

AN INTRODUCTION TO INDIAN AESTHETICS: HISTORY, THEORY AND THEORETICIANS. By Mini Chandran and Sreenath V. S. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2021. xii + 218 pp.

According to Mini Chandran and Sreenath V. S., the aim of their book, *An Introduction to Indian Aesthetics: History, Theory and Theoreticians*, is to provide the reader with “an introduction to the world of Sanskrit poetics, explaining its major concepts lucidly for even those who do not know Sanskrit.” (xii) This goal is satisfied, as the authors navigate the dense and rich Sanskrit literature with mastery and elegance, to the point that they can render challenging concepts in a particularly succinct and clear manner. This achievement, which is the first merit of the book, is worth noting from the outset.

The book is divided into eight chapters, preceded by a foreword by Sheldon Pollock and a preface by the authors. These chapters are followed by two useful appendixes, respectively concerned with the genres, and the categories of drama in Sanskrit literature. In addition, the authors provide the reader with ‘suggested readings’ and an index, both of which are welcome to expand one’s knowledge of the subject and navigate easily through the book.

In chapter one, ‘Indian Aesthetics: A Historical and Conceptual Overview,’ which shares with chapter 8 (‘Conclusion’) the fact of being the most theoretical part of the book, Mini Chandran and Sreenath present the scope of their work, namely *kāvyaśāstra*, i.e., the Sanskrit aesthetics of literary composition. In this last expression, the term *aesthetics* is traditionally understood as the systematic exploration of beauty, by which *kāvyaśāstra* is on the one hand the formal study of literature, and on the other hand, the practical study of what makes good literature. The authors then present the six schools of thought of Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra*, namely *alañkāra*, *rīti*, *guṇa*, *vakrokti*, *dhvani*, and *aucitya*. Apart from chapter 2 devoted to *rasa* or “aesthetic pleasure,” which the authors consider “the theory in classical Sanskrit literary studies” (33. Original emphasis), each of the remaining chapters deals with one of these concepts or schools of thought.

Chapter 3 examines ‘*Alañkāra*,’ a term that was originally used in Sanskrit poetics to “signify what was conventionally regarded as figures of speech, and... to denote anything that adds beauty to the poem.” (63) The authors emphasize the fact that the concept of *alañkāra* was so important to Sanskrit thinking that it finally came “to represent ‘literary theory’ itself.” (63). In any case, *alañkāra* is concerned with beauty, whether as a creation of the poet or as a concept in itself.

Chapter 4 inquires about ‘*Rīti*, *Guṇas*, and *Doṣas*.’ Vāmana, the main contributor to the first concept, defines it as the “soul of poetry” in his *Kāvyaalāñkārasūtravṛtti*. As such, *rīti* is related to *guṇas*, namely, according to the “working definition” offered by the authors, any “factor that enhanced *rasa*,” (91) while conversely, *doṣas* refer to any factor that reduced *rasa*.

In chapter 5 Mini Chandran and Sreenath discuss ‘*Dhvani*,’ i.e., “the ability of a word, a sentence, or a literary composition to suggest a meaning, a *rasa* or an *alañkāra* beyond what is explicitly stated.” (97) This discussion allows the authors to present the different forms of *dhvani* and the different forms of poetic composition. The chapter includes an important section on the role of the reader regarding the “actualization of *dhvani*.” (118)

Chapter 6 takes on ‘*Vakrokti*,’ “which literally means ‘deviant use of language.’” (123) The authors also note that ancient Indian theorists of poetry maintained that *vakrokti* “is one distinctive feature that helped you to recognize a *kāvya* when you saw or read it.” (123) However, none of these theorists “made *vakrokti* the primary focus of their inquiry.” (129) Nonetheless, the chapter unfolds the six categories of *vakratā*, as outlined by Kuntaka in his *Vakroktijīvita*.

In chapter 7, they then turn to ‘*Aucitya*’ or “property,” another concept that “had always been central to the treatment of literature in Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra*.” (145) The authors point out that “the Indian concept of *aucitya* corresponds to the Greek and Roman classical concept of

decorum.” (159) Thus, *aucitya* is a concept that bridges Greek, Roman and Sanskrit literary endeavors, skillfully brought together by Mini Chandran and Sreenath under the idea of “classical literature.” (160)

The conclusion (chapter 8), finally, primarily discusses the current relevance of Sanskrit aesthetics, touches upon its critical nature, and the relation between the “drastic downturn” (170) of *kāvyaśāstra* and the phenomenon of colonization in India. The authors also return to the question of the role of the reader in Sanskrit literary criticism and ultimately argue for the current relevance of the study of Sanskrit theories.

It is worth noticing that in presenting Sanskrit literary criticism, the authors are true to the subtitle of their book, as they are equally attentive to the major exponents of each theory or concept, as well as the history of their scholarly discussion by other thinkers and practitioners through the ages, until their decline. In doing so, the book offers a detailed account of each concept presented to an extent that fortunately contradicts the authors’ opening euphemism of their work as a “bird’s-eye view” (xii). In fact, the book is a dense, rich and erudite presentation of Sanskrit literary criticism, albeit devoid of unnecessary technicality or jargon.

The practical result of this skillful and informed treatment and engagement with Sanskrit aesthetics of literary composition is the authors’ active demonstration that one is perfectly legitimate, beyond the clichés and other prejudices on non-Western premodern thinking in the domain of human sciences, to speak of Sanskrit literary criticism not only as a discipline, but moreover as having an impressive and long-lasting history, a point made by Sheldon Pollock in his foreword to the book.

