

# The Standard of Beauty: On the Universality and Cultural Particularity of Criteria for Aesthetic Appreciation

Caihong He<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology; Macau, China

## Abstract

*The tension between the universality and cultural particularity of aesthetic criteria represents one of the most persistently contested propositions in the history of aesthetics. This paper engages three analytical frameworks — philosophical, anthropological, and cognitive-scientific — to systematically examine the Western aesthetic canon from Plato's theory of Forms to Kant's Critique of Judgment, from Hegel's historicism to Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, set in comparative dialogue with the Chinese aesthetic tradition represented by Zong Baihua and Li Zehou. Integrating findings from neuroaesthetics and cross-cultural empirical studies, we propose a Hierarchical Nested Model (HNM) that distinguishes three strata of aesthetic judgment: a biological substrate layer (shared perceptual preferences shaped by evolutionary selection pressures), a cognitive schema layer (aesthetic frameworks acquired through early cultural habituation), and a cultural coding layer (symbolic conventions produced within specific historical contexts). The model demonstrates that universality and particularity are not polar opposites but are each justified at different levels of analysis. This research carries direct methodological implications for cross-cultural arts education, museum display practice, and the construction of critical discourse in a globalized context.*

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**Keywords:** aesthetic criteria, aesthetic universality, cultural particularity, hierarchical nested model, cross-cultural aesthetics

## 1 Introduction

When we stand before a painting, a sculpture, or a piece of music and judge it as “beautiful” or “not beautiful,” what criteria are we invoking? Does such a judgment rest on objective grounds that transcend the individual, culture, and even epoch — or is it merely a historical product of a particular cultural context? Questions of this kind have haunted the Western philosophical tradition since ancient Greece and remain among the most vital points of contention in aesthetics, art criticism, and cross-cultural studies.

Universalist aesthetics holds that there exist trans-cultural standards of aesthetic judgment, a position whose philosophical cornerstone is Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment [1]. Kant argued that genuine aesthetic judgment must appeal to the *sensus communis* — a perceptual structure assumed to be shared by all rational beings. In contrast, cultural particularism takes Franz Boas's cultural relativism as its anthropological point of departure, deepened through Wittgenstein's concept of “forms of life” and Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* [2], emphasizing that aesthetic preferences are deeply embedded in specific socio-historical contexts and cannot be simply extracted or translated across them.

Over the past three decades, however, the rise of neuroaesthetics and evolutionary aesthetics has introduced new dimensions to this debate. Cross-cultural psychological experiments indicate that certain visual preferences — such as tendencies toward symmetry, the golden ratio, and specific color combinations — show remarkable consistency across different cultural samples, offering empirical support for the universalist position. Yet an equally substantial body of

research reveals that cultural background exerts a formative influence on stylistic evaluation, narrative interpretation, and emotional attribution that cannot be dismissed.

This paper argues that the reason existing debates have remained locked in prolonged opposition without meaningful progress lies fundamentally in the presupposition that “universality” and “particularity” are mutually exclusive ontological options, thereby overlooking the multi-layered structure of aesthetic judgment itself. To address this, the paper proposes the Hierarchical Nested Model (HNM), which attempts to integrate findings from philosophy, anthropology, neuroscience, and comparative aesthetics within a single theoretical framework, while offering a critical assessment of the model’s explanatory power and limitations.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section II traces the historical dispute between universalism and particularism; Section III examines key findings from neuroaesthetics and cross-cultural empirical research; Section IV proposes and elaborates the HNM; Section V tests the model through comparative case studies of Chinese and Western aesthetics; Section VI discusses the model’s methodological implications for arts education and critical practice; and Section VII concludes with a summary and a proposed agenda for future research.

## 2 Literature Review: The Historical Debate Between Universalism and Particularism

### 2.1 Classical Origins and the Universalist Tendency in Western Aesthetics

The universalist tradition in Western aesthetics can be traced back to Plato’s Theory of Forms. In the *Hippias Major* and the *Republic*, Plato defines beauty itself (τὸ καλόν) as an eternal, immutable Form independent of the senses, with individual beautiful things being nothing more than instances of participation (methexis) in this Form. This position establishes, at the ontological level, the very possibility of universal aesthetic standards [3].

