly the Chinese and Malays in the Malay world. However, their approach leans more toward formalistic comparison and does not examine the ontological and epistemological principles driving the creation of such art. This leaves comparative aesthetic discourse superficial, without touching on the metaphysical and cosmological foundations that shape the aesthetic thought of each tradition.

In this regard, the epistemology of Eastern aesthetics is heavily influenced by philosophical systems such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, which emphasize harmony with nature, ego dissolution, and the cycle of life as the core of artistic thought (Cheng, 1994; Parkes, 2003). In contrast, the epistemology of Malay aesthetics is more closely tied to a

philosophy of life based on *budi, adab* (etiquette), and a cosmic order centered on God (Hashim, 2008; Wan Daud, 1998).

This difference reflects two distinct worldviews—one oriented toward nature and natural processes (Eastern), and the other oriented toward moral values and the relationship between humans, God, and nature (Malay). Neither should be viewed in an East-West or high-low dichotomy but as autonomous epistemological systems that should be appreciated within their respective cultural frameworks.

Thus, this study aims to fill this gap in discourse by proposing a comparative approach that is epistemological—not merely comparing forms, themes, or artistic expressions but delving into the meanings, principles, and philosophical foundations underlying the concept of beauty in both traditions. This approach can not only enrich regional aesthetic discourse but also contribute to the construction of a more inclusive and contextual aesthetic discourse in the philosophy of art in Southeast Asia.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, applying comparative analysis and hermeneutic methodologies as the main frameworks for examining and interpreting aesthetic concepts in Eastern and Malay traditions. Comparative analysis is used to identify similarities and differences between the two aesthetic systems, particularly in terms of beauty concepts, cultural values, and the philosophical foundations underlying their aesthetic thought. Meanwhile, the hermeneutic approach is applied to trace and interpret meanings embedded in texts and cultural artifacts that serve as the primary materials of the study. This method allows for a deeper understanding of the value systems and worldviews embedded in the aesthetic heritage of both traditions.

Data sources in this study consist of two main categories. Primary sources include classical texts detailing aesthetic thought in their respective cultural contexts. Among the analyzed Malay classical texts are *Taj al-Salatin*, *Bustan al-Salatin*, and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. For the Eastern tradition, the study focuses on texts such as *Zhuangzi* from Chinese philosophy, *Kokinshū* from Japanese tradition, and *Natyashastra* from Indian aesthetics. The selection of these texts is based on their seminal role in shaping the main aesthetic frameworks of their respective traditions: *Zhuangzi* represents Taoism in Chinese aesthetics, *Kokinshū* as the foundation of *mono no aware* sensitivity in Japanese poetry, and *Natyashastra* as the primary reference for the principle of *rasa* in Indian art. Additionally, secondary sources, including contemporary studies in the form of books, journal articles, and seminar proceedings, are also referenced to strengthen the analysis and comparison.

The data analysis process is conducted in three main stages. First, thematic analysis is performed to identify dominant themes emerging from the analyzed texts and studies, such as themes of harmony, spirituality, simplicity, and moral values. Second, comparative analysis is used to compare these themes in the context of both traditions, identifying significant meeting points and differences. Finally, the results of this comparison are synthesized into an epistemological framework outlining the foundations of knowledge and philosophical principles shaping Eastern and Malay aesthetic traditions. This framework is hoped to serve

as a foundation for a more holistic and contextual understanding of regional aesthetic thought.

Findings and Discussion

Epistemological Foundations of Eastern Aesthetics

The three classical texts used in this study—*Zhuangzi*, *Kokinshū*, and *Natyashastra*—represent important epistemological foundations in Eastern aesthetic thought. Each text not only contains philosophical views or artistic beauty but also expresses value systems and worldviews that shape the aesthetics of their respective cultures. Four main principles summarized from this study are as follows:

1. Harmony with Nature (天人合一 / Tian Ren He Yi & 自然との共生 / Shizen to no Kyōsei)

In Eastern aesthetics, particularly in Chinese and Japanese philosophies, beauty is seen as a manifestation of harmony between humans and the universe. The Chinese concept *Tian Ren He Yi* (天人合一) emphasizes the unity between heaven (*tian*) and humans (*ren*), reflecting the view that humans should live in accordance with natural principles. This philosophy is deeply evident in *Zhuangzi*, which emphasizes the concepts of **wu wei** (無為, non-forced action) and **ziran** (自然, natural spontaneity). According to *Zhuangzi*, beauty exists when humans do not interfere with the flow of nature but follow the *Dao* (Zhuangzi, trans. Watson, 1968).