However, as impressive as it is, the book suffers from a few shortcomings that do not diminish its quality and interest, although they are worth noting. First, although the authors are true to the subtitle of their book, they are not completely true to its title, which is said to deal with ‘Indian Aesthetics.’ In fact, Mini Chandran and Sreenath are only interested in Sanskrit literary criticism, despite their own remark that “contrary to popular perception, the term ‘Indian aesthetics’ refers to not just Sanskrit poetics but also the well-developed poetic system of Tamil.” (xi-xii) But insofar as the authors say nothing about other poetic systems of ancient India, the title of their book is somewhat misleading as it is broader than the task that is actually undertaken.

Second, the authors make an appreciable effort to connect Sanskrit aesthetics with modern Western literature. Without questioning the appropriateness of such a relationship on which there is undoubtedly a lot to say, it is noticeable that the authors primarily illustrate Sanskrit aesthetic concepts and theories in the modern world with examples they find almost exclusively in the traditional Western corpus (see 33, 44, 76, 97, 106, 117, 124–125, 133, 139, 152, etc.). Colonization put aside, it is not always easy to understand how the theory discussed (Indian) and the examples provided (Western) come into a relation that is justified other than by the (subjective) action of the authors. This difficulty carries with it another one concerning the very nature of Sanskrit aesthetic thinking in relation to our present. In fact, it seems that the authors unwittingly argue that there is no such thing as a “modern Indian aesthetics,” especially from the perspective offered by Sanskrit thinking, a limitation that may explain the necessity to refer to Western playwrights/plays, poets/poems and novelists/novels for illustrative purposes. The book, indeed, struggles to highlight the current relevance of Sanskrit aesthetics beyond the notable mention of Ayyappa Paniker in the conclusion (186–187).

From a different perspective, this situation speaks of the authors’ conservatism about ‘Indian aesthetics,’ which aligns somewhat and more or less intentionally with the conservatism of the Indian caste system. On this last point, readers will make their own judgment about the grounds and implications of one section in the conclusion of the book, where Mini Chandran and Sreenath, in a manner that can be related to that of Karl Rosenkranz in his *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* (1853), assert that “While it is correct to assume that Sanskrit was spoken only by the upper

castes, it is wrong to conclude that *this world* [that of Sanskrit aesthetics] *has space only for what is beautiful.*" (177. Emphasis added)

Despite these difficulties, it is, however, fair to say that overall, the book presents itself as a valuable introduction to the vast and interesting domain of Sanskrit literary criticism, thus encouraging the reader to engage more intensively with this fascinating subject.

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ECOCRITICISM AND CHINESE LITERATURE: IMAGINED LANDSCAPES AND REAL LIVED SPACES. By Riccardo Moratto, Nicoletta Pesaro and Di-Kai Chao. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. 209 pp.

As a literary and cultural criticism tendency, ecocriticism was formed in the United States in the mid-1990s, and then appeared in many countries around the world. Although the definition of ecocriticism varies, it is generally accepted that ecocriticism is a literary and artistic criticism approach that addresses ecological issues from the perspective of literary criticism. On the one hand, it addresses the deep relationship between literature and natural environment, and on the other hand, it concerns the internal relationship between literature and art and social ecology, cultural ecology, and spiritual ecology.

It is an important trend of today's ecocriticism to discover and introduce the resources of Eastern civilizations. Schopenhauer, Huxley, Toynbee, Ralston and many other thinkers and ecophilosophers have emphasized the importance of Eastern ecological wisdom. In recent years, Harvard University Press has successively published a number of books, such as *Daoism and Ecology* (2001), *Confucianism and Ecology* (1998), *Buddhism and Ecology* (1997), carrying out in-depth exploration into the great value of ancient Eastern ecological thought. An increasing number of ecological thought and ecological culture researchers realize that the exploration and introduction of Eastern ecological wisdom will probably provide new ideas for ecological philosophy, ecological ethics, ecological literature and ecological criticism.

This book *Ecocriticism and Chinese Literature: Imagined Landscapes and Real Lived Spaces* is just an effort in this regard. As a compilation of eco-criticism about oriental writings, it focuses on modern and contemporary Chinese literature. As emphasized by Wang Fuzhi, a master of Chinese classical poetry theory, a very important goal of literature and art is *qing* (情) and *jing* (境).

Combining these two classical literary concepts, this volume, taking a new ecological perspective, examines their contexts and different ecological dimensions based on dozens of works in different genres. It points out that there is an inseparable connection between nature, human beings and literary writing, and analyzes how this connection is manifested in traditional, modern and contemporary Chinese literature. This collection of essays reinterprets the concept of Chinese classical literature from contemporary and eco-criticism lens, hoping to provide new materials and perspectives for eco-criticism and expand the depth and breadth of eco-criticism.

This volume consists mainly of two parts: (1) Ecocriticism and Chinese Literature, and (2) Imagined Landscapes and Real Lived Spaces. Each part is further made up of seven chapters.

Chapter 1 "Trees Keep Time: An Ecocritical Approach to Literary Temporality" analyses the emotional topography of human-tree relationships and their effect on narrative temporality with a focus on the works by Chu T'ien-hsin's (朱天心), Dung Kai-cheung's (董启章) and Alai (阿来). The author argues that plants, trees for example, have always been powerful symbols of place and core images for defining and representing time.