

Natural Beauty and a Review of Chuang Tzu's Aesthetics

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For many years the field of aesthetics has been almost exclusively concerned with works of art, while the natural world as the subject of aesthetics has been neglected. Especially in modern China, because of the influence of Hegelian idealism, there are few philosophical investigations of the beauty of nature even though there are rich thoughts about it in Chinese classical aesthetics. Why was natural beauty dropped from the agenda of aesthetics?

T. W. Adorno asserts that natural beauty presents an implicit challenge to man-made art: "its continued presence would have touched a sore spot, conjuring up associations of acts of violence perpetrated by every work of art, as a pure artefact, against the natural. Wholly man-made, the work of art is radically opposed to nature."¹⁾ He argues, "Natural beauty vanished from aesthetics thanks to the expanding supremacy of the concept of human freedom and dignity."²⁾

Allen Carlson thinks the decline of thinking about natural beauty began earlier in medieval religion. He writes: "Initially, nature's appreciation and its philosophical investigation were hamstrung by religion. The reigning religious tradition could not but deem nature an unworthy object of aesthetic appreciation, for it saw mountains as despised heaps of wreckage left by the flood, wilderness regions as fearful places for punishment and repentance, and all of nature's workings as poor substitutes for the perfect harmony lost in humanity's fall."³⁾

Zhu Guang-Qian, one of the founders of modern Chinese aesthetics, even claims that there is not natural beauty in the world; "natural beauty" is a self-contradictory wording. He argues, "People usually like to say 'natural beauty'. They seem to presume that there is beauty in nature, even though nobody appreciates it . . . In fact, from the point of view of aesthetics, the word 'natural beauty' is self-contradictory. If something is 'beautiful', it must not be 'natural'; if something is 'natural', it must not have become to be 'beautiful' . . . If you feel the beauty in nature, this nature is not the wild and uncultured nature; it must have been artificialized and changed to be your artwork."⁴⁾

However, today's situation is quickly changing. There are many opinions and arguments regarding natural beauty, the appreciation of natural things, and even natural aesthetics itself. More and more people are scandalized by modern life and technology, which brings catastrophes both to nature and themselves. Because the natural environment has been deeply affected, people are rethinking the relationship between humanity and nature. They believe that studies of natural beauty can give a dependable foundation for conservation. As a result,

1) T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, translated by C. Lenhardt, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p.91.

2) *Ibid.*, p.92.

3) Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p.3.

4) Zhu Guang-Qian, *Tan Mei [Talking About Beauty]*, Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu Press, 1992, p. 74. It must be mentioned that, in the text of Zhuang Guang-Qian, the transforming or artificializing from nature to artwork is not real changing the physical existence of nature, but empathizing and endowing meaning to nature.

positive aesthetics, which is mainly concerned with the beauty of nature, is emerging. As S. Godlovitch indicates, "Given the current reassessment of our destructive impacts upon and exploitative attitudes toward nature, we are at least prompted to understand why positive aesthetics has recently been given a voice and where positive aesthetics sits in the tradition. Much of the tradition flows from metaphysics, religious, moral, or mystical sources. All share vaguely themes about the basic indistinguishability of things at the most fundamental level and the relative littleness of the strictly human sphere. The main point here is that we stand in a significantly different relationship to nature than to art. We derive from nature but are nevertheless something apart."⁵⁾

More than two thousand years ago, Chuang Tzu, an oriental sage, meditated deeply on natural beauty and expressed some very interesting and prescient opinion, which would behoove us to now bring up again. Therefore, of primary focus in this paper will be 1) a discussion of the challenge posed to aesthetics by its increased recognition of natural beauty; 2) a review of Chuang Tzu's thought about natural beauty and 3) a comparative study between Chuang Tzu and positive aesthetics.

1. The challenge of natural beauty to aesthetics

In ordinary human experience, enjoyment of the beauty of nature even predominates over the appreciation of works of art. This is especially the case with popular audiences, who find it difficult to relate to contemporary works of art. Many people find renewal in appreciating natural things. In everyday life we are instinctively drawn to natural things as objects of aesthetic appreciation than to works of art.