In the Japanese context, the concept *Shizen to no Kyōsei* (自然との共生) or "living with nature" is central to Zen gardens and bonsai art. It reflects a deep appreciation for natural forms that are not excessively manipulated but appreciated in their original, imperfect state.

2. Impermanence and Transience (無常 / Mujō & 侘寂 / Wabi-Sabi)

Eastern aesthetics also values impermanence and imperfection as part of the aesthetic experience. The concept of *wabi-sabi* (侘寂) in Japanese culture highlights beauty born from simplicity, change, and imperfection. The classical text *Kokinshū* (古今集), a 10th-century Japanese poetry anthology, plays a significant role in shaping this sensibility. The poems in *Kokinshū* express the aesthetics of **mono no aware**—a melancholic awareness of change and transience. Feelings such as solitude, delicate emotions, and beauty in fragility are key features that reinforce the value of *wabi-sabi* in Japanese tradition (McCullough, 1985).

3. Integration of the Physical and Metaphysical (理 / Li & 氣 / Qi; रस / Rasa)

In Chinese aesthetic philosophy, beauty is understood not only through external form but through metaphysical principles. The concept *Li* (理) refers to the universal principle underlying all phenomena, while *Qi* (氣) is the vital energy flowing through the universe. Both form the basis for the idea that art reflects the balance between tangible and spiritual elements.

In the Indian tradition, the central concept underlying aesthetics is *rasa* (रस)—the aesthetic feeling experienced by the audience when encountering art. This is elaborated in *Natyashastra*, a classical dramatic text translated by Ghosh (1961). *Natyashastra* explains nine types of *rasa* (*navarasa*), such as *shringara* (love), *karuna* (sorrow), and *shanta* (peace),

which transcend the physical to spiritual and moral experiences (Ghosh, 1967). Indian aesthetics emphasizes that true beauty is what can evoke *rasa* in the soul of the audience.

4. Intuition and Direct Experience (悟り / Satori & प्रत्यक्ष / Pratyakṣa)

Eastern aesthetics also emphasizes the importance of **direct and intuitive experience** in understanding beauty. In Japanese Zen tradition, the concept of *satori* (悟り) refers to sudden enlightenment achieved not through logic but through direct experience and inner awareness. Beauty in arts such as sumi-e painting or Zen garden arrangements can only be appreciated through inner tranquility achieved via meditation and contemplation.

In Indian philosophy, *Pratyakṣa* (प्रत्यक्ष) is one of the *pramāṇa* (valid sources of knowledge) that emphasizes sensory perception and direct experience as means to attain valid aesthetic understanding. This means beauty cannot be understood rationally alone but must be experienced holistically with full sensory and spiritual awareness (Coward, 1990).

Epistemological Foundations of Malay Aesthetics

Analysis of classical texts and contemporary literature discussing Malay aesthetics shows that the Malay understanding of beauty is built on several key epistemological principles that reflect their worldview and cultural values comprehensively.

1. Harmony with Nature and the Cosmos.

Like in Eastern aesthetic traditions, Malay aesthetics also makes harmony with nature a fundamental principle. However, the concept of harmony in Malay tradition leans more toward the idea of *selaras*—a balance that not only occurs between humans and the physical environment but also involves equilibrium with spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. This aligns with the Malay cosmological view that does not separate the visible and invisible worlds but sees them as interacting and complementing each other (Wan Daud, 1998). This is reflected in Malay carvings that often feature plant, water, and cloud motifs as symbols of life continuity and the power of nature. Traditional Malay architecture, such as Malay houses, is built according to specific orientations based on principles of wind, light, and land, aligned with astronomy and spiritual beliefs (Nasir, 1985).