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant enacted a Copernican revolution within this tradition: he relocated the ground of aesthetic objectivity from external objects to the transcendental structure of the knowing subject. The universal communicability (Allgemeingültigkeit) of taste judgments depends not on concepts but on the affective resonance produced by the free interplay of imagination and understanding [1]. Hegel went further, interpreting artistic beauty as the self-manifestation of Absolute Spirit in sensory form, endowing aesthetic universality with the dynamic dimension of historical dialectics [4].

### 2.2 The Rise of Cultural Relativism and Particularism

Hume, while acknowledging the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment, nonetheless sought to establish a “standard of taste” [5], holding that the ideal critic — cultivated through training and experience — could render reliable aesthetic judgments that transcend individual differences. However, the anthropological turn of the twentieth century fundamentally destabilized this assumption. Boas’s cultural relativism regarded each culture as a complete and self-sufficient system of meaning, within which aesthetic standards were understood to be internal and non-comparative.

Bourdieu’s research (1979) [2], drawing on large-scale sociological surveys, revealed that supposedly “pure” aesthetic taste is in fact a form of symbolic capital used to mark class distinction: the capacity to appreciate high art is not an expression of universal human nature but a product of the education and socialization of particular classes. While this finding carries powerful ideological revelatory force as a critique of universalism, it has also provoked counterarguments — a thoroughgoing relativism would render cross-cultural artistic dialogue and the establishment of any critical standards impossible.

### 2.3 Alternative Pathways in the Chinese Aesthetic Tradition

In contrast to the binary framework of Western universalism versus particularism, Chinese classical aesthetics presents a distinct theoretical configuration. Zong Baihua (1981) distinguished two aesthetic ideals: “cuocai loujin” (intricately wrought and ornately rich beauty) and “chufa furongchu” (the natural freshness of a lotus first in bloom), both of which find legitimate expression within the Chinese aesthetic tradition without either claiming exclusive authority as the single standard [6].

Li Zehou (1981) [7], in his theory of “sedimentation” (jidian), argued that aesthetic experience is not a purely a priori emotion but the result of human socio-historical practice being embedded into sensory form through a process of sedimentation. This praxis-based aesthetics thereby relocates the foundations of universality from transcendental structures to the collective practices of social history — a pathway that provides crucial theoretical resources for the Cognitive Schema Layer of the HNM proposed in this paper.

## 3 Key Findings from Neuroaesthetics and Cross-Cultural Empirical Research

### 3.1 Neuroscientific Evidence Supporting Universality

Research in neuroaesthetics has revealed that aesthetic experience involves specific neural substrates [8]. The meta-

analysis by Chatterjee and Vartanian (2014) [9], integrating data from 43 fMRI studies, found that judgments of beauty consistently activated regions including the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), anterior cingulate cortex, and insular cortex — a pattern observed across participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, suggesting that aesthetic pleasure may share certain neural mechanisms.

Vessel et al. (2012) [10] further demonstrated that when viewers judged an artwork as “deeply moving,” activation of the default mode network (DMN) increased significantly. As the DMN is typically associated with self-referential thinking, this finding suggests that peak aesthetic experience possesses a quality of self-implication that transcends cultural differences.

### 3.2 Cross-Cultural Psychological Evidence Supporting Particularity

At the same time, psychological research has accumulated substantial evidence of cultural particularity (as shown in Table 1). Masuda et al. (2008) [11] compared East Asian and North American participants in their allocation of visual attention, finding that East Asian participants processed significantly more contextual information than their North American counterparts — a difference that extended to art appreciation tasks, where East Asian viewers tended to perceive the overall atmosphere in landscape paintings while Western viewers focused more on individual figures.

With regard to emotional attribution, Leder et al. (2012) [12] found systematic differences between German and Chinese participants in their interpretations of the emotional content of identical abstract paintings. These differences correlated closely with the number of years of formal arts education and with the discourse patterns surrounding art discussion in each cultural context, demonstrating the substantive formative power of cultural coding over emotional perception.