When aestheticians regard natural beauty from an aesthetic prospective and attempt a philosophical investigation of it, they find it a real challenge. Traditional aesthetics, accustomed to dealing with works of art, seems ill-suited to deal with natural things.⁶⁾

There are at least four important differences between natural things and works of art. First, nature as the object of appreciation, the aesthetic object, is indeterminate, boundless, and changeable, unlike works of art, which are discrete, stable, and self-contained. Nature is not an object over against us, but something that surrounds and embraces us. As the object of appreciation, nature is our environment, our own surroundings. It is difficult to separate our environment from ourselves as human inhabitants. As Arnold Berleant states, "We are rather continuous with environment, an integral part of its processes."⁷⁾ Carlson stresses that nature, as an object of aesthetic appreciation, bears an important character: "Not only are we in what we appreciate but what we appreciate is also that from which we appreciate. If we move, we move within the object of our appreciation and thereby change our relationship to it and at the same

5) Stan Godlovitch, 'Valuing Nature and the Autonomy of Natural Aesthetics,' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 38, No.2, April 1998, p.192.

6) As Zhu Guang-Qian comments, natural beauty is a stumbling block to aestheticians. (Zhu Guang-Qian, Zhu Guang-Qian Quanjì [Collected Works of Zhu Guang-Qian] vol. 5, Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu Press, 1992, p.113.)

7) Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, p.12.

time change the object itself.”⁸⁾

Second, the experience of the aesthetic appreciation of nature is very different from the appreciation of works of art. Art appreciation typically involves perceptual, cognitive, and affective elements as central and determinative. But these do not figure so centrally in the aesthetic appreciation of natural things. At best they appear as unprivileged elements in a rambling host of responses, because nature is not a language, not a system of signs and symbols, not a book. As we reside in the natural object, we see it, hear it, feel it, smell it, and perhaps even taste it. ⁹⁾The aesthetic appreciation of natural things is initially intimate, total, and somewhat engulfing. As Berleant puts it, “The usual tradition in aesthetics has difficulty with this [natural environment], for it claims that appreciation requires a receptive, contemplative attitude. Such an attitude benefits an observer, but nature admits of no such observer, for nothing can remain apart and uninvolved.”¹⁰⁾

Moreover, the aesthetic appreciation of nature does not provide an imaginary world as in the case of works of art. Our imagination can change the world of art, but it cannot influence or change natural things. As S. Godlovitch indicates, “Even if the aesthetic experience of nature provides a pleasurable escape or at least a relief from ‘the real world of our practical affairs’, it cannot do so by removing us entirely from the real world. Quite the contrary, aesthetic interest in nature must necessarily and precisely be interest in the real world, arguably a world which we are bound to regard more fully real than the world of our practical affairs.”¹¹⁾

Third, the sources of aesthetic value in natural things are unstated. Inasmuch as works of art are the products of artists, artists are the sources of aesthetic value of works of art. They endow their works with aesthetic value. The ideas and skills of artists are the two most important elements that establish the aesthetic value of works of art. But natural things are not produced by anybody; the sources of the aesthetic value of natural things remain ambiguous.

Finally, the aesthetic value of natural things is not susceptible to comparison and grading. Works of art are always and appropriately subject to ranking and comparative valuation. The aesthetic value of art is invariably conceived in scalar fashion. To value art is to grade it. We can grade art according to the ideas and skills of the artist. But, natural things reflect a single source, the skill and ideas, as we might put it, of the creator of all things. So the aesthetic value of natural things cannot be evaluated in the same way as works of art.

2. Chuang Tzu on natural beauty

The insights of Chuang Tzu can enlighten us about the issues outlined above.

Chuang Tzu was perhaps the most cunning philosopher in the history of Chinese thought.

8) Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, p. xvii.

9) See Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, p. xvii.

10) Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, p.12.

11) Stan Godlovitch, ‘Valuing Nature and the Autonomy of Natural Aesthetics’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 38, No.2, April 1998, pp.182-183.

Widely regarded as a leader of skeptics and critics, he rejected the blind orthodoxy of Confucianism and argued against the great ethical system of Confucius as being just a superficial and meaningless dogma of political and social life. Chuang Tzu especially inveighed against appreciating nature as merely a symbol of moral value. Confucius had suggested that we should appreciate nature insofar as it represents certain character traits and morals. This dogma of Confucianism was a popular perspective of classical Chinese aesthetics.

But Chuang Tzu took exception. He rejected the idea that nature should be seen as providing representations of human beings; he wanted people to escape from the bondage of human culture and to respond to nature qua nature.

