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## Wangheng Chen's *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*

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# Contemporary AESTHETICS

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## Wangheng Chen's *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*

Arnold Berleant

Summary of *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* by Wangheng Chen

Wangheng Chen, *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*, translated by Feng Su, edited by Gerald Cipriani (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 212 pp. ISBN 9780815364276

Environmental aesthetics as a focus of philosophic inquiry first developed in the West in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the UK, the US, Canada, and Finland. It gained increasing attention partly because of the growing environmental movement and partly because perennial questions in philosophy found new relevance and a fresh focus in aesthetic values in environment. While this new interest appeared in China only in the final decade of the last century, a profound awareness of nature and appreciation of environmental values are rooted in ancient Chinese culture. The fascination with nature has infused its art, its literature, and its religion. In *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*, Wangheng Chen, Professor of Philosophy at Wuhan University, P.R. China, has opened the way for Western scholars to discover from a contemporary vantage point the richness of the traditional Chinese understanding of nature and the human place in the natural world. Chen has brought together a rich array of concepts, thinkers, poets, and artists who have contributed to forming the distinctive Chinese melding of nature and human life. His book provides a valuable counterpart to Western research in environmental aesthetics by developing an historical and cross-cultural account of Chinese thinking and valuing of nature.

The only book of its kind in English, *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* is an impressive achievement in its own right. Not only does Prof. Chen offer a clear, detailed historical account of the origins of environmental thought in China; he introduces Chinese concepts and practices, that express and apply that understanding, such as *Feng Shui*. This account develops into a philosophical discussion of environment and the Chinese words that express that traditional understanding. Central here is its fusion of what we in the West call 'subject' and 'object' as an inseparable unity in perception and understanding. This informs the idea of landscape and environment, more generally. Together with the unity of nature and humans that is integral to Taoism runs a moral strain, a Confucian concern for the social dimensions of environment.

From this cultural grounding, Chen moves into particular kinds of environments: gardens, palaces, agricultural landscapes, and the urban environment, pursuing the idea of beauty in these different contexts. Not just a *tour de force* for its success in gathering and elucidating a long and complex tradition, the book is filled with expressions of that history in poetry, painting, and architecture. Numerous quotations and photographs of temples and landscapes embody as well as document this tradition. Although the quality of the reproductions does not do justice to the images, Chen's erudition is enhanced by Feng Su's careful translation of his text and by Gerald Cipriani's fluent and graceful stylistic editing, so that the book reads as smoothly as if it had been written originally in English, a rarity in the translation of Chinese texts.

Contemporary Chinese research in environmental aesthetics is strongly informed by the Western literature that established this field of inquiry. Chen identifies congenial sources in the present author's idea of aesthetic engagement that develops an understanding of the unity of humans and nature that parallels the Chinese tradition. The more recent Western inquiries into the aesthetic dimensions of everyday life introduced by Yuriko Saito and Katya Mandoki also resemble the Eastern fusion of aesthetic values with the activities of daily life.

From these beginnings Chinese environmental aesthetics has developed its own character and momentum. Prominent here is the concept of ecological aesthetics or 'ecoaesthetics,' as it is often called, developed in the work of Yongcheng Zeng, Fanren Zeng, Dingsheng Yuan, and Xiangzhan Cheng, among others. This uses the scientific concept of ecology to epitomize the contextual character of human existence as part of the natural world. While ecology provides a scientific grounding for the traditional Chinese understanding of living in nature, what it affirms is fundamentally a philosophical view that has struggled

against the pervasiveness of the Platonic-Cartesian dualism that has dominated Western intellectual and scientific life. Much of the work on ecological aesthetics by Chinese aestheticians has been polemical, but from this grounding one may hope that original studies will emerge that show the fruitfulness of this contextualism in developing a fresh understanding and new ideas in responding to the environmental challenges of the present day, challenges as deeply serious in China as in the West. *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* can serve modern environmental researchers well by encouraging Western scholars to reciprocate Chinese scholars' knowledge of Western environmental philosophy.

The global environmental crisis is undoubtedly the most pressing consequence of the industrial transformation of the human world. Wangheng Chen's *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* is important for the background it provides through its historical account and cultural insights. Affirming the importance of aesthetic values for the human environment has at no time been a more pressing need. Chen conveys the scope of environmental thinking in China and the rich cultural meanings of nature and environment. The book offers a many-layered introduction to environment, both natural and human, and signals a fresh and productive turn in environmental aesthetics. Perhaps Chen's book will help stimulate efforts at collaborative inquiry by scholars working across traditions.

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Editor's note: the summary of Wangheng Chen's *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* can be found in our [Recent Publications](#) section.

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