I. Introduction: Origins in the West

An interest in environmental aesthetics began to emerge among Western scholars during the last third of the twentieth century. Many factors joined in promoting this interest: renewed awareness of the beauties of the natural world; growing participation in activities involving nature, such as hiking, camping, boating, visiting state and national parks. While these had long been part of Western recreational culture, growing affluence in the decades following the Second World War joined with increased leisure to increase the popularity of outdoor recreation and peripheral activities like nature photography. These interests began to intrigue scholars curious about the values embedded in such experiences. As the decades progressed, environmental concerns became increasingly prominent from a greater awareness of industrial abuses along with their consequences in the devastation of landscapes, air and water pollution and, in recent years, global warming.

Thus there developed a growing public interest in and awareness of environmental issues. From a reawakened interest in outdoor activities joining with a concern over environmental abuses, a strong international movement quickly developed. In addition to a growing body of scientific research documenting the irreparable changes to the earth’s ecosystem from short-sighted exploitative practices, scholars began to assess their ethical implications. Groups emerged focusing on increasing public awareness and political action as part of an international response to a growing crisis.

This interest affected scholars as well as scientists and political activists. Because of widespread environmental problems and abuses, ethical issues attracted the greatest attention, and environmental ethics emerged as a center of philosophical interest. Around the mid-1960s aestheticians began to turn toward the new interest in nature after a hiatus of more than a century of attention mainly, under the influence of Hegel, on the fine arts. This was a move in a new direction than a return to old issues and it has developed over the last half century into a
significant area of scholarly inquiry known as environmental aesthetics. This movement began with scholars working at first independently: Ronald Hepburn in Scotland, Allen Carlson in Canada, Yrjö Sepänmaa in Finland, and Arnold Berleant in the United States. They came at this emerging interest from different intellectual origins and with somewhat different concerns. Hepburn reflected a sensitivity to the forms of natural beauty and to its imaginative and metaphysical significance. Carlson’s approach was a cognitive one informed by the natural sciences. Sepänmaa came to nature through its revelation in literature, while Berleant centered his investigations around appreciative, aesthetic engagement in environment.

As these scholars became aware of the work going on in the aesthetics of environment, they began communicating and collaborating in conferences and publications. Younger researchers were soon attracted to this, leading to a widening of environmental aesthetics to social and political milieux and to recognizing aesthetic values in urban environments and in the conditions and circumstances of everyday life. From its beginnings in widely scattered locations, environmental aesthetic research has spread widely. A series of six international interdisciplinary conferences on different environments organized by Yrjö Sepänmaa in Finland from 1994 to 2009 was followed by several large international conferences in China in 2003, 2004, and 2009. Other conferences have been held in France, The Netherlands, and Portugal, to mention a few, and scholars in many other countries have also been attracted to the aesthetic understanding of environment. At the present time, scholars throughout North America and Europe are pursuing research in environmental aesthetics.

Environmental studies also embraced the sciences and recognized the importance of ecological research. An ecological perspective offered revealing insight into the significance of environmental changes. They could not be considered as unique individual occurrences but rather as patterns and contextual processes. Ecology offered a powerful perspective on the transformations taking place in the earth’s environment and achieved a powerful focus in the deep ecology developed by [the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. But it was primarily Chinese scholars who integrated the ecological model into environmental aesthetics.

II. Environmental aesthetics in China

Environmental interests and concerns are not restricted to Western scholars. Since the mid-twentieth century, the global scope of environmental (as well as political) issues has grown
increasingly apparent, and Chinese scholars began to develop an interest in the aesthetics of environment. They found the ecological perspective particularly appealing and used it to develop a distinctive approach to environmental aesthetics. Using the scientific model of ecology, a systemic context of interrelated and interacting constituents, they called this 'ecological aesthetics' or 'eco-aesthetics.' Ecoaesthetics embodies a perspective shaped by China’s long cultural tradition based on a belief in the unity of heaven and earth. Indeed, Fanren Zeng considers that "classical Chinese aesthetics is an ecological aesthetics based on the philosophical background of 'the unity between heaven and earth.' " Because of the universal concern with environment, it is tempting to see the development of environmental aesthetics in China as a variant of the same intellectual quest for understanding the aesthetic values in environment. To be sure there are common interests here, but I think that there are also fundamental differences in cognitive context. Let us consider what these are.