Chuang Tzu's writings consist largely of allegorical stories. One story that provides insight about the nature of natural beauty involves Hsi Shih, a famous beauty. When she was distressed in mind, she knitted her brows. An ugly woman of the village, seeing how beautiful Hsi Shih looked, went home, and having worked herself into a fit frame of mind, knitted her brows. The result was that the rich people of the place barred their doors and would not come out, while the poor people took their wives and children elsewhere. The ugly woman saw the beauty of knitted brows, but she did not see wherein the beauty of knitted brows lay.¹²⁾ In this story Chuang Tzu points out that imitation cannot transform what is ugly into something beautiful, even if the object of imitation is supremely beautiful. On the other hand, Chuang Tzu told another story with a very different point about the beauty. When Yang Tzu went to the Sung State, he passed a night at an inn. The innkeeper had two concubines, one beautiful, the other ugly. But it was the latter that he favored rather than the former. Yang Tzu asked how this was. The innkeeper said, "The beautiful one is so conscious of her beauty that I do not think her beautiful. The ugly one is so conscious of her ugliness that I do not think her ugly."¹³⁾

Some commentators have concluded from this story that Chuang Tzu did not value true beauty. But the ancient sage was not so counterintuitive. In the first story we saw that Chuang Tzu acknowledged the beauty of a beautiful woman. How, then, should we understand the second story? The key has to do with spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness resulting in naturalness, in contrast with artificiality and self-consciousness resulting in the loss of naturalness. A beautiful woman lose her beauty to the extent that she is self-conscious of her beauty, while a plain woman gains beauty to the extent that she realizes and accepts her plainness. Chuang Tzu maintained that someone who is conscious of his high value, and who tries constantly to intensify his value, will become unnatural and loss his value. But someone of lower value, who accepts himself without pretense, remains natural and preserves his true value.

A beautiful woman who remains unself-conscious of her beauty need not do anything about her beauty; she is a real, natural beauty. But a beautiful woman who is self-conscious of her

12) See Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer, translated by Herbert A. Giles, Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Limited, 1926. p. 182.

13) *Ibid.*, pp. 259-260.

beauty and keeps trying to improve upon her beauty will ultimately lose herself; she is not a real beauty, or at least not a natural beauty. If a plain-looking woman is not conscious of her plainness and strives to be beautiful, she will lose herself and become even less desirable. But if she accepts her plainness and feels no compulsion to embellish her natural appearance, she will gain the beauty of naturalness. The real, natural beauty and the real, natural plainness are equivalent in value; both have natural beauty, according to Chuang Tzu.¹⁴⁾

As I understand, Chuang Tzu defended his view in two ways. First, he considered that the origin of all natural things is the same; all natural things are generated from congealed of the vital fluid [Qi].¹⁵⁾ Because everything is equal at its source, to differentiate beauty and ugliness is untenable. Second, Chuang Tzu thought that the natural beauty and natural ugliness are equivalent just because people cannot differentiate beauty from ugliness among natural things.¹⁶⁾ Sometimes we enjoy something; other times it may find no favor with us. The differentiation of beauty and ugliness was relative between different people and even with the same person at different times.¹⁷⁾ Because beauty and ugliness among natural things cannot be objectively determined, all natural things should be regarded equally.

If all of what Chuang Tzu said is correct, it just can insure that all natural things are equal, but how did he maintain that all natural things are also equally beautiful? And what stops us from asserting that all natural things are equally ugly?

First, Chuang Tzu could defend his view just on the basis of intuition. We can see the beauty of nature instinctively. Natural beauty is self-evident and needs no argument. On one occasion, according a story about the sage, Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu strolled onto the bridge over the Hao. Chuang Tzu observed, "See how the minnows are darting about! That is the pleasure of fishes."

"You not being a fish yourself," said Hui Tzu, "how can you possibly know in what consists the pleasure of fishes?"

"And you not [being] I," retorted Chuang Tzu, "how can you know that I do not know?"

"If I, not being you, cannot know what you know," urged Hui Tzu, "it follows that you, not being a fish, cannot know in what consists the pleasure of fishes."

"Let us go back," said Chuang Tzu, "to your original question. You asked me how I knew in what consists the pleasure of fishes. Your very question shows that you knew I knew. I knew it from my own feelings on this bridge."¹⁸⁾

14) Chuang Tzu said, "Therefore it is that, viewed from the standpoint of Tao, a beam and a pillar are identical. So are ugliness and beauty, greatness, wickedness, perverseness and strangeness." (Ibid., pp. 19-20.)

15) Chuang Tzu said, "The life of man results from convergence of the vital fluid. Its convergence is life; its dispersion, death . . . Therefore all things are ONE . . . Therefore it has been said, the world is permeated by a single vital fluid, and Sages accordingly venerate ONE." (Ibid., p. 278.) According to context, "all things" should be understood as "all natural things".

16) Chuang Tzu said, "Monkey mates with monkey, the buck with the doe; eels consort with fishes, while men admire Mao Ch'iang and Li Chi [the famous beauties of old], at the sight of whom fishes plunge deep down in the water, birds soar high in the air, and deer hurry away. Yet who shall say which is the correct standard of beauty?" (Ibid., p. 27.)