This aesthetic is also evident in classical texts like *Taj al-Salatin* and *Bustan al-Salatin*. In *Bustan al-Salatin*, for example, the relationship between humans, nature, and divine power is often expressed symbolically. Narratives highlighting simplicity in life, humility, and obedience to God show that beauty is not measured by external opulence but by alignment with divine law and cosmic balance. This concept of harmony is part of the epistemological foundation of Malay aesthetics, integrating physical and spiritual elements in equilibrium.

2. Beauty with Moral Qualities (Budi and Adab)

In the epistemology of Malay aesthetics, beauty is not judged solely by form or external appearance but more by the moral and ethical values embodied in the work. The concept of *budi* is central to the Malay value system, encompassing intellect, heart, and behavior (Hashim, 2008). Beauty in this context is a reflection of the height of *budi*, not materialistic attractiveness. This can be seen in literary texts such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Syair Siti Zubaidah*, and traditional *pantun*, which are rich with moral teachings and subtle satire as reflections of *adab* values. Muhammad Haji Salleh (2006) also emphasizes that in Malay

poetics, ethical and aesthetic elements coexist—poems or verses are not only beautiful in form but also carry profound thought and social lessons.

In *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the aesthetics of *budi* are clearly depicted through the character of Hang Tuah, known for his loyalty, eloquence, and diplomatic finesse. Phrases like "Takkan Melayu hilang di dunia" (The Malays shall never vanish from the earth) are not just political slogans but reflect the collective spirit of a society that values beauty in the form of *maruah* (dignity), loyalty, and cultural identity. Characters in this text act based on *budi* principles, thereby reinforcing an aesthetic that emphasizes morality and noble character.

Similarly, in *Taj al-Salatin*, aesthetic values are demonstrated through royal advice and comparisons of leadership qualities. A leader's beauty is not measured by appearance or external grandeur but by justice and wisdom in governance. This shows that in Malay culture, aesthetic values are ethical and closely tied to social responsibility and leadership with *budi*.

3. Balance and Moderation

One of the key principles in Malay aesthetics is the rejection of excess or extremism in artistic expression. Malay proverbs such as "*biar bersederhana asal tidak cela*" (moderation is key as long as it is not flawed) or "*bukan kerana rupa tetapi kerana hati*" (not because of appearance but because of heart) emphasize the importance of meaning and content over mere external appearance. In traditional music like *gamelan* or *mak yong*, balance between rhythm, movement, and story meaning is highly valued, not just for entertainment but as a medium for cultural and spiritual education (Yusof, 2015). Moderation is also seen as a reflection of *tawaduk* (humility), rooted in Islamic worldview and part of the Malay intellectual framework.

Texts like *Bustan al-Salatin* reinforce this concept through narratives that reject extravagance and praise *tawaduk* values. Stories of kings and scholars in this text illustrate that moderation in dress, speech, and governance is the true mark of high status in Malay culture.

4. Holistic Knowledge

The epistemology of Malay aesthetics is comprehensive and relies on the integration of various sources of knowledge—empirical, rational, intuitive, and spiritual. This differs from the positivist modern approach that separates forms of knowledge. In Malay tradition, an artwork is evaluated not only through the senses but also through *rasa* (feeling), *firasat* (intuition), and *ilham* (inspiration) obtained through a deep connection with nature and God (Wan Daud, 1998; Baharuddin, 1996). Therefore, Malay aesthetics cannot be understood mechanistically but must be approached as a system of meaning intertwined with religion, customs, and spiritual experiences.

Comparative Epistemology of Eastern and Malay Aesthetics

Based on the analysis of the epistemological foundations in Eastern and Malay aesthetic traditions, several similarities and differences emerge, reflecting the uniqueness of each worldview. Both traditions place high value on a holistic understanding of beauty rooted in the interaction between humans, nature, and spiritual dimensions. However, differing

religious, cultural, and philosophical backgrounds have shaped distinct approaches to aesthetic experience.

