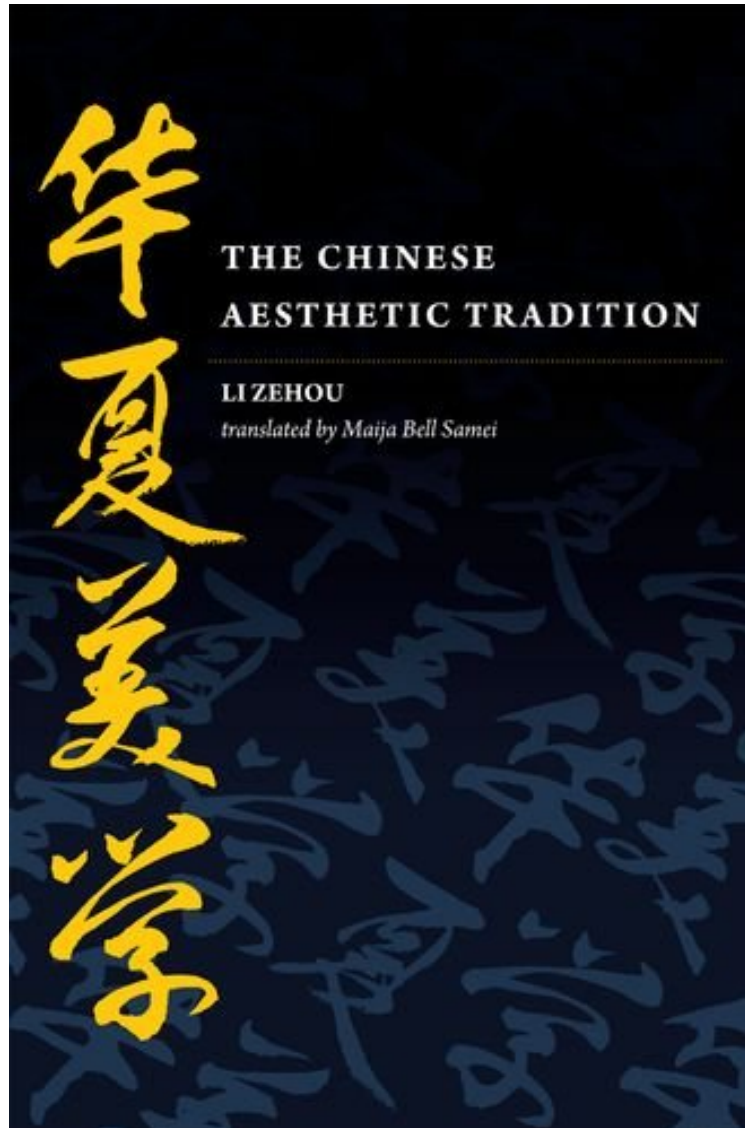


## The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition

*Zehou Li*

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**Zehou Li : The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Beautiful!By JMCKBeautifully structured history of the Chinese aesthetic tradition.0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. must read for Chinese scholarsBy SandaraWhat you need to know about the complex history of Chinese aesthetics. Only disappointment the short shrift given Buddhist philosophy.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Intellect and Sense in an Emotional SpaceBy John C. Marshall Jr.The first thing that lends this book to a hearty recommendation is the translator's excellent