17) Min Ze discusses this topic in detail. (Min Ze: *ZhongGuo Meixue Sixiangshi* [A History of Chinese Aesthetic Theory], Jinan: Qilu Shushe, 1987, p. 258-260.)

18) Chuang Tzu: *Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, pp.218-219.

This story tells us the awareness of the pleasure of fishes is direct, spontaneous, and self-evident. It need not arise from reflection and reason.

Second, Chuang Tzu could give his view an ontological explanation. He claimed that everything originated from Tao. Tao is the most beautiful thing. The natural things are so near to Tao that it can be identified with Tao. So, the natural things are the most beautiful too.

Third, Chuang Tzu divided everything on the earth to two kinds, natural things and artificial things. All natural things are beautiful as compared to artificial things. As we learned in the stories about beautiful and plain-looking women, Chuang Tzu opposed any imitations.

Chuang Tzu asserted that, if people responded to nature qua nature, they would find that all natural things are created equal, and that all natural things have positive aesthetic value compared with artificial things. There are not good-bad, beautiful-ugly, great-petty, right-wrong among the natural things. Natural things are not subject to differentiating, ranking, and comparative valuation.

There was an interesting dialogue between Chuang Tzu and Tung Kuo Tzu.

Tung Kuo Tzu asked Chuang Tzu, saying, "What you call Tao, Where is it?"

"There is nowhere," replied Chuang Tzu, "where it is not."

"Tell me one place at any rate where it is," said Tung Kuo Tzu.

"It is in ants," replied Chuang Tzu.

"Why go so low down?" asked Tung Kuo Tzu.

"It is in a tare," said Chuang Tzu.

"Still lower," objected Tung Kuo Tzu.

"It is in a potsherd," said Chuang Tzu.

"Worse still," cried Tung Kuo Tzu.

"It is in ordure," said Chuang Tzu. And Tung Kuo Tzu made no reply.

"Sir," continued Chuang Tzu, "your question does not touch the essential. When Huo, inspector of markets, asked the managing director about the fatness of pigs, the test was always made in parts least likely to be fat. Do not therefore insist in any particular direction; for there is nothing which escapes. Such is perfect Tao; and such also is ideal speech. Whole, entire, all, are three words which sound differently but mean the same. Their purport is One."¹⁹⁾

People, like Tung Kuo Tzu, were used to looking for Tao in high things, but Chuang Tzu saw Tao as readily in lower things. It does not mean that Chuang Tzu gave higher value to lower things and lower value to higher things. Chuang Tzu considered that everything was worthy of appreciating as long as it existed in itself; but things that imitated other things were not worthy of appreciation.²⁰⁾

3. Chuang Tzu's influence on Chinese aesthetics

19) *Ibid.*, pp.285-286.

20) Some contemporary aestheticians hold a similar view. For example, Paul Ziff uses aesthetic examples as "a gator basking in the sun on a mud bank in a swamp" and "a mound of dried dung." He suggests the equality of all things as proper objects of aesthetic appreciation. (Paul Ziff, "Anything Viewed", in Esa Saarinen, Risto Hilpinen, Ilkka Niiniluoto, and Merrill Provence Hintikka eds. *Essays in Honour of Jaakko Hintikka*, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979, p.285.)

There are two main sources of Chinese thoughts, Confucianism, and Taoism. Confucianism mainly focuses on Chinese practical affairs, while Taoism focuses on aesthetic experiences.²¹⁾ We find many sympathizers of Chuang Tzu in Chinese aesthetics, especially in regard to natural beauty. Chinese aesthetics emphasizes several points.

First, Chinese aesthetics advocates a nonjudgmental, non-evaluating, non-grading approach to the appreciation of natural beauty. With human artifact, appreciation involves valuing, judging, and grading.²²⁾ But this type of appreciation is not suited for the appreciation of the natural things. Chinese aesthetics advocates another kind of appreciation, which values something for what it is in and of itself rather than for some good elements selected for the admirer's personal enjoyment. This kind of appreciation is real, pure appreciation, according to Chinese aesthetics, the appreciation that chooses something for what it offers for our personal pleasure is a prejudiced appreciation.²³⁾ Real appreciation that is content to value something for its own sake is an unprejudiced appreciation, capable of arousing a universal bliss. This nonjudgmental appreciation is especially suited for natural things, so we can call it natural appreciation.

Second, Chinese aesthetics maintains that natural appreciation can help people escape the bounds of culture.²⁴⁾ People are cultural, social beings, and they find it difficult to escape the bounds of culture. Their aesthetic appreciation is usually culturally prejudiced. But Chinese aesthetics asserts that appreciation of natural things can help people escape their prejudiced perspectives and help them be true to themselves as natural things. People who desire pure aesthetic experiences may need to de-economize, de-moralize, de-scientize, and de-humanize it their environment.