Much rests on how we understand aesthetic appreciation of environment. Cheng Xiangzhan rightly points out that Western aesthetics centers attention on the aesthetic object. In the case of the arts, this seems apparent: we focus on the painting, the music, the poem, the landscape. This last, however, does not easily fit this model, for landscape is no discrete object. Rather it leads us to interact with it, and this suggests that the engagement model of environmental appreciation is more appropriate. Such an approach brings us close to the Chinese model of environmental appreciation in which the subject-object opposition is rejected in favor of an intimate relation of humans and the world. Cheng points out that the Chinese term usually translated as ‘aesthetic’ is shen-mei, but this is actually a verb-object word group that means the activity of appreciating the beautiful. This makes clear the difference between an aesthetics of objects and an aesthetics of appreciation.

This takes us to vastly different understandings of environment in Western and Eastern aesthetics. In Western societies, it is common to speak of “the environment” as the matter of our concern here. Thinking of environment in this way turns it into an object: the environment, something separate and apart from us. For the Chinese, however, there is no opposition or separation: shen-mei denotes an activity of appreciating, not an object to be appreciated as beautiful.

Such an understanding animates the work of Zeng Fanren. In his essay, "Resurgence of the Wisdom of Chinese Classical Eco-aesthetics within the Context of Constructive Postmodernism," Zeng shows how traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics originated in
an agricultural economy dominated by “the unity of humanity and nature.” While in the West, the aesthetic value of harmony was found in the formal features of an aesthetic object, in China harmony was understood as the unity between heaven, earth, and humanity and expressed in the interdependence of yin and yang.

Ecological aesthetics or “eco-aesthetics,” as it is known, is a complex idea that is capable of varied emphasis and development. Cheng has elaborated a version he calls “Ecosophy C.” Just as Naess extended the concept of ecology into a general view that he called “ecosophy,” Cheng’s ecosophy C is “a philosophical world-view or system inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere.” This is a sophisticated development of the central theme of ecology into a multi-faceted philosophy that joins together many aspects of Chinese tradition and culture. Cheng identifies eight features of Ecosophy C, among these Confucianism, community, The Book of Changes, and compassion. His work clearly shows the rich possibilities for generalizing the germinal idea of ecology.

We have, then, a parallel development in environmental aesthetics in China. It is significantly different from Western work in this area, and it articulates the philosophical context in which this aesthetic inquiry takes place. As I shall claim later, both approaches are complementary and can be enhanced by mutual knowledge.

III. Environmental aesthetics West and East

What has emerged, then, are two complementary developments in environmental aesthetics. It does not do justice to their distinctive contributions to attempt to unify them into a single movement. It is characteristic of Western intellectual culture to pursue research into restricted and clearly defined issues. This approach has been dramatically successful in the areas of science and technology, whereas in fields that demand comprehensive vision, it has been less so. Much of Western philosophical inquiry in the past half century has attempted to emulate the narrow vision of the sciences, while forsaking the inclusive scope and comprehension that philosophy has historically striven for. When it comes to the aesthetic appreciation of environment, this approach has been inadequate, and philosophical research has joined the ethical, social, and political with the aesthetic, merging as well with ecological and other scientific approaches and disciplines. Not only the natural environment but the urban environment, the social environment, and even the political environment have become rich areas of research. Such expansion is both needed and welcome.
Chinese aesthetics of nature has traditionally held to a larger view and this is embodied in ecological aesthetics. Here the ethical is inseparable from the aesthetic, unlike the characteristic separation of the two in Western philosophy. Cheng expresses this explicitly when he writes that "ecological aesthetic appreciation is an aesthetic activity predicated on ecological ethics. It revises and strengthens the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in traditional aesthetics, and it takes ecological awareness as the premise of ecological appreciation."\textsuperscript{10} Cheng's claim is one that Western aestheticians are beginning to share, namely that it is impossible to exclude ethical consequences from aesthetic appreciation, particularly in speaking of environment. Indeed, he expands this into a full ecological humanism that he calls a critical aesthetics:

