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Notes on a Chinese Garden: Comparative Responses to Berleant's Environmental Aesthetics

Eva Kit Wah Man

In this article, I present a comparative study of Arnold Berleant's recent essay, "Nature and Habitation in a Chinese Garden"ⁱ from his book *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays*. In addition to reviewing Berleant's thoughts on the subject and object relation, bodily reaction, and aesthetic experience in relation to the Chinese garden environment, I compare his reading of the nature of Chinese gardens with the real case of Geyuan Garden and the architectural aesthetics of the contemporary Confucian scholar Tang Junyi. In his influential work, *The Spiritual Values of Chinese Culture*, Tang proposes a metaphysical manifestation of traditional Chinese architecture and garden design and the interactive relation between man and Nature or *Dao*.ⁱⁱ The comparison of the two works demonstrates the strength of Berleant's reading of the subject, and its proximity to Tang's bodily notions of "hiding," "maintaining," "resting," and "travelling" in a Chinese garden. The correspondence between the two works also allows me to examine the relevant comparative aesthetics and critical responses.

In his earlier work, *Rethinking Aesthetics*,ⁱⁱⁱ Berleant elaborates on the notion of "aesthetic engagement." Recognizing that art does not simply consist of objects but of situations in which experiences occur,^{iv} Berleant points out that the numerous oppositions that are used to describe aesthetic relations, such as surface and material, form and content, illusion and reality, spectator and work of art (that is, subject and object), beauty and use, and interestedness and disinterestedness, have a philosophical rather than an aesthetic basis. Berleant proposes that these oppositions have led aesthetic inquiry in fragmentary and oppositional directions.^v Although the language of art has since changed, one would have to agree that we are in need of a broader theoretical language that can embrace both the contemporary and traditional arts.^{vi}

I would like to start with painting to convey a basic understanding of Chinese aesthetics before discussing landscape aesthetics. Both aesthetics emphasize integrated and unified experiences, and that art is identifiable but not distinct from other activities. Berleant's notion of "continuity and engagement" sees art as integrated into the full range of individual and cultural experiences

and aesthetic perception as incorporating the numerous social, historical, and cultural factors, and different meanings, associations, and memories that penetrate perceptual awareness. These aesthetic concepts correspond fully with the early discussions on Chinese aesthetics. For example, Ku K'ai-chih (顧愷之 c.344-406), whose teachings on painting have been followed for centuries, suggests that art should involve "continuity and engagement."^{vii} Ku emphasizes the importance of depicting the relation between the subject and the environment in portrait painting. He also states that artists need to care about the personality and social class of their subjects (especially historical or legendary figures), and the relations between the subject and other characters in a painting. Of equal importance are the reaction of the subject, the social constraints or rituals that affect the subject's bodily behavior, the places where the subject and other characters are situated, and the related setting or environment. To realize the above principles, Ku suggests that artists should make efforts to observe, study, analyze, and understand their subjects, because the essence of the subject and the related artistic transformation can only be grasped through hard study.

An example of this approach is provided in one of Ku's very few surviving scrolls, *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* 《女史箴圖》^{viii} This famous painting shows the emperor gazing doubtfully at a concubine seated on a bed-couch. The text alternates with illustrations that echo the woman's language, "If the words that you utter are good, all men for a thousand leagues around will make response to you. But if you depart from this principle, even your bedfellow will distrust you." This painting, which also served as a Confucian educational text for women, reminds us of the dwelling that Berleant mentions; the dwelling in the aesthetic situation and the broader social and personal uses of art. Accordingly, the painting also portrays the basic connection between what art does and the larger world of meaning, perception, consciousness, and knowledge, in short, the totality of human being.