Third, this kind of appreciation of natural things affects one's idea of art. Chinese aesthetics

- 21) Many Chinese aestheticians support that the foundation of Chinese aesthetics is Taoism. Xu Fu-guan asserts that the spirit of Chinese art originated from the idea of Chuang Tzu's Tao: "If we practise the Tao with our life, we will not regard it as a concept of metaphysics but a spirit of art. This meaning of Tao is not uncovered until Chuang Tzu indicated it." (Xu Fu-Guan: *Zhongguo Yishu Jingshen [The Spirit of Chinese Art]*, Shenyang: Chunfeng Wenyi Press, 1987, p.42.) Ye Lang suggests that the most important categories of Chinese aesthetics are "Tao", "Qi", and "Xiang" which are brought by Taoists such as Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. (Ye Lang, *ZhongGuo Meixueshi Dagang [An Outline of the History of Chinese Aesthetics]*, Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Press, 1985, p.24.)
- 22) Berleand says: "Appreciation is a word that connotes value, yet curiously enough, this value may be economic as well as aesthetic." (*Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997, p.21.)
- 23) As Chuang Tzu suggested, people should appreciate the world from the point of view of Tao, which is very different from the point of view of men: "From the point of view of Tao, there are no such extremes of value or worthlessness. Men individually value themselves and hold others cheap. The world collectively withholds from the individual the right of appraising himself." (Chuang Tzu: *Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, pp. 205-206.) In the history of Chinese aesthetics, "from the point view of Tao" is understood as the pure appreciation, and "from the point view of men" is understood as a prejudiced appreciation.
- 24) Especially in Jin Dynasty, there were many scholars, such as Xie Ling-yun and Tao Yuan-ming, strove to escape the oppression of autocracy and the limitation of Confucianism by living in mountain and farm. They regarded natural beauty as the model of the beauty of personality. The appreciation of natural beauty helped them to attain a high ideal of life. (See Ye Lang, *ZhongGuo Meixueshi Dagang [A Outline of History of Chinese Aesthetics]*, p.188, 190; also see Li Ze-hou, *Mei de Licheng [a path of beauty]*, Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Press, 1984, p.130-131.)

advocates that in the finest art the highest ideal is artless spontaneity.²⁵⁾ Only when an artist loses his intention, perhaps even his creative ability, will he be able to create outstanding works of art.²⁶⁾ The highest ideal of art is unartistic, for example, the ideal in painting is empty, in music is inaudible, in poetry is unstated, etc.²⁷⁾ Chinese aestheticians think the personality and life of artist is more important than artworks.²⁸⁾

Fourth, the highest ideal of personality is a spontaneous life with vitality and bliss.²⁹⁾ Chinese aesthetics believes that true appreciation of nature qua nature can arouse a universal bliss. Although Chinese people see nature as the opposite of human culture, they believe there is a basic harmony between nature and human beings, from which all of the cultural and social rules originate. This harmony is the basic of the universal bliss.

The basic harmony between man and the world, to borrow terminology from Chinese philosophy, can be called “oneness of heaven and man”. Some philosophers assert that people cannot obtain a theorizing knowledge about “oneness of heaven and man”, which perhaps only be manifested in aesthetic experiences, especially in the aesthetic experiences of nature.³⁰⁾ So Chinese philosophers want people to feel their deep harmony with nature as they uncover their original sensitive communication with nature. Then they will find that all of natural things possess equal beauty. So, the foremost question of Chinese aesthetics is not how to train