introduction. Not simply an explanatory account of word selection and grammar, Maija Bell Samei's introduction provides a good overview of the book and critical insights into most of the book's terms and themes. You do not want to skip it. The Chinese aesthetic tradition is largely based on a wholeness and harmony that brings man into a deeper communion with nature and society. All forms of Chinese art from grand landscape painting to calligraphy seek the "humanization of nature" and the "naturalization of humans." Chinese aesthetics is not simply about the transcendental themes of goodness and beauty but the "art of living" and the moral development of the human character. Chinese art possesses an homespun elegance that never seems to "present itself" but creates through symbol and energy a communitarian ethos of ease and human fulfillment. Li Zehou's book is an excellent introduction to this subject. Though academic in its character and content, I think anyone with a beginner's interest in Chinese aesthetics could find no better place to start than here. While it does not ignore historical development, chronological concerns are expertly subsumed into a larger thematic exploration based on "sedimentation" and a socialized noumenon that is largely psychological. Sedimentation is a term coined by Li to define the accumulated cultural material that results from the long historical process of compressing the rational and the sensual into artistic expression and the human condition. The expression of sedimentation forms a noumenon, or "noumenal world," given to empirical transcendence (sensuousity) and the universalization of emotions which create a sense of right and wrong that values aesthetic experience over juridical concerns without devaluing legal restraint and taboo. Li Zehou's approach is largely Confucian respecting the importance of music (rites and ritual) and recognizing the Doctrine of the Mean in artistic expression. Chinese aesthetics eschews the Dionysian social model and prefers the Apollonian disposition, moderation is honored over orgastic emotion. Though this book is not a "compare and contrast" exploration of aesthetics, western attitudes are introduced to help define for the western reader the Chinese aesthetic milieu. Kant, Schopenhauer, and Schiller are included in Li Zehou's analysis. Li's concept of sedimentation is set in stark contrast to the nearly masochistic western concept of abstraction which seeks to elevate the intellect beyond sensing. While both east and west are concerned with accurate representation, the ego based western understanding of mimesis differs from Chinese concerns which promote the "expression of universalized emotional realities" and avoid self centered emotional displays. Chinese art creates emotionalized time and space; transcendence is within the web of nature and society. Chinese aesthetics is a spiritual affair. Li Zehou fully discusses the influence of the three major religious traditions in China on its aesthetic tradition. Confucianism and Taoism are discussed separately and also as a synthesis, forming a yin and yang relationship. The Wei-Jin period and the work of Qu Yuan and Zhuangzi are given much space in the book. Chapter Five is largely devoted to the importance of Buddhism. Despite being a foreign influence on Chinese aesthetics, I did not feel Li slighted Buddhism's contributions at all. Buddhism adds an important element of transcendence that Li explores in detail. The traditional image of the "three vinegar tasters" suits Li's efforts at exploring the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism on Chinese aesthetics. In many ways Chinese religion is an aesthetic concern and in a sense even supplanted by it. In China, religion is aesthetics. Li sees the rise of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism as a crowning accomplishment in the sedimentation process as it brings together all the best in China's spiritual life--a life embedded in the arts.

Li Zehou (b. 1930) has been an influential thinker in China since the 1950s. Before moving to the U.S. in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, Li published works on Kant and traditional and contemporary Chinese philosophy. The present volume, a translation of his *Huaxia meixue* (1989), is considered among Li's most significant works. Apart from its value as an introduction to the philosophy of one of contemporary China's foremost intellectuals, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* fills an important gap in the literature of Chinese aesthetics in English. It presents Li's synthesis of the entire trajectory of Chinese aesthetic thought, from ancient times to the early modern period, incorporating pre-Confucian and Confucian ideas, Daoism, Chan Buddhism, and the influence of Western philosophy during the late-imperial period. As one of China's major contemporary philosophers and preeminent authority on Kant, Li is uniquely positioned to observe this trajectory and make it intelligible to today's readers. *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* touches on all areas of artistic activity, including poetry, painting, calligraphy, architecture, and the "art of living." Right government, the ideal human being, and the path to spiritual transcendence all come under the provenance of aesthetic thought. According to Li this was the case from early Confucian explanations of poetry as that which gives expression to intent, through Zhuangzi's artistic depictions of the ideal personality who discerns the natural way of things and lives according to it, to Chan Buddhist-inspired notions that nature and words can come together to yield insight and enlightenment. In this enduring and stimulating work, Li demonstrates conclusively the fundamental role of aesthetics in the development of the cultural and psychological structures in Chinese culture that define "humanity."

A fascinating explanation of why Chinese philosophy and culture are 'aesthetic' rather than scientific and logical. This is a wonderful book--for the questions it asks, the answers it proposes, and the possibilities it leaves open.--  
"Philosophy East West" A fascinating explanation of why Chinese philosophy and culture are aesthetic rather than scientific and logical. This is a wonderful book for the questions it asks, the answers it proposes, and the possibilities it

leaves open. (Philosophy East West)About the AuthorZehou Li (Author) Li Zehou was a key figure in the intellectual foment of the 1980s. A philosopher of aesthetics and historian of Chinese thought, as well as Chinas preeminent authority on Kant, Li is the author of *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* (1995), and *Four Essays on Aesthetics: Toward a Global View* (with Jane Cauvel; Lexington Books, 2006). A senior research fellow and retired professor of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Li has since 1991 resided in the United States, where he makes his home in Boulder, Colorado.Maija Bell Samei (Translator) Maija Bell Samei is an independent scholar. She is the author of *Gendered Persona and the Poetic Voice: The Abandoned Woman in Early Chinese Song Lyrics* (Lexington Books, 2004) and holds a doctorate in Chinese literature from the University of Michigan.