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About Nature: Discourses on the Boundaries of East and West in Curtis Carter’s Concern over Contemporary Chinese Art

Abstract: American aesthete Curtis Carter demonstrates genuine concern for the subject of nature in contemporary Chinese art and its representations. He correctly points out that the Chinese tradition of featuring nature in the arts represents an imaginary paradise grounded in an idealized nature. Carter’s concern regarding China’s entry into a state of globalization is the impact of Westernizing globalization on the place of nature in Chinese art. Before discussing his concern, this article provides a review of the meaning of nature in traditional Chinese art and revisits ink painter Shitao’s notion of nature in his most representative painting notes, *Hua-pu*. Curtis also mentions the Chinese garden, stating that gardens in urban settings are supposed to maintain the presence of nature, and exemplifying them as symbolic presentations of nature. In addressing Carter’s concern, a review of the aesthetic experience of visiting a Chinese garden is provided for background. Carter also suggests examining the practices of contemporary Chinese experimental art versus the practices of traditional art to determine whether nature will retain a significant place in today’s Chinese art practices under the strong influences of globalization. This article examines the contemporary ink landscape scene and suggests that new Chinese art involves the invention of new paradigms in art creation, the resources of which are now available globally, and that representations of nature and reality are transforming.

Keywords: nature; globalization; traditional landscape painting; Chinese gardens; aesthetic experience; contemporary ink art.

In his paper, “Globalization, Modernity and the Place of Nature in Chinese Art”, Curtis Carter demonstrates genuine concern for the subject.¹ In his brief on

¹ Carter presented his paper at the American Philosophical Association meeting in 2014. Parts of this article are sourced from Carter’s “Globalization and Chinese Contemporary Art: West to East, East to West,” in *Unsettled Boundaries: Philosophy, Art, Ethics. East/West*, ed. Curtis Carter (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2017), 113–28. However, the notes in this article come from the unpublished version of Carter’s paper, which he provided to me in a typed format.

the prominent subject of nature in Chinese art history, he correctly points out that the Chinese tradition featuring nature in the arts has been apparent since the Tang Dynasty. Natural landscapes dominate both Buddhist and Daoist paintings, the artists of which contributed to the development of “artistic landscapes”, ranging from traditional “regulated” styles to more free forms.² The subject of nature in both traditional Chinese paintings and poetry, as Carter states, “represented an imaginary paradise grounded in an idealized Nature.”³

In examining the literature of nature aesthetics, Carter finds various understandings of the subject.⁴ Traditionally, nature is valued for its visual features, its aesthetic values, and the ways in which it is represented in painting and poetry. Furthermore, in both Confucianism and Daoism, the natural world is appropriated to describe people’s personalities and moral strengths. Confucians like Mencius ask for the regulation and cultivation of one’s physical nature and relate the exercise to moral nurturing. Daoists aim to live according to nature, or natural instincts, to live normally or as a sage.

Expressing his concern, Carter states, “Modernity in the art of the West had among its aims a shift away from Nature as a favorite source of imagery for purposes of representation or depiction.”⁵ Therefore, considering that Chinese art received modern Western art in a series of events at the turn of the 20th century and currently in the 21st century, Carter is concerned with the displacement of nature, which was once a dominating subject in Chinese art. Carter states that in Western modernity, “replacing Nature as a principal source of art is the ‘fugitive, fleeting beauty of present-day life, the distinguishing character of that quality [...] we have called modernity.”⁶ Holding the same concern about China’s entry into the state of globalization, he asks, “What will be the impact of westernizing globalization on the place of Nature in Chinese art?”⁷ As much of the art that globalization brings to China from the West no longer features nature, the future of nature’s place in Chinese art may be negatively affected.⁸

The place of nature in traditional Chinese landscape paintings

Carter’s concern is valid. Before discussing it, a review of the meaning of nature in traditional Chinese art is useful. Revisiting Shitao’s notion of nature in his most representative painting notes, *Huapusi*, is also beneficial. Shitao (1642–1707),

² Curtis Carter, “Globalization, Modernity and the Place of Nature in Chinese Art,” (unpublished paper), typescript, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Carter, “Globalization, Modernity and the Place of Nature in Chinese Art,” 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

an influential painter during the late Ming and early Qing periods in China, is not only a well-known ink artist, but also a prominent art theorist who suggests that the origin of art lies in the metaphysical Dao or nature. His surviving notes on ink painting, *Hua-pu* (*Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting*),⁹ are regarded as some of the most important Chinese philosophical reflections on the art form. Shitao's key theory of the "one-stroke" in *Hua-pu* provides a systematic discourse on the artistic practice of Chinese ink painting. He argues that the one stroke in ink painting is both a visible event and a metaphysical understanding, which includes primordial intuition, spiritual transformation, and the achievement of the proper ways of living.