- 25) Chuang Tzu narrated a story about painting: “Prince Yüan of Sung desiring to have a picture painted, the officials of that department presented themselves, and after making obeisance stood waiting for the order, more than half of them already licking their brushes and mixing their ink. One of them arrived late. He sauntered in without hurrying himself; and when he had made obeisance, did not wait but went off home. The prince sent a man to see what he did. He took off his clothes and squatted down bare-backed. ‘He will do’, cried the prince. ‘He is a true artist.’” (Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralistic, and Social Reformer, p. 270.) This story is interpreted by Chinese aestheticians as that true creating is a spontaneous operation.
- 26) There is a story told by Chuang Tzu about that Ch’ing, a famous artisan, who made a mystical stand. As people asked him how did he make this mystical work, he said: “When I am about to make such a stand, I guard against any diminution of my vital power. I first reduce my mind to absolute quiescence. Three days in this condition, and I become oblivious of any reward to be gained. Five days, and I become oblivious of any fame to be acquired. Seven days, and I become unconscious to my four limbs and my physical frame. Then, with no thought of the Court present to my mind, my skill becomes concentrated, and all disturbing elements from without are gone. I enter some mountain forest. I meet with a suitable tree. It contains the form required, which is afterwards elaborated. I see the stand in my mind’s eye, and then set to work. Otherwise, there is nothing. I bring my own natural capacity into relation with that of the wood.” (Ibid., pp. 240-241.) This story is widely commended by Chinese artists. Most of them suggest that artists should reduce to a pure state of existence and attain a direct understanding to their objects before they set to work.
- 27) This idea originated from Lao Tzu. A famous maxim of Lao Tzu is: “Music, perfected, has no melody; Painting, perfected, has no shape.” (Lao Tzu, chapter 41.) Lao Tzu suggested that music and art may be graded into two ranks, ordinary, and perfected. Perfected is the negation of ordinary. Chinese aesthetics approves the perfected one as the highest ideal of art. Also see Kenneth J. DeWoskin, “Chinese and Japanese Aesthetics”, A Companion to Aesthetics, Edited by David Cooper, Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997, p. 69.
- 28) This is a popular idea in Chinese aesthetics. Liu Xi-zai, a famous aesthetician who lived in Qing dynasty, summarized it in one sentence: “A high ideal of poetry comes from a high ideal of personality.” (Liu Xi-zai, Shigai [An Outline of Poetry], quoted from Zhongguo Meixueshi Ziliao Xuanbian [Selected Data of Chinese Aesthetics], vol. 2, edited by the editor committee of Chinese literature, Taipei: Fuxin Shuju, 1984, p. 744.)
- 29) Fung Yu-lan names the highest ideal of personality feng liu. Feng liu spirit has four important characteristics, as Fung Yu-lan summarizes, such as pursuing pleasure, living according to impulse, having subtle sensitivity and sentiments to everything, and enjoying the beauty of the opposite sex without any sensuous inclinations. According to these characteristics, Fung Yu-Lan concludes that “feng liu derives from tzu-jan (spontaneity, naturalness).” (Fung Yu-lan, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948, p. 240.)
- 30) “Oneness of heaven and man” is one of the most important ideas of Chinese philosophy, about which there are different understanding. Zhang Dai-nian indicates, “In the history of Chinese Philosophy, there are two main

aesthetic skills, or how to develop aesthetic ideas, or how to obtain the knowledge of art, but how to guide people to their original sensitive nature.³¹⁾

Chuang Tzu said he once dreamt he was a butterfly, and as he awakened, he was not sure whether he was a man or a butterfly. "Once upon a time, I, Chuang Tzu, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awakened, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man."³²⁾

This blending between human and nature are celebrated in Chinese aesthetics. The highest ideal of aesthetic experience is attaining this direct and sensitive understanding of nature.

4. An outline of positive aesthetics

The thoughts of Chuang Tzu and Chinese aesthetics about natural beauty seem to be a little similar to the ideas of some contemporary western aestheticians. After a long time of neglecting natural beauty, western philosophical aesthetics finally began about mid-twentieth century to take an interest in nature. Some new areas are being developed in this field, including what is called positive aesthetics, with specific reference to natural beauty.

Allen Carlson, Eugene Hargrove, and Stan Godlovitch are among the aestheticians who have defended positive aesthetics. Carlson asserts the natural world is essentially aesthetically good: "All the natural world is beautiful. According to this view, the natural environment, insofar as it is untouched by man, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is, for example, graceful, delicate, intense, unified, and orderly, rather than bland, dull, insipid, incoherent, and chaotic. All virgin nature, in short, is essentially aesthetically good. The appropriate or correct

meanings of 'oneness of heaven and man', the communicating between heaven and man, and the analogy between heaven and man." (Zhang Dai-nian, *Zhongguo Zhexue Dagang* [An Outline of Chinese Philosophy], Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Press, 1982, p. 173.) Feng Yu-lan stresses that "Oneness of heaven and man" cannot be thought, about which we cannot obtain any knowledge. He suggests that "Oneness of heaven and man" can be understood through "the negative method" which just say "what it is not something" instead of saying "what it is something". Poetry is one of "the negative methods", So poetry can manifest "Oneness of heaven and man". Most of the poems that are used by Feng Yu-Lan as examples are poems intoning nature. (Fung Yu-lan, *Sansongtang Quanji* [Collected Works of Fung Yu-lan] vol. 5, Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Press, 1986, pp. 635-636.) Zhang Shi-Ying observes that "oneness of heaven and man" is used in religion, moral, and aesthetics in the history of Chinese thought. After a commentary of the three kinds of using, Zhang Shi-ying concludes that "oneness of haven and man" should be understood as an object of aesthetic experience. He says: "Aesthetic experience is a blending of man and the world, to borrow terminology from Chinese philosophy, can be called 'oneness of heaven and man'." (Zhang Shi-ying, *Tian Ren Zhi Ji* [The Joint of Heaven and Man], Beijing: Renmin Press, 1995, p. 199.) In his text, the "heaven" can be understood as natural world, because he suggests that "Oneness of heaven and man" should be understood as "Oneness of landscape and feeling".