Epistemological Similarities

1. Harmony with Nature and the Cosmos

Both Eastern and Malay aesthetic traditions emphasize the concept of harmony between humans and nature as the foundation of aesthetic experience. In Eastern aesthetics, particularly in Taoist and Confucian thought, the principle of *tian ren he yi* (unity of heaven and humans) signifies the importance of cosmic balance as the basis of beauty (Cai, 2004). Similarly, in Malay aesthetics, the concept of *selaras* serves as the foundation for art that considers the relationship between humans, nature, and the metaphysical realm (Wan Daud, 1998). Artworks like Malay wood carvings or Japanese Zen gardens are manifestations of this harmony principle.

2. Metaphysical Dimensions of Beauty

Both traditions do not view beauty as merely physical. In Eastern aesthetics, concepts like *qi* (vital energy) and *li* (cosmic principle) reveal metaphysical elements flowing through nature and art (Parkes, 2003). Meanwhile, in Malay aesthetics, the appreciation of beauty also encompasses spiritual and transcendent dimensions, intertwined with religious values and cultural cosmology (Baharuddin, 1996).

3. Holistic Understanding of Aesthetics

The epistemological approach in both traditions is holistic, encompassing emotion, intellect, senses, and spirituality simultaneously. In Malay aesthetics, elements like *rasa*, *budi*, and *firasat* serve as epistemological mediums for understanding meaning and beauty (Hashim, 2008). Eastern aesthetics, on the other hand, emphasizes *direct intuition* and aesthetic experiences that are not purely intellectual, such as *satori* in Zen and *pratyakṣa* in Hindu-Buddhism (Kasulis, 2002).

4. Emphasis on Moderation and Anti-Excess

Both traditions also value the principle of moderation and reject excessive expression. In Japanese tradition, the concept of *wabi-sabi* highlights beauty in simplicity, imperfection, and transience (Juniper, 2003). This principle aligns with the Malay approach that praises moderation in architecture, clothing, and verbal expression through proverbs like "*biar bersederhana asal tidak cela*" (Haji Salleh, 2021).

Epistemological Differences

1. Emphasis on Moral and Ethical Values

Malay aesthetics places stronger emphasis on moral and ethical values compared to Eastern aesthetics. The concept of *budi*, encompassing wisdom, politeness, and refined feelings, forms the basis of all Malay art and culture (Hashim, 2008). In Eastern traditions, particularly in Chinese and Japanese art, more emphasis is placed on cosmic harmony and aesthetic form, though ethical values remain implicitly present (Parkes, 2003).

2. Influence of Religion and Belief Systems

A key difference between the two traditions lies in religious influence. Malay aesthetics is heavily influenced by Islam, which brings values of monotheism, purity, and moderation into

all aspects of life (Wan Daud, 1998). This shapes an aesthetic orientation based on the oneness of God and moral responsibility. In contrast, Eastern aesthetics is more influenced by various philosophical systems like Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, which emphasize natural balance, the continuity of life, and self-awareness without exclusive focus on a personal God.

3. Aesthetic Manifestations in Artworks

This epistemological difference is also evident in the forms of art produced. In Eastern aesthetics, particularly Chinese and Japanese paintings, nature is the primary subject depicted directly to achieve inner silence and balance (Cai, 2004). Meanwhile, in Malay art, natural elements are often used as symbolism or metaphors to convey deeper moral and spiritual values—such as the use of flowers, water, and clouds in carvings or *pantun* (Yusof, 2015).

4. Emphasis on the Concept of Impermanence

Another key difference is how the two traditions understand the concept of time and transience. Eastern aesthetics, particularly in Japanese tradition under Buddhist influence, strongly emphasizes beauty in impermanence (*impermanence*) and transience—as seen in the concept of *mono no aware*, which refers to a melancholic appreciation of change and loss (Juniper, 2003). In contrast, Malay aesthetics tends to emphasize continuity and balance that is more sustainable and harmonious, in line with a worldview rooted in familial and communal values (Baharuddin, 1996).