Shitao's attraction to Daoism was regularly demonstrated during his former 30-year painting career.¹⁰ It is also reflected in his increasing use of "raw" color for subjects of leisurely living and outings and in arresting extraordinary natural objects, such as Huangzan (the Yellow Mountain) in China. It is argued that Shitao's subordination to Daoist sympathies "marks the culmination of a long pursuit of Oneness through painting over a period of fifty years."¹¹ He states in *Hua-pu*,

I, having mastered one-stroke painting, can penetrate into the form and spirit of mountains and rivers. This is why I have always kept to mountains and rivers during the past fifty years. I neither neglected them as useless nor let them conceal their secrets. Mountains and rivers let me communicate for them. They are free from me and I am free from them. I thoroughly investigate strange peaks, making rough sketches. Mountains, rivers and I meet on a spiritual level and mingle together without trace.¹²

He further explicates the manifestation of Dao or nature in his "oneness of strokes",

From Oneness, produce the ten thousand things, govern the One. Transform Oneness into this harmonious atmosphere, is indeed the highest achievement of art in the world.¹³

⁹ On the authenticity of the *Hua-pu* and the question of the treatise's various recensions and titles, Jonathan S. Hay provides an overview and a list of bibliographies. See Jonathan S. Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 208–9, 364. The excerpts from the *Hua-pu* texts used in this article come from Earle Jerome Coleman's English translation.

¹⁰ Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*, 242, 258–9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹² Earle Jerome Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting by Shih-t'ao: A Translation and Exposition of His Hua-p'u* (*Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting*) (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 1971), 158.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 155.

With nature as the world/object,

If one uses the one-stroke to fathom it, he can participate in the transforming and sustaining of the universe (heaven and earth). The artist can then describe the conditions of mountains and rivers, estimate the breadth and length of the terrain, judge the dispersion and density of mountain peaks, and penetrate into the obscurity of clouds and mist.¹⁴

Shitao also discusses the relationship between artist/subject and Dao/nature,

It is not the function of particular aspects of mountain or water or the function of mere brush strokes or ink wash, or the function of antiquity or the present, or the function of the wise man. Within this function, there is reality. In short, it is the oneness of strokes. It is limitless, it is the Dao of heaven and earth.¹⁵

He further suggests,

The splashing of the ink onto the brush is to be done with spirit. Ink wash cannot be spiritual unless one has achieved the state of concealment in nondifferentiation (which means communication with Nature or Dao in whole). If the brush stroke is not endowed with vitality, then the brush is without spirit. If the brush contains the spirit of concealment in non-differentiation yet cannot release the spirit of life, then this is ink wash without brush strokes.

When the awakening of cultivation of non-differentiation and lively spirit is grasped, then flowing everywhere, and embracing and encircling each other, will take place. When flowing everywhere, and embracing and encircling each other take place, then the function of mountains and rivers is fulfilled.¹⁶

Thus, the intimacy between art and Dao in Shitao's metaphysical ideas and Daoism is evident. Shitao's view of the world is a self-regulating system, within which artists have their own ethical imperatives to fulfill and function receptively to nature's gift. The introduction of the one-stroke painting method as the departure or beginning of the first stroke affirms its unique transcendental position, which encompasses and unites all things in nature.

¹⁴ Ibid., 157.

¹⁵ Ibid., 180.

¹⁶ Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting by Shih-t'ao*, 179.

Shitao, while dissolving himself in the state of oneness, also participates in the Daoist ideal of a perfect man:

Therefore, the perfect man cannot not be wise, cannot not be enlightened. Because he is wise, he transforms; because he is enlightened, he is free. When confronted by things, he is undisturbed. When he deals with forms, he leaves no traces. When he moves the ink, it is as if the work were already finished. When he grasps the brush, it is as if he were doing nothing. On a one-foot wide canvas (small area), he manages heaven, earth, mountains, rivers, and the ten thousand things; yet, his mind is as pure as nothing. Because ignorance is diminished, wisdom is produced. Because ordinariness has vanished, purity of mind is attained.¹⁷

Shitao discusses the essentials of Chinese art, referring to it according to his profound Daoist beliefs. He states that the engagement of an artist with nature in the deepest, meditational sense determines the quality of art in its external manifestation. He lays out the principle of Chinese art and grants nature the supreme state of artistic engagement. Thus, it is not the imitation or grasp of nature that counts, but the artist's cultivation and devotion to the understanding of things along with the grasp of nature that determines the quality of the art. Therefore, the subject of nature in Chinese traditional art goes beyond making nature the object of art. Nature and the artist are both subjects that merge into one, making the subject a disinterested, spiritually free being. In the Confucian sense, the implication is that even the artist's moral strength as the Confucian heaven or nature is the supreme moral principle in itself.