31) Chinese artists think the skills and knowledge about art can be obtained by studying and practising, but by so doing people cannot attain the creating state, the pure state of existence, which, to borrow terminology from Chinese aesthetics, can be called "Xing"[a state of uplifting]. So how to attain "Xing" is the most important thing. Wang Yu, a famous artist of Qing dynasty, said, "All things I need to do is fostering "Xing" before painting. I usually do first something else, such as appreciating clouds or springs, watching flowers or birds, strolling or intoning, lighting incense or drinking a cup of tea. Once I get 'Xing', I set to paint immediately, and stop at the end of 'Xing'."(quoted from *Zhongguo Hualun Leibian* [A Selection of the theory of Chinese Painting], vol. 1, edited by Yu Jian-Hua, Beijing: Renmin Meishu Press, 1986, p. 189.)

32) Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer, p.32.

aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is basically positive, and negative aesthetic judgements have little or no place.”³³⁾

Carlson provides numerous references to other writers who espouse positive aesthetics. Many allies come from theistic, transcendental, mystical, romantic, scientific, metaphysical, affective, and moral outlooks. A positive reverential mood about nature finds wide expression in poetry, religion, science, and environmental ethics.

Carlson’s aesthetics is indebted to the work of Kendall Walton. Walton claims that the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of works of art is to perceive them in their correct categories.³⁴⁾ Carlson thinks the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of natural things should be the same as Walton’s approach to works of art.³⁵⁾ He says: “Positive aesthetics claims that the natural world is essentially aesthetically good. It follows that the natural world must appear as such when it is appropriately aesthetically appreciated . . . the natural world must appear aesthetically good when it is perceived in its correct categories, those given and informed by natural science.”³⁶⁾

There is a difference between the appropriate appreciation of natural things and that of works of art. The correct categories of the natural world are given by natural science, such as: geography, geology, ecology, biology, etc.; the correct categories of works of art are given by artist, connoisseur, historian of art, philosopher of art, and artcritic. But this difference is not enough to bring about two different results. The appropriate appreciation of the natural world justifies positive aesthetics. But works of art are not assured to be aesthetically good when they are perceived in their correct categories.

Carlson takes note of the difference between works of art and natural objects. Works of art are created by artists, but natural objects are discovered by scientists. When an artist creates his work, the categories are preexistent. Artists create works of art according to some preexistent categories. Artists cannot create their private categories. But when a scientist discovers a natural thing, he not only finds natural thing but also creates the categories in which virgin

33) Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, p.72. As Godlovitch concludes, All positive aesthetics rests on the view that: (A) Everything in nature has overall positive aesthetic value. To distinguish Positive Aesthetics more radically from art evaluation, a refinement is added: (B) The overall positive aesthetic value had by all natural things is non-comparable or non-gradable. (Stan Godlovitch, ‘Valuing Nature and the Autonomy of Natural Aesthetics’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 38, No.2, April 1998, p.190.)

34) Kendall L. Walton, ‘Categories of Art,’ *Philosophical Review* (1970) pp. 334-367.

35) Carlson says: “The analogous account hold that there are different ways to perceive natural objects and landscapes. This is to claim that they, like works of art, can be perceived in different categories – not, of course, in different categories of art, but rather in different ‘categories of nature.’ Analogous to the way *The Starry Night* might be perceived either as a post-impressionist or as an expressionist painting, a whale might be perceived either as a fish or as a mammal, or a gator basking in the sun might be perceived either as an alligator or as a crocodile. Further, for natural objects or landscapes some categories are correct and others not. As it is correct to perceive the Van Gogh as a post-impressionist painting, it is likewise correct to perceive the whale as a mammal and the gator as an alligator. Lastly, analogous to the way certain facts about works and their origins in part determine the correct categories of art for them, certain facts about natural objects or landscapes and their origins in part determine the correct categories of nature for them. As certain facts about the Van Gogh and its history in part determine it to be a post-impressionist painting, so certain facts about the whale and its natural history in part determine it to be a mammal.” (*Aesthetics and the Environment: The appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, p.89.)

