

*Aesthetic Education Through Teaching Japanese Literature and Cinema
at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education in Vietnam*

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Abstract

In recent years, along with the strengthening of friendship and international cooperation between Vietnam and Japan, many novels and short stories from Japanese literature have been translated and introduced to Vietnam, and well received by Vietnamese readers. In addition, Japanese cinema has gradually conquered Vietnamese audiences, through film festivals, the recognition that comes with earning international awards, as well as official screenings at domestic cinemas. The use of films adapted from Japanese literature to further promote the reception of literature among young people is also recognized as a new trend of the times. To better reflect these current trends and and promote the development of the aesthetic sense of youth in general and students at the Faculty of Literature of the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education in particular, we have developed several new subjects: *The Relationship between Literature and Cinema* (Master's Program in Foreign Literature 2016 - 2024), *Foreign Literature and Cinema* (Master's Program in Foreign Literature 2024 - 2026), while also having organized many seminars on literature - cinema, as well as introducing adaptations from Japanese literature and cinema into subjects such as *Eastern Literature 1 - 2*, *Eastern Literature Topics*, *History of Eastern Thought*, etc. Through the subjects and teaching activities, we have exposed students and Master's students to subject matter related to Japanese aesthetics, including concepts such as wabi (侘), sabi (寂), yugen (幽玄), etc.; Japanese identity expressed through literature and cinema as well as a variety of other content. This article summarizes the method of aesthetic education utilized in teaching Japanese literature and cinema at the Faculty of Literature, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, while also emphasizing the importance of aesthetic education and proposing new approaches to aesthetic education for university students.

Keywords: Aesthetic Education, Japanese Literature, Japanese Film, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education

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Introduction

Aesthetic education for young people is always necessary, especially for Gen Z, a generation that is facing unprecedented challenges from the development of social networks, the internet and AI. Aesthetic education helps young people understand more about art, and through works of art, understand more about the world and themselves. Self-discovery through artistic experiences, especially literature and cinema, helps young people gain respect for different styles and artistic values, thereby discovering their own style and values. This is particularly important for younger individuals who sometimes don't yet know exactly who they are as it can help them to position themselves in society and define their personal identity in life. These are fundamental steps that can help a person live a more peaceful and happy life.

Currently, Vietnamese education is also aiming at the goal of aesthetic education. The document of the 13th National Congress of Delegates talks about the importance of: "(...) Linking education in knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, life skills with physical education, improving the stature of Vietnamese people" (Communist Party of Vietnam, *Documents of the 13th National Congress*, vol. 1, Truth National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2021, pp. 136-137). Meanwhile, it can also be seen that in Vietnam's national education strategy, attention has been paid to raising 5 important issues for the comprehensive development of a person: knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, life skills and physical fitness.

In Vietnam, many scholars and educators have started to focus more on aesthetic education for students. This includes a greater awareness of the impact of the internet on the formation and development of aesthetic tastes of young people, and an emphasis on providing knowledge about traditional culture, literature and art for young people.

So why do I propose aesthetic education for students through Japanese literature and cinema?

First, because Japan is one of the few countries with a strategy in originating and popularizing concepts about aesthetics, creating influence not only in Japan but also around the world.

Second, Vietnamese youth today are very fond of, even passionate about, Japanese culture in general and Japanese literature and cinema in particular. Japanese literature is currently translated into Vietnamese with a disproportionately large number of publications, and receives special attention from the young public. Japanese films in recent years have also won many prestigious awards, including the Oscar for best foreign film, and the Oscar for best animated film. This further promotes the aesthetic reception among young people (Phan Thu Van, 2022).

Third, Vietnam and Japan have a friendly relationship. In 2023, there were many activities to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Japan, and cultural and artistic exchange activities have continued to take place recently. Not only that, Vietnam and Japan also have many similarities in culture and history, such as being located in the same Kanji cultural sphere, having political and cultural exchanges since the ancient and medieval times, suffering the consequences of war, etc. All of these factors have helped facilitate the acceptance and popularity of Japanese literature, cinema and their aesthetic messages among Vietnamese youth.

The Importance of Aesthetic Education

Aesthetic education as an academic concept was clearly proposed and originated by the German philosopher, poet and historian J. C. Friedrich Von Schiller (1759 – 1805). It is generally believed that the first book on aesthetic education was Schiller's *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* written in 1793-1794. Schiller asserted that only through aesthetic education can people achieve full and harmonious development between reason and emotion, and perfect their personality, thereby promoting sustainable social development.