Table 1. Key studies in neuroaesthetics and cross-cultural psychology of aesthetics

Researcher (Year)	Method	Cultural Sample	Key Finding	Position Supported
Chatterjee & Vartanian (2014)	fMRI meta-analysis (43 studies)	Cross-cultural mixed	Consistent cross-cultural activation of OFC and related regions	Universalism
Vessel et al. (2012)	fMRI experiment	Western (U.S.)	Consistent DMN activation during peak aesthetic experience	Universalism
Masuda et al. (2008)	Eye-tracking experiment	East Asian vs. North American	Systematic cultural differences in attention allocation patterns	Particularism
Leder et al. (2012)	Behavioral experiment + questionnaire	Germany vs. China	Emotional attribution varies by years of arts education	Particularism
Tschacher et al. (2012)[13]	In-museum field study	Switzerland (multicultural)	Formal elements (symmetry, complexity) show universal appeal	Mixed evidence

Note: DMN = default mode network; OFC = orbitofrontal cortex. Researchers listed by first author; full names appear in the reference list.

## 4 Constructing the Hierarchical Nested Model (HNM)

### 4.1 The Basic Architecture of the Model

The Hierarchical Nested Model (HNM) proposed in this paper understands aesthetic judgment as the dynamic integration of three analytical strata (see Figure 1):

Layer One: Biological Substrate Layer (BSL). This layer corresponds to the shared evolutionary heritage and neural foundations of humankind, encompassing: preferences for certain colors (high saturation, warm hues); tendencies toward symmetrical structures (associated with evolutionary pressures of mate selection); aesthetic pleasure in prospect-refuge spatial configurations (derived from evolutionary models of human habitat preference); and processing fluency — stimuli that are cognitively easier to process consistently receive higher aesthetic evaluations across cultural contexts [14]. The BSL exhibits the strongest universality and serves as the most reliable anchor for cross-cultural aesthetic comparison [15].

Layer Two: Cognitive Schema Layer (CSL). This layer is profoundly shaped by early cultural habituation, encompassing visual organization preferences (differential weighting of Gestalt principles across cultures), cultural variants of narrative prototypes, and the linguistic encoding of aesthetic concepts (cross-linguistic studies have documented the influence of linguistic categorization on the perception of color and form). Li Zehou’s theory of sedimentation [7] describes precisely this layer’s mechanism: historical practice enters the individual’s sensory structure through sedimentation, forming semi-stable aesthetic frameworks. The CSL exhibits systematic inter-group differences while maintaining internal consistency, making it a crucial level of analysis for comparative aesthetics.

Layer Three: Cultural Coding Layer (CCL). This layer is the most historically contingent and variable, encompassing the stylistic norms, generic conventions, and critical discourse systems formed within specific artistic communities at specific historical moments. The artworld described by George Dickie’s institutional theory of art [16] operates at this level: aesthetic taste and standards of appreciation are disseminated socially and normatively established through institutional recognition, curatorial practice, and critical writing. The high variability and historicity of the CCL account for the many differences uncovered by cultural particularist research.

#### 4.2 The Dynamic Nature of Inter-Layer Relationships

The key theoretical claim of the HNM is that the three layers are not independently parallel but constitute a nested structure — the upper layer (CCL) is nested within the middle layer (CSL), which is itself nested within the lower layer (BSL). However, the upper layer does not determine or dissolve the lower layers; rather, it conducts cultural creation within the “possibility space” established by the lower layers.

This relationship implies: (a) purely cultural constructions entirely detached from the biological substrate are impossible; (b) cultural coding cannot deviate indefinitely from the preference thresholds of the biological layer without inducing aesthetic fatigue or cognitive dissonance; and (c) cross-cultural differences at the CCL level do not constitute a refutation of the universality at the BSL level, since the two operate at different levels of granularity.