36) *Ibid.*, p.90.

nature is suitable to unveil to men. Carlson argues, "Unlike works of art, natural objects and landscapes are not created or produced by humans, but rather 'discovered' by them. Only once they are discovered can description, categorization, and theorizing proceed. Thus, natural objects and landscapes are in a sense given, and then the categories of nature are created in virtue of them."³⁷⁾ "A more correct categorization in science is one that over time makes the natural world seem more intelligible, more comprehensible to those whose science it is. Our science appeals to certain kinds of qualities to accomplish this. These qualities are ones such as order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, resolution, and so forth . . . these qualities that make the world seem comprehensible to us also those that we find aesthetically good. Thus, when we experience them in the natural world or experience the natural world in terms of them, we find it aesthetically good."³⁸⁾ It needs to be emphasized that positive aesthetics only applies to the virgin natural things.

5. A compare between Chuang Tzu and positive aesthetics

It seems to be much similarity between positive aesthetics and Chuang Tzu. Both emphasize that all the natural world has the positive aesthetic value, but their arguments and intentions are very different.

First, the concepts of nature are different. Carlson's nature only means the virgin natural things. Chuang Tzu's nature means everything that exists naturally, spontaneously. It is more abstract than Carlson's. Carlson's problem is, after the discovering, is the virgin natural thing still beautiful? If yes, it is not necessary to emphasize its virgin character. Then the argument as to how scientists find natural beauty is not necessary. If no, only scientists who discover the natural things can enjoy the natural beauty. This is very anti-intuition and anti-common sense.

Second, there are two different kinds of appreciation. Carlson suggests that appropriate aesthetic appreciation is to perceive the aesthetic object in its correct category. Appropriate aesthetic appreciation needs knowledge about what the aesthetic object is. By the contraries, Chuang Tzu suggested that appropriate aesthetic appreciation is to enjoy and understand the aesthetic object directly and spontaneously. It needs to reduce knowledge. Generally speaking, Carlson's appreciation is more suited for the appreciation of works of art; Chuang Tzu's appreciation is more suited for the appreciation of the natural things.

Third, the methods of justification are different. Carlson strives to discover and verify the new beauty of nature that is not manifest to ordinary. But Chuang Tzu endeavored to awaken the original sense and insight of the common people, to sensitize them to the beauty of nature. Carlson's position seems inconsistent. He resorts to the aesthetic principles that are applied to the appreciation of works of art. If the beauty of nature is objective, it can be compared and

37) *Ibid.*, p.92.

38) *Ibid.*, p.93.

graded. We can say that some natural things are more beautiful than other things. Then the view that all of the natural things are equally beautiful is overthrown.

Finally, the intentions of Carlson and Chuang Tzu are different. Carlson's intention is to discover a new and beautiful natural world, to obtain new knowledge about the beauty of nature. Chuang Tzu's intention is to change the mind of men, to improve inner self-cultivation. In other words, Carlson hopes to achieve harmony between nature and humanity through changing the natural world, but Chuang Tzu hoped to do it through changing human beings. For Chuang Tzu natural world is not changeable; the changes must occur in our minds. The thought of Chuang Tzu seems more beneficial for the problems and conditions in today's world.

6. Conclusion

There is an interesting analogy between Chuang Tzu and positive aesthetics. However, if both of my reviews of them are correct, it is clear enough for me to conclude that the view that all natural things is equally beautiful is more plausible and evident from Chuang Tzu than from positive aesthetics. It is implausible that the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature, as Carlson suggests, must borrow knowledge from new natural science. Carlson needs science to free nature from the associations of religion and thereby open it for aesthetic appreciation. But there is not a reigning religious tradition in the history of China. Most of Chinese philosophers think that natural beauty should be free from the associations of science, especially natural science. Even if the knowledge of science is perhaps useful to aesthetic appreciation of nature, the attitude and working of science are absolutely non-aesthetic. Natural beauty is the most self-evident phenomenon in the experiences of human beings. Science and its affiliated technology not only veil natural beauty, but also pollute our attitude to nature, as Chuang Tzu suggested, science and its affiliated technology are a kind of cunning. Chuang Tzu argued that people "who have cunning implements are cunning in their dealings, and that those who are cunning in their dealings have cunning in their hearts, and that those who have cunning in their hearts cannot be pure and incorrupt, and that those who are not pure and incorrupt are restless in spirit, and that those who are restless in spirit are not fit vehicles for Tao."³⁹⁾ The appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature, as Chinese aesthetics suggests, is to respond and understand nature directly and sensitively. It is not a hard work to appreciate natural beauty aesthetically, we need not be restless in spirit.

39) Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer, p. 147.