Carter echoes the reading by mentioning traditional Chinese painter Gao Jifu (1879–1951) and his work, focusing on Gao's suggestion to look beyond painting toward the improvement of human nature and the betterment of society.¹⁸ Yet Carter's concern also hinges on the depiction of nature in Chinese art. He argues that the focus on landscape is changing, expanding to the urban landscape under the development process of globalization. His elaboration of the situation is critical for artists and other citizens who value nature, as economic development consumes more and more of the land once reserved for appreciating nature.¹⁹ He mentions gardens in particular, stating that those in urban settings are supposed to maintain the presence of nature, and exemplifying them as symbolic presentations of nature.²⁰ He ponders whether Chinese gardens will be diminished or even replaced by all kinds of urban development projects. In addressing Carter's concern, I offer a review of the discourses on the aesthetic experiences of visiting Chinese gardens.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁸ Carter, "Globalization, Modernity and the Place of Nature in Chinese Art," 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

Strolling in traditional Chinese gardens and the displacement of the aesthetic experience

Ming Dynasty Chinese gardens were typically composed of bamboo and rocks. Rocks of different hues and shapes were used to represent scenes from the four seasons; hence, the rocky gardens were named the “Artificial Mountain of Four Seasons.” According to Arnold Berleant’s description of a classical Chinese scholar’s garden, it is carefully integrated into the landscape, embraced by trees and shrubs, and usually connected by covered walkways. They are interspersed by equally important semi-enclosed natural areas that contain a profusion of rocks and vegetation. Water is almost always present, often as a large central pond, but also in smaller pools connected by narrow waterways traversed by small footbridges.²¹

Chinese gardens have natural sculptures of arresting presence and absorbing details, and the Chinese consider them “a concentration of the creative forces of the Dao.”²² These features convey a sense of continuity. As one wanders contemplatively through such gardens, one becomes part of the landscape and nature. Nature is habitation, and habitation is nature. Wandering through a Chinese garden can evoke an association with a scroll painting and perhaps even its embodiment. Furthermore, the classical Chinese garden is usually shaped by and designed for human participation. It requires a human presence to be completed and to fulfill its objective of providing an aesthetic experience.

Chinese gardens encourage a reflective, contemplative mood, but not a state of passivity or inactivity. It is a roving contemplation, an immediacy of thoughtful presence in the activities of walking, noticing, listening, contemplating, and sensing bodily the constantly varying environmental experience. Finally, a Chinese garden is due less to the layout and the formal arrangement than to what vibrates through and around the various elements of composition, enhancing their power to bring out the rhythm of nature.

I want to refer to contemporary neo-Confucian Tang Chun I’s concept of landscape appreciation in Chinese gardens, namely “hiddenness”, “cultivation”, “resting”, and “traveling”.²³ Tang’s insightful analysis contributes to the understanding and appreciation of nature in Chinese gardens with which Carter is concerned. Tang suggests that the notion of traveling in Chinese landscapes embodies both the physical and the spiritual elements of a visitor, as the subject is surrounded by different Chinese architectural forms, such as towers, palaces, gardens, and home interiors. Unlike the churches and castles of the West, Chinese architecture allows and enables the visitor to travel in space, even if it has a deep courtyard and layers of curtains and draperies.²⁴

²¹ Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays* (GBR: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012), 131–47.

²² *Ibid.*, 132.