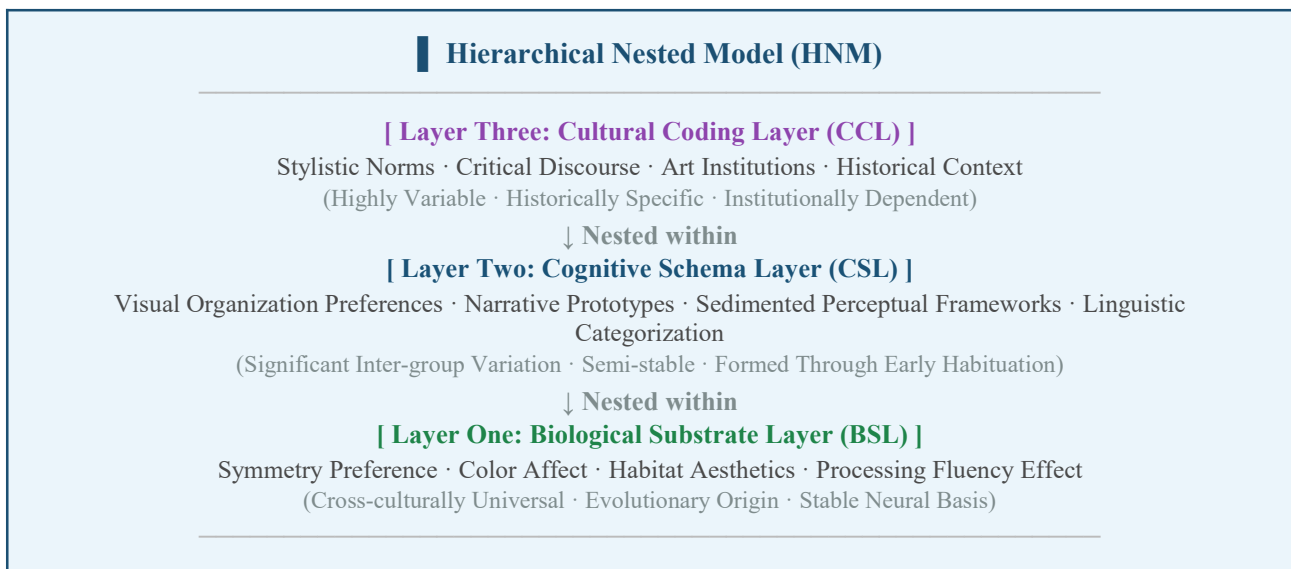


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of the Hierarchical Nested Model (HNM) of aesthetic judgment

Note: Arrows indicate the direction of nesting (upper layers nested within lower layers), not causal determination. Analytical granularity increases from bottom to top; variability increases from bottom to top.

## 5 Model Validation: Comparative Case Studies Between Chinese and Western Aesthetics

### 5.1 Case One: Cross-Cultural Reception of Chinese Landscape Painting and European Landscape Painting

Chinese landscape painting and European landscape painting are both visual representations of natural scenery, yet they differ significantly in compositional logic, treatment of space and time, and emotional orientation. Analyzed through the HNM: at the BSL level, viewers from both traditions experience aesthetic pleasure in prospect-refuge spatial configurations and elevated vantage points, a finding closely consistent with evolutionary models of human habitat preference (Orians & Heerwagen, 1992) [17]; at the CSL level, Chinese viewers tend to interpret negative space (liubai) as evocative atmosphere (yijing) rather than as “incompleteness,” while European viewers anticipate the depth of space rendered through linear perspective — a difference that directly influences curatorial strategies in cross-cultural exhibitions; at the CCL level, the modernist movements of the twentieth century, through their reappraisal of the flatness, linearity, and non-representationality of East Asian painting, have allowed these two traditions to interpenetrate in contemporary art critical discourse, generating new aesthetic codes.

This case demonstrates that cross-cultural aesthetic differences are concentrated primarily at the CSL and CCL levels rather than at the BSL, supporting the HNM’s prediction that universality is concentrated in the lower strata.

**5.2 Case Two: Cross-Cultural Mapping of Musical Mode and Emotion**

The cross-cultural perception of musical emotion is another significant arena for aesthetic research. Fritz et al. (2009) [18], in a study of the Mafa people from a remote region of Cameroon, found that even listeners with no prior exposure to Western music could identify the three basic emotions of happiness, sadness, and fear in Western music at above-chance accuracy, suggesting a BSL foundation for the cross-cultural perception of musical emotion. However, the ethnomusicological survey of 750 societies by Mehr et al. (2019) [19] also revealed that music serving specific social functions (such as lullabies, healing songs, and dance music) shows stronger cross-cultural recognizability, while highly elite art music exhibits greater cultural specificity — suggesting that the depth of CCL encoding increases with the degree of artistic elitization.

The HNM elegantly accounts for this difference (as shown in Table 2): the closer a musical form is to everyday functional life, the greater the contribution of the BSL; the more a musical genre belongs to the constructions of elite art institutions, the heavier the CCL encoding, and the lower the corresponding cross-cultural universality.