Toward an Epistemological Framework of Eastern and Malay Aesthetics

Based on the analysis of similarities and differences in Eastern and Malay aesthetic traditions, a holistic and inclusive epistemological framework can be proposed to understand the relationship between beauty, nature, and metaphysical dimensions in both cultures. This framework integrates aspects of harmony, symbolism, spirituality, and direct experience, which form the basis for understanding beauty in both traditions.

1. Epistemology of Harmony

The epistemology of harmony is the primary foundation in both aesthetic traditions, where beauty is seen as a manifestation of alignment with larger cosmic principles. In Eastern aesthetics, this harmony is often linked to universal principles introduced in Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. For example, the concept of *Tao* in Taoism depicts harmony existing in the universe and between humans and nature (Lao Tzu, 2009). In Chinese tradition, landscape paintings and Japanese Zen gardens illustrate the relationship between humans and the universe, where beauty lies in recognizing harmony that exists without interference (Cai, 2024).

Meanwhile, in Malay aesthetics, harmony is more focused on the balance between humans and nature, as well as moral and ethical values. The concept of *selaras* in Malay art reflects the unity between humans, nature, and the metaphysical realm. This is evident in architecture, wood carvings, and Malay visual arts that often use natural elements as symbols of moral and spiritual values like simplicity, unity, and harmony (Baharuddin, 1996). This harmony also emphasizes the integration of ethics in human life, where art is not only viewed as an aesthetic object but also as a channel for conveying profound moral values.

2. Symbolic Epistemology

Symbolism is a key feature in both aesthetic traditions, linking aesthetic objects with deeper meanings, whether cosmological, moral, or spiritual. In Eastern aesthetics, symbols like the lotus flower, dragon, and phoenix carry cosmological meanings reflecting universal principles and transcendental elements. For example, the lotus flower in Buddhist art and philosophy symbolizes enlightenment, as it grows in mud but remains pure (Kasulis, 2002). Similarly, the dragon in Chinese culture is often depicted as a creature symbolizing the power of nature and cosmic balance (Cai, 2024).

In Malay aesthetics, symbolism serves to convey moral and spiritual values. Natural motifs like bamboo shoots (*pucuk rebung*), flowing clouds (*awan larat*), and flowers represent simplicity, wisdom, and sincerity in life. For example, *awan larat* used in Malay carvings symbolizes simplicity and beauty derived from moderation. These symbols connect nature with the concepts of *budi* and ethical values accepted in Malay society (Yousof, 2015).

3. Spiritual Epistemology

Both aesthetic traditions acknowledge the spiritual dimension as a vital component in understanding beauty. In Eastern aesthetics, concepts like *dao* (the way) in Taoism, *zen* in Buddhism, and *rasa* in Indian art tradition demonstrate an understanding of beauty that transcends the physical dimension. In Zen tradition, meditation becomes a way to achieve deeper aesthetic experiences, where beauty is seen not only through the senses but through the attainment of inner enlightenment (Juniper, 2003).

Conversely, in Malay aesthetics, this spiritual dimension is linked to the concepts of *budi* (moral wisdom), *adab* (ethics), and *ihsan* (moral excellence). Malay aesthetics is closely tied to moral and ethical education in daily life. Beauty in Malay art is not only viewed as aesthetically pleasing artwork but also as a manifestation of an individual's moral and spiritual integrity. For example, *budi* is central to the formation of aesthetic identity in Malay culture, encompassing politeness, gentleness, and respect for the universe and fellow humans (Wan Daud, 1998).

4. Epistemology of Experience

Direct experience plays a crucial role in both traditions in understanding beauty. In Eastern aesthetics, this experience is more about intuitive appreciation that is non-discursive, where beauty is not only understood through rational thought but through direct experience arising from inner attainment or enlightenment. The concept of *satori* in Zen refers to profound enlightenment that occurs directly, without logical thought processes (Kasulis, 2002). This experience involves a shift in perception of the world and leads to a deeper understanding of the concept of unity with the universe.