"...not only does it criticize the fallacies of traditional aesthetic theory as well as the various crimes against nature, but it also utilizes the viewpoint of nonhuman species to criticize and reflect humans' innate aesthetic preferences. It is true that everyone has a tendency to love and appreciate beautiful things. However, the love for the beautiful has to be founded on the respect for all things equally, too. That is, we have to appreciate the beautiful with an ecological awareness."\textsuperscript{11}

In a similar vein, Tu Weiming elaborates the traditional Chinese belief of the unity of heaven and earth into an ecologically-based vision. "The idea of the unity of Heaven and humanity implies four inseparable dimensions of the human condition: self, community, nature, and Heaven. The full distinctiveness of each enhances, rather than impedes, a thorough integration of the others."\textsuperscript{12}

The differences between Western and Chinese approaches to the aesthetics of environment are highly instructive. Western aestheticians in general have remained close to the traditional philosophical discipline of aesthetics as the study of the beautiful in art and nature. From that base they have moved outward to embrace urban aesthetics,\textsuperscript{13} social aesthetics,\textsuperscript{14} political aesthetics,\textsuperscript{15} body aesthetics,\textsuperscript{16} and the aesthetics of everyday life.\textsuperscript{17}

Is it possible that a convergence will develop between both traditions? Signs of such a unification seem to exist. The work of Jusuck Koh, a Korean architect and scholar proposed an ecological architecture early in the recent past.\textsuperscript{18} As Cheng has observed,

Based on Koh's paper and definition, Arnold [Berleant] thinks that 'an ecological aesthetic incorporates a holistic notion of an environmental system that is both harmonious and
dynamic (i.e. in constant change). That is the ecological part. Construing it aesthetically would be to incorporate it into human perceptual experience. Perhaps this can serve as a beginning.' I agree with this point too. What in my mind here is how to explain ‘holistic notion of an environment system'?

My thought is to explain this key issue in terms of ecology and deep ecology. Only through key terms in the field of ecology, can we propose a kind of 'ecological aesthetics'.

Indeed, it is striking to recollect in retrospect an early publication in contemporary aesthetics that proposed the concept of an aesthetic field as a contextual framework for understanding aesthetic experience.

The Aesthetic Field was concerned primarily with aesthetic experience in the arts, and brought together four activities in that functional process: the creative, the appreciative, the object-oriented, and the performative. At the same time, it has been readily adapted to environmental appreciation.

I suggest that the future of environmental aesthetics would be enhanced by applying the Chinese understanding of harmony to the relation between environmental aesthetics East and West. Both orientations contribute important insights and offer a direction for further inquiry. Such a harmony need not submerge the distinctiveness of both orientations but, at the same time, it would enhance both. Western environmental aesthetics could continue the specific directions and extensions of inquiry while being informed by a philosophical vision of its larger human and planetary context and implications. Chinese ecoaesthetics could develop specific inquiries from the perspective of its rich traditions and scholarly history. The main emphasis of such a convergence of traditions could center on the value of emphasizing the contextual character of aesthetic experience and appreciation. Such an approach would unify both the aesthetic appreciation of the arts and the aesthetic appreciation of environment. And it is in dealing with environment that an ecological aesthetics can exemplify its harmony.


3 Xiangzhan Cheng in *Ecological Aesthetics and Ecological Assessment and Planning*, Ch. 3, "On the Four Keystones of Ecological Aesthetic Appreciation."


6 Zang Fanren, *op. cit.*


10 Xiangzhan Cheng in *Ecological Aesthetics and Ecological Assessment and Planning*, p. 90.


22 For a recent contribution toward achieving such harmony, see my essay, "Ideas for an Ecological Aesthetics," in Arnold Berleant, Aesthetics beyond the Arts (Farnham, Surry: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 118-130.