Table 2. Analytical framework of HNM layers in Sino-Western comparative cases

Layer	Analytical Dimension	Chinese Landscape vs. European Landscape	Chinese Music vs. Western Music	Degree of Universality
BSL Biological Substrate Layer	Evolutionary / Neural	Shared aesthetic pleasure in open natural spaces	Shared capacity to recognize basic musical emotions	★★★★★
CSL Cognitive Schema Layer	Acquired / Perceptual	Divergent interpretations: negative space vs. perspectival depth	Ethnic group differences in modal-emotional mapping	★★★☆☆
CCL Cultural Coding Layer	Institutional / Discursive	Modernist cross-cultural interpenetration and critical reconstruction	Culture-specific encoding of elite art music	★☆☆☆☆

Note: ★ indicates degree of universality, with five stars being highest and one star lowest. Assessments are based on existing empirical research reviewed in this paper and represent current consensus rather than final conclusions.

**6 Methodological Implications: Insights for Arts Education and Critical Practice**

**6.1 Stratified Strategies for Cross-Cultural Arts Education**

The HNM provides a methodological framework of stratified intervention for cross-cultural arts education. For the BSL, teachers can design introductory exercises centered on visual fluency, symmetry recognition, and color affect, using universal perceptual tendencies to establish initial emotional connections across cross-cultural audiences. For the CSL, the pedagogical focus should shift to culture-specific perceptual schemas — such as the experience of qi-yun (spirit resonance) in Chinese calligraphy or harmonic expectation in Western classical music — helping learners consciously identify and relativize their own default aesthetic frameworks. For the CCL, critical media literacy and art-historical contextualization are the core instruments, enabling learners to decode the institutional origins and power dynamics of particular critical discourses.

**6.2 Layer Sensitivity in Museum Curation**

The frequently encountered problem of “decontextualized display” in cross-cultural exhibition practice is in essence a loss of meaning produced by the forced transplantation of CCL-level cultural coding onto audiences operating within different CSL frameworks. The HNM recommends that museum curators adopt layer-sensitive display strategies: exhibition labels and guided tours should explicitly distinguish the work’s biological-level universal appeals (such as experiences of the sublime or harmonious proportion), its ethnic-level perceptual frameworks (such as East Asian spatial logic), and its institutional-level critical coordinates (such as the historical positioning of a particular school), enabling visitors from different backgrounds to establish initial connections at their familiar level before being gradually guided into perceptual exploration of unfamiliar strata.

**6.3 Methodological Reflexivity in Globalized Critical Discourse**

In a globalized context, the international art criticism market faces a structural risk of universalizing particular CCL encodings — typically the North Atlantic modernist tradition — as “global standards.” The HNM provides a critical verification mechanism: when a critical judgment claims universal validity, one should examine the layer on which it relies — if it primarily appeals to institutional recognition at the CCL level rather than to perceptual consensus at the BSL

level, its universality claims deserve scrutiny. This does not mean that CCL-level judgments are invalid; rather, it requires that critical discourse maintain methodological reflexivity regarding its own layer-positioning.

## 7 Conclusion and Future Research Agenda

Through philosophical mapping, empirical integration, and model construction, this paper has attempted to provide a theoretical response to the debate over universality and cultural particularity in aesthetic criteria that transcends binary opposition. The core claim of the Hierarchical Nested Model (HNM) is: universality and particularity are not incompatible theoretical rivals but accurate descriptions of real phenomena, each valid at a different level of analysis. The universality of the biological substrate layer provides the basis of possibility for cross-cultural dialogue; the inter-group differences of the cognitive schema layer constitute the core object of comparative aesthetic inquiry; and the historical variability of the cultural coding layer is the primary working terrain of critical practice and art-historical writing.

The HNM as a theoretical construction nonetheless leaves several questions to be deepened: How can the boundaries between layers be operationally measured? The mechanisms of interaction and feedback between different layers — such as how cultural coding “sinks” to reshape cognitive schemas — require more refined theoretical articulation. Moreover, the question of how the rise of digital media and AI-generated art will restructure the relationships among the three layers represents an urgent agenda for future research.

As an inaugural article, this paper aspires to establish a methodological keynote for the interdisciplinary, cross-cultural approach to art research advocated by *Art Appreciation*: to maintain creative tension between rigorous empirical research and thoughtful philosophical reflection, and to seek balance between the theoretical ambition of universalism and the interpretive honesty of cultural particularism — in order to respond to the genuine questions posed by the global art world of the twenty-first century.

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