²³ Tang Chun I, *Spiritual Values of Chinese Culture* (Taiwan: Ching Chung Book Stores, 1978).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

According to Tang, the concept of traveling has another layer of metaphysical meaning, as it echoes the Daoist concept of the intertwining relationship between the concreteness of the empirical world and the vacuousness (*hsu*) of the metaphysical world of the Dao. Tang further suggests that in addition to traveling, the notions of hiddenness, cultivation, and resting emphasize the unity of the visitor's inner feelings with the outer space in moving around the garden landscape.²⁵ Tang states,

The meeting point of the concreteness and the vacuous is where one's mind and soul travel freely. The beauty resulted from this is the realization of a free-mind and openness [...] that is why I compare the aesthetics of Chinese architecture to that of traveling.²⁶

When visiting a Chinese garden, one can appreciate the landscape by hiding alone (i.e., hiddenness), reflecting on one's moral life (i.e., cultivation), sitting around and resting the body (i.e., resting), and walking through the aesthetically natural or artificial space of the garden (i.e., traveling). The experience transcends the rigid binary opposition between the subject and the object in Western aesthetics. Furthermore, the visitor gains overall understanding, self-nourishment, and self-enrichment when the mind departs from the garden and travels into the realm of nature or Dao and back again. This transcendence enriches the viewer and results in an aesthetic appreciation of the fluid nature of artistic qualities. Such a perception and aesthetic experience of a Chinese garden is best illustrated by Chinese landscape painting in ink.

Tang regards the Daoist idea of traveling as the key to the aesthetics of the Chinese garden, as it integrates the physical freedom of the body and the metaphysical transcendence of the mind. Furthermore, all of the elements and parts of a typical fine Chinese garden are designed to blend gently together to show the harmonious forces of nature. In his words, to experience landscape aesthetics is “to follow the Dao of Nature, getting oneself in tune with the underlying rhythms of the seasons, the plants, the very universe, so that there was no discrepancy between inner being and outer reality.”²⁷ With this in mind, I can only share Carter's concern about the impacts of globalization in terms of its values, rapid development, and disregard for the place of nature in humanity. The concern goes beyond the physical existence of Chinese garden sites to the loss of the extraordinary environmental, aesthetic experiences that traditional Chinese gardens have to offer, and beyond, to metaphysical and meditative enlightenment.

²⁵ Ibid., 305.

²⁶ Ibid., 316.

²⁷ Ibid., 316.

Global interventions and the response of contemporary Chinese art

Carter suggests that there have been three major global interventions since the beginning of the 20th century, placing particular importance on the current place of nature in Chinese art.²⁸ The first major global intervention he mentions refers to what occurred at the beginning of the 20th century when Chinese artists began studying Western art in Japan and later in Paris. He suggests that for a variety of reasons, efforts to introduce Western art during the 1920s only had limited success in China and, for the most part, posed little immediate threat to the place of nature in traditional Chinese art.²⁹

According to Carter, the second main global challenge to nature's place in Chinese art comes during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, when art focused on the socialist agenda and traditional art celebrating nature did not have the same value or support. The third stage of global intervention started in the 1980s, when Chinese artists began migrating to the West in search of greater freedom of artistic expression.³⁰ Carter mentions the American artist Robert Rauschenberg's launch of an overseas culture exchange project in 1985, bringing paintings, installations, and mixed media arts to the China National Art Gallery. Yet despite the opening of China to Western economic and artistic cultures through the process of globalization, Chinese art did not mindlessly succumb to the hegemonic dominance of the West.³¹

In seeking the reason for this, Carter turns to Chinese art critic and artist Gao Minglu. According to Gao, Chinese history and its art do not fit the linear periodization of the Western system – that is, from being traditional, classical, and modern to postmodern and contemporary. Gao argues for “total modernity”, which consists of the state of art in a particular time and space and cultural contexts. In Carter's reading of Gao, Chinese artists carry with them the long and highly developed traditions of Chinese art practices and bear in mind the shared inventions of an endless stream of new paradigms for creating art, the resources of which are now globally available.³² Carter, in response to his main concern, suggests examining the practices of contemporary Chinese experimental art versus the practices of traditional art to determine whether nature is to retain a significant place in today's Chinese art practices when under the strong influences of globalization.³³

²⁸ Carter, “Globalization, Modernity and the Place of Nature in Chinese Art,” 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

The expansion of new ink art

My study on the evolution of traditional Chinese ink art supports Gao's observation, and I would like to supplement here the phenomenon of contemporary ink art in China. I quote Tang Dynasty literatus Wang Wei's words on ink painting below:

*In the art of painting,
Works in ink surpass all.
They stem from Nature,
And fulfill the functions of the universe.*

Traditional Chinese ink painting, from its ancient beginnings in decorating Neolithic pots, has evolved and flourished in the hands of great masters from different dynasties and shaped by the social, economic, and cultural values of the times. It has come full circle as contemporary ink painters have sought to expand beyond the two-dimensional confines of ink on paper or silk, and its continuous re-interpretation links ink art to our present-day society and keeps it alive.³⁴ Numerous daring attempts in ink have shifted ink art from its traditional format and the usual subject of depiction, including landscapes and nature, rendering it geometrically framed rather than fluid.