Since modern times, aesthetic education has become a field that intersects aesthetics, pedagogy, psychology and anthropology and has received noteworthy attention in countries such as Germany, the United States, England, China, Japan, etc.

In Japan, in 1872 under the Meiji period, the government published the Educational System “学制”, a legal document that opened the way for the modernization of education. The first person to introduce "aesthetics" was Nishi Amane (西周, 1829-1897). He translated "aesthetics" as "good aesthetics" (善美学), "good interest theory" (佳趣论), "beautiful science" (美妙学), and then carried out a systematic construction of his own aesthetic thoughts (郑子路, 2021). In 1885 - 1886, the book *A New Theory of Education* “教育新论” written by James Johonnot (1823 – 1888) and translated by Takamine Hideo (高峰秀夫, 1853-1910) was published. This was the first book discussing Western education to be translated into Japanese, in which for the first time the concepts of "aesthetics", "fine arts", "aesthetics" and "aesthetic education" were used. Japanese education began to borrow Western aesthetic concepts to incorporate traditional aesthetic categories. (柏奕旻, 2020).

In Vietnam, in the *General Aesthetics* textbook, one of the first books to lay the foundation for aesthetics and aesthetic education in Vietnam, Professor Lê Ngọc Trà wrote: “The height of aesthetic ideals will help people to open their eyes and hearts, to know how to choose, to know how to direct their feelings towards true beauty, works of humanistic value from the past as well as the present, the cultural and artistic quintessence of the nation and of humanity” (Lê Ngọc Trà, 1995).

Unlike professional art education for a small number of people, aesthetic education focuses more on public and humanistic nature, and its approaches include but are not limited to art, music, literature, drama, dance, architecture, environment and other art forms.

Howard Gardner (1943 -), a modern and contemporary American psychologist, pointed out that education is undergoing a period of strong impact from postmodern consciousness and digital media networks. The impact of postmodern consciousness causes doubts about accepted beauty standards and gives rise to a desire to break the mold, creating beauty according to personal standards, while digital media networks provide too much unverified information as well as create a crowd effect that is not always reliable. Therefore, aesthetic education becomes more necessary than ever, so that each person can build a solid foundation in the process of growing up, before facing a complex reality of life.

The notion of an ideal and universal personality has been recognized for thousands of years in all cultures. The ideal universal personality is considered to be a personality with three important qualities: Truth, Goodness and Beauty.

“Truth” represents honesty, sincerity and respect for the truth.

“Goodness” is often understood as kindness, sincere thoughts. More broadly, this is the love of community, love of fellow human beings and humanity.

“Beauty” is the perception of beauty, having aesthetic sense when standing before beauty, having knowledge of beauty to evaluate what is beautiful and what is not yet or not beautiful at all, and at an even higher level is knowing how to create beauty in all areas of life.

Aesthetic education is a planned, oriented strategy to develop people with the ability to perceive, feel, and correctly evaluate aesthetic phenomena in reality and art. On that basis, learners will gradually form the ability to live, work and create according to the law of beauty.

Aesthetic education is inseparable from the general educational process. All subjects, to a greater or lesser extent, have the potential to educate young people about aesthetics. However, literature and cinema can be placed in a special position in aesthetic education, because they do not only teach about ordinary beauty, but also aim at the humanistic spirit, promote understanding and sympathy between people, or between people and the natural world. In addition, they serve to promote tolerance, empathy and arouse legitimate aspirations. In the case of Japanese literature and cinema, selecting and teaching Japanese literary and cinematic works can help students understand the core values of Japanese culture and make comparisons with Vietnamese culture, thereby being able to understand more about themselves and have a broader view of the world.

Aesthetic Education Utilized in Teaching Japanese Literature and Cinema at the Faculty of Literature

At undergraduated level, in the field of humanities and arts, aesthetics is an important subject including general courses and topics on Eastern and Western aesthetic theories. However, aesthetic education is not only within the scope of one or a few subjects, but is inherent in most subjects. All subjects that can contribute to imparting to learners sensitivity, love for nature, country, for the beauty of the soul, language style, and or the cultural and artistic values of humanity, can be considered to be suitable candidates for the use to incorporate aesthetic education.

At Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, we design the program related to Japanese Literature for undergraduate students as follows:

At the university level, there are 2 compulsory subjects related to Japanese literature:

Ancient and Pre-modern Eastern Literature (45 periods), teaching the literatures of Eastern countries that are largely familiar to Vietnamese people, typically that of China, Japan and India. 30% of the content and duration of this program is related to early Japanese literature, including the historical process of Japanese literature from its inception to before the Meiji period, with a focus on works such as *Taketori Monogatari*, *Genji Monogatari* and Haiku poetry.

A similar proportion is dedicated to Modern and Contemporary Eastern Literature (45 periods), to teach students about Chinese, Japanese and Indian literature in the modern period. About 30% of the Modern Literature program content and duration are is related to Japanese

literature, including the modernization of Japanese literature from the Meiji Restoration to contemporary literature, introducing the works of Natsume Soseki, Akutagawa's short stories, Kawabata Yasunari's novels and Haruki Murakami's novels.

These are two compulsory subjects taught in the second year of university for individuals majoring in Literature and Literature Pedagogy, so after completing the compulsory program, students have an overview of Japanese literature.

In the third year, students majoring in Literature have the option to study the Japanese Literature Specialization. If students choose to study Japanese Literature Specialization, they will be introduced to additional works such as *Manyoshu*, *Stories of Old Times*, or Noh drama, etc.

In the 4th year, students majoring in Literature must choose 1 elective course, depending on the student's career orientation. For example, if the student has a career orientation related to the media, they typically choose the subject which is most closely related to cinema, namely *Film Criticism Practice*. Meanwhile students majoring in Literature Pedagogy (who are oriented to teach Literature in middle and high schools after graduation) have 1 compulsory elective course, which relates to *Topics of Eastern Literature*.

In the Film Criticism Practice course, we select a number of films directly related to literary works that students have studied in the *Ancient and Pre-modern Eastern Literature and Modern* and *Contemporary Eastern Literature* (the 2 aforementioned compulsory) courses for students to watch and learn to analyze a variety of films. These include works such as the Ghibli animation *Kaguya hime no monogatari* (2013) adapted from *Taketori Monogatari*, the movie *Rashomon* (1950) adapted from the stories *Rashomon* (羅生門) and *Yabu no naka* (藪の中) by Akutagawa Ryuunosuke, the movies *Burning* (Lee Chang Dong 2018), *Drive my car* (Ryusuke Hamaguchi, 2021) adapted from the work of the same name by Haruki Murakami, etc.

In the *Topics of Eastern Literature* course, students will study in more depth Japanese literary works from a regional comparative perspective. This might involve comparing literature written in Japanese Chinese characters with literature written in the Chinese characters of Vietnam, China and Korea; or comparing the works of Natsume Soseki with Lu Xun (China), the works of Haruki Murakami with Ho Anh Thai (Vietnam) and other regional authors.

At the graduate level, there are 2 subjects related to Japanese literature and cinema: *Japanese Poetry and Novels* and *The Relationship between Literature and Cinema* (Master's Program in Foreign Literature 2016 - 2024), *Foreign Literature and Cinema* (Master's Program in Foreign Literature 2024 - 2026).

With *Japanese Poetry and Novels*, students will study more deeply about the genres of poetry and novels especially the formation and development of movements in Japanese literature.

With *Foreign Literature and Cinema*, students will learn about the influence of Japanese literature and cinema on the world, through short stories, novels, comics, anime, etc.

Through these subjects, there are some consistent issues that we use as a connection between different subject matter:

First, it is to understand literature and cinema through some basic Japanese aesthetic categories. When studying *Genji Monogatari*, students learn about “mono no aware” (物の哀れ) - sensitivity to things, sensitivity to the ephemeral. When studying Haiku poetry, students have the opportunity to learn more about “wabi” (transient and clear beauty) and “sabi” (silent beauty of nature and aging). When studying Noh theater, students add knowledge about “yūgen” (deep grace and subtlety). These aesthetic sensibilities are the foundation of the Japanese cultural and aesthetic norms of elegance and beauty, and are also reflected in modern and contemporary literary and cinematic works.