In Malay aesthetics, this direct experience is more associated with the appreciation of moral and ethical values. Beauty is not only seen in physical form but in a deep understanding of wisdom and politeness in action. This can be seen in traditional theater arts like *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry), where every movement and dialogue is not just for entertainment but to convey profound moral lessons. Aesthetic experiences in this context are more social and interactive, where beauty is achieved through actions grounded in *budi* values and politeness in daily life (Haji Salleh, 2021).

Table 1

Epistemological Framework of Eastern and Malay Aesthetics

Component	Eastern Aesthetics	Malay Aesthetics
Harmony	Alignment with the universe (e.g., <i>tian ren he yi</i>).	Alignment between humans, nature, and the metaphysical (<i>selaras</i>).
Symbolism	Cosmological symbols (lotus, dragon, phoenix).	Moral and spiritual symbols (bamboo shoots, flowers, <i>awan larat</i>).
Spirituality	Spiritual enlightenment through <i>dao</i> , <i>zen</i> , <i>satori</i> .	Moral wisdom through <i>budi</i> , <i>adab</i> , <i>ihsan</i> .
Aesthetic Experience	Direct experience through intuition and meditation.	Appreciation of moral and ethical values in daily life.

This framework provides a clearer picture of the differences and similarities in the understanding of beauty between the two traditions, while suggesting a more holistic approach to aesthetic concepts encompassing physical, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions.

Conclusion

This study has outlined the similarities and differences between the epistemologies of Eastern and Malay aesthetics and proposed an epistemological framework that can deepen our understanding of both traditions. Through this comparative study, it is clear that although both traditions present different foundations for understanding beauty, there are many notable similarities, particularly in aspects of harmony, metaphysical dimensions, symbolism, and the appreciation of moral values. Thus, this study suggests great potential for building deeper dialogue and discussion between these two distinct traditions, opening opportunities for mutual understanding and enrichment of each other's aesthetic traditions.

The epistemological framework in this study serves as a vehicle for understanding beauty not only within Eastern and Malay cultural contexts but also in a broader context, where the relationship between humans, nature, and metaphysical dimensions is seen as closely interconnected. This framework offers a more holistic and inclusive approach to exploring aesthetic thought, where it is not limited to material or physical perspectives but also involves moral, spiritual, and direct experiential elements that enrich aesthetic experiences. With this approach, our understanding of aesthetics is expected to transcend the narrow boundaries of Western theories that often dominate academic discourse.

Additionally, this study also emphasizes the importance of developing aesthetic theories rooted in local traditions and values. In the Asian context, including Eastern and Malay aesthetics, there is great potential to develop more authentic aesthetic approaches that reflect the cultural and historical diversity of each society. An aesthetic understanding grounded in local values is crucial to respecting the uniqueness and beauty inherent in every artistic and cultural tradition. This also avoids the dominance of Western aesthetic theories that tend to overlook the uniqueness and diversity of aesthetic traditions in the Asian context.

Through this study, we can understand beauty not merely as a universal concept applicable to all cultures but as something that can be explained and appreciated with approaches more sensitive to specific cultural and traditional contexts. In this way, we can achieve a deeper, more holistic, and integrated understanding of beauty, involving a combination of aesthetic, moral, spiritual, and cultural elements in human experience.

This research contributes theoretically by offering a comparative epistemological framework that brings together Eastern and Malay aesthetic traditions—two cultural systems often discussed in isolation. By outlining their philosophical, spiritual, and moral foundations, this study introduces an original model for interpreting aesthetic values beyond the Western paradigm. Contextually, the framework enables scholars and cultural practitioners to recognize the unique contributions of Malay aesthetics as a distinct tradition within the broader Asian discourse. It repositions Malay epistemology not as a derivative or marginal expression of Eastern thought, but as a rich and autonomous source of aesthetic understanding. As such, this study not only enriches the field of comparative aesthetics but also supports the decolonization of aesthetic theory by foregrounding local knowledge systems and cultural worldviews.

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