When Gao Minglu argues for a different kind of modernity in China, it is still shared with other forms of globalization. Indeed, the excessiveness of modernity has captivated modern Chinese subjects to the extent that they are actively involved in it. It is said that modern Chinese subjects do not only face the passing of the past and the anticipation of a pluralistic future. They must also come to terms with their own modern selves and new identities. Chinese modernity is, in fact, constantly renewed through the interactions between the subjects and their rapidly changing cultural environments. With contemporary art strongly expanding its range of expression and various techniques and media intermingling, subjects are addressing the recent cultural pertinence, strategy, and speculation. Chinese ink painting is no exception. The following excerpt represents the statements made by contemporary ink art curators:

The unique spirit and the specific cultural connotations of Chinese ink painting that were formerly concealed by the contemporary may now be implemented as a kind of accessory or special flavor of the contemporary and thus compromise with current aesthetics. To define its position within a pluralist and multicultural context, we have to introduce Western artistic grammar into the context of ink painting, with a strategy that aims at producing diversified models of a contemporary quality. Only through such a process of continuous exchange can the factors participating in it successfully participate in cultural negotiations. [...] one of

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

the tasks of the contemporary ink experiment is to rediscover the cultural functions and spiritual implications of ink and to revive ink as an artistic language, as well as for the actual grammar and rhetoric of this particular language.³⁵

It is clear that new ink painting, along with its favorite subject (i.e., nature), must now fulfill multiple functions in its spiritual revival and be as functional as culturally identifiable. This explains the following question raised by a curator: “Is it correct to say ink makes a sacrifice to obtain a contemporary identity?”³⁶ This reminds us to avoid the illusion of the existence of a privileged domain of ink and that there is neither a definite conclusion nor the declaration of the establishment of other norms for ink painting – only through the expectation of possibilities can the yet unknown possibility that would inspire the experiment be met.³⁷ It is said that the contribution of the ink experiment lies in its preservation of a text of the practice of the evolution of the concepts in the field of contemporary art and culture; and, more importantly, in its provision of valuable experience in what concerns the appropriate strategy of a situational culture affected by the drive of globalization. However, what about nature, if even “spiritual resonance” (the first principle of traditional Chinese painting that evolved from the correspondence between the artistic subject and the movement of nature) is now only regarded as a functional option in an international city among its contemporary discourses?

To Shitao, the one-stroke painting is the point of departure to the metaphysical intersection of self and nature. One can find numerous evidence in *Hua-pu* of this emphasis on the transcendental origin of the aesthetic experience:

The art of painting is a manifestation of truth. With regard to the delicate arrangement of mountains, streams, and human figures, or the natural characteristics of birds, animals, grass, and trees, or the proportions of ponds, pavilions, towers, and terraces, if one’s mind cannot deeply penetrate into their reality and subtly express their appearance, one has not yet understood the fundamental meaning of the oneness of strokes.³⁸

The following statements by Shitao still echo among some of today’s ink painters:

Those who know the subtle manifestation, but forget the origin of the fundamental principle of oneness of brush strokes, are like children who

³⁵ Sun Xiaofeng, “Note on the Contemporary Chinese Ink Experiment,” in *Infiltration-Idylls and Visions*, ed. Guangdong Museum of Art (Shijiazhuang China: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁸ Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting* by Shih-t’ao, 37.

forget their ancestors. Of one knows that ancient and modern works never perish, yet forgets that their achievement of merit is not limited to men, this is the same as the ten thousand things losing what is given by Nature. Heaven can give man a method, but cannot give him skill.³⁹

This is what heaven gives to man: Because he can receive, heaven gives to him. If one has a great capacity, then he receives a great gift. If his capacity is small, he receives a small gift. Therefore, ancient and modern works of calligraphy and painting originated from heaven and were completed by man.⁴⁰

This revisit of Shitao's texts brings us back to Carter's concern regarding nature and Chinese art and to Gao Minglu's suggestion that "not all Chinese artists or theorists will agree on the best routes to follow. Some may choose to continue to imagine Nature as it was and attempt to revitalize the traditional roles of Nature in art."⁴¹

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³⁹ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 105.

⁴¹ Carter, "Globalization, Modernity and the Place of Nature in Chinese Art," 19.