Second, it is through these categories that students can understand more about Japanese culture and people. For example, the feeling of “mono no aware” (物の哀れ) arose in Japan and became an important feeling that dominated Japanese literature and art, closely related to the geographical conditions of the Japanese archipelago. Since ancient times, parts of Japan have often been covered in fog, so the scenery hidden in the fog gives the impression of vagueness, uncertainty and constant change. Another example is “wabi”, an idea which was created by Sen no Rikyu 千利休 (1522 – 1591), a famous tea master of the Warring States period in Japan. It blends the spirit and beauty that tea pursues: rough on the outside, perfect on the inside. It was then refined by the haiku poet Matsuo Basho 松尾芭蕉 (1644 – 1694), who guided by Noh music, gradually developed the meaning of beauty. He noted that from the appearance of old objects (including people), a beauty full of time appears even when the appearance is mottled, an irresistible beauty, even when faded and blurred.

Third, it is to compare the feelings in Japanese literature with Vietnamese literature, so that students can understand the cultural differences between Japan and Vietnam, and at the same time, locate traditional cultural values. Our students/graduate students have had valuable works comparing Japanese literature with Vietnamese literature such as comparing and contrasting Inoue Yasushi's short stories with Nguyen Huy Thiep's short stories, or researching Empty Symbols in Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* and *The Wind Erases All Marks* by Ho Anh Thai, etc. These are the first steps showing the intersection in the artistic thinking of modern and contemporary Japanese writers, at the same time showing the differences in artistic style, character building and cultural symbols. These differences are based on various cultural backgrounds and aesthetic sensibilities between writers from different cultures.

New Approaches to Aesthetic Education for University Students

In our opinion, the new aesthetic education has five notable elements and benefits:

First, it shifts the course emphasis from theoretical to practical. In the era of information explosion like today, students can easily access a treasure trove of knowledge and books, they just need a little guidance on which sources to approach, and how to process information effectively and accurately. Therefore, we believe it makes sense to reduce purely theoretical teaching hours to increase practice and discussion hours.

Second, it encourages students to share their personal aesthetic experiences, especially when approaching something completely new, beyond their previous aesthetic experience. For example, some of our students were shocked when they first read Kawabata's *Sleeping Beauty or Beauty and Sadness*, and some cannot explain why the author approached his works in that way. Our goal is to respect their aesthetic experience, rather than providing

explanations or answers right away. We then encourage them to learn more about Kawabata's other works, or read more and compare what they learn with Tanizaki's novels, and continue to discuss issues related to traditional Japanese aesthetic sensibilities.

Another example is our study of viewers' experiences of *Grave of the Fireflies*, to understand the different perspectives of Vietnamese viewers on the situation that Japanese people faced after World War II. We encourage students to record their reading/watching experiences, their views before, during and after reading/watching the work, and encourage them to keep those pages of their writing even after they have finished the course. Their reading experiences as well as their aesthetic experiences will continue to change during their time at school, as well as after they graduate.

Third, the lecturer's teaching experience, knowledge accumulation, and life experience are very important. If the lecturer does not have enough aesthetic experience and aesthetic sensitivity, he or she cannot inspire students. Therefore, in our department, we encourage lecturers to participate in cultural and artistic exchange activities in Vietnam and also abroad, creating conditions for lecturers to have the opportunity to improve and develop themselves. From there, lecturers will have more creativity and the ability to offer more inspiring lessons for students. The overall effect is to help teachers to reach and maintain higher professional standards than they otherwise might.

Fourth, we organize activities such as dramatizing literary works so that students can experience the feeling of being transformed into a character in another culture, thereby gaining empathy and deeper feelings about literature and culture. In this sense, our view is close to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002)'s aesthetic view: artistic experience is a way to increase aesthetic awareness, creating art or participating in artistic activities is a process of play or festival, stimulating joy, excitement and imagination. “Gadamer emphasizes within experience (Erfahrung) one is always participating, perhaps unwittingly, in something beyond oneself” (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer-aesthetics/>). These experiences of students also help them enrich their inner world and learn to live harmoniously in a community.

Fifth, studying and experiencing aesthetic categories does not only help students grasp concepts and identify manifestations of aesthetics in literary and artistic life. It also helps students locate differences. in culture, thereby respecting differences as well as maintaining their own cultural identity in a globalized world.

Conclusions

In short, we believe that teaching aesthetics through literature and cinema is a process of finding joy and empathy in art. It may not immediately show a specific result, but each of our efforts nevertheless plays an essential role on the journey to creating beautiful souls and useful people for society. At a time when many young people are in need of assistance when it comes to discovering their own identity and gaining deeper appreciation for literature and cinema as well as other cultures, aesthetic education arguably provides a more effective method to teach and engender within young people greater respect for other cultures as well as themselves and promote a more harmonious global existence.

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