When talking about art as an original unity, a unity as the condition of primal being that precedes all divisions and separations, Berleant uses the term embodiment, which denotes a condition of being before the divisive acts of thought that alienate consciousness from the body, thought from feeling, and people from their world.^{ix} In this sense, he evokes the aesthetic principles of Daoism. In my understanding, the first subjective principal of Daoism is *wu-wei* (no-action),

which signifies the effort of the aesthetic subject who transcends human epistemological functions and moves toward the realm of a metaphysical *Dao*. In *Dao*, the human mind stops all the acts of “knowing” and travels with *Chi*, the metaphysical element and basis of life. At this point, the subject would, together with other things, present itself in its original nature. The unity of the subject and the environment is in the “calmness of mind” described by the original Daoist, Zhuangzi, who said,^x

“Do not be the master of knowledge (to manipulate things). Personally realize the infinite to the highest degree and travel in the realm of which there is no sign. Exercise fully what you have received from Nature without any subjective viewpoint. In one word, be absolutely vacuous (hsu).”

It is said that the mind of the perfect man is like a mirror, in that it responds to things but conceals nothing of its own. Accordingly, the perfect mind is able to deal with things without interference (to its reality). In this transcendental realm of the *Dao*, a thing is not an object but an “ideal state.” It is a form in itself, in which the sense of beauty and aesthetic pleasure in the real form of freedom springs up in tranquility. In contrast with the Western epistemological sense of cognition, in which things are perceived as objects, the subject and object relation is a “host and guest” relation according to the traditional Chinese aesthetics of the neo-Confucian scholar Junyi.^{xi} There are several features to this unity or encounter:

- 1) It emphasizes the communication with nature in gaining a form of human totality;
- 2) It refers to a unifying way of thinking, in contrast with Western mainstream aesthetics which implies dogmatic and subjective elements;
- 3) The aesthetic experience that takes place is a fundamental process which presents a “pre-existing inner structure” that exists before the objectification process in which the relationship between the object of art (the text), the author, and the audience is formed;
- 4) It claims to be the continuation of life as a cycle of rebirth in the sense of the circulation of life (*Chi*) in Daoism;
- 5) The unity demands that we should adapt ourselves to nature, which includes our bodies

and our immediate environment, leading to the harmonious correlation between a change in nature and a spiritual change in the self.

This ancient wisdom echoes Berleant's view in *Rethinking Aesthetics* that art functions as a present and active factor in the participatory engagement that is the sign of the aesthetic.^{xii} It is also in this sense that Berleant reminds us of Daoism. He is correct in stating that the notion of intuition is a characteristic feature of much of the art of the Orient, that by examining the varying facets of intuition we may come to realize more fully how the artistic process engages the reality of experience, and that intuition shows that it is impossible for art to be subdued by reduction and division.^{xiii} Accordingly, the idea of intuition is an important commonality between Berleant's reading Chinese aesthetics and the unity of aesthetic experience described in neo-Confucian thought. In fact, as I shall discuss, Berleant's notion of intuition closely corresponds to the aesthetic experience of a Chinese garden. In Berleant's words,^{xiv}

- 1) Intuition involves absorption in the dynamic nature of form as it moves across space and time, in vertical and horizontal dimensions of experience;
- 2) Intuition is a total vision instead of a fleeting impression;
- 3) Art (in this case a garden) is not a finished object or a completed process in intuition, but rather a coming into being, as the artist shapes a path, which the viewer follows in the wonder of personal discovery;
- 4) Aesthetic intuition reflects a merging of one's consciousness with the art object or the intimate bond by which we engage with the object in experience;

In this earlier text, Berleant regards the aesthetics of intuition as a general illumination in art and states that Eastern philosophy seems to have expressed this trait most openly. He suggests that there is a special kind of intercourse between art and the world that is best captured by the intuitive impulse.^{xv} He also proposes to examine the varying facets of intuition to realize how the artistic process engages the reality of experience by grasping the sharpness, clarity, and directness or immediacy of that experience. I wish to describe this reading of intuition as a

genuine form of experience of walking through a Chinese garden, which is echoed in Berleant's later essay. Berleant describes this intuition as follows,^{xvi}

- 1) The intuition leads the eye, the ear, the hand across the surface of perceptual experience with delight in the caress more than the direction or the content. All the sensory intuition is the cutting edge of consciousness.
- 2) It is the focal point of all the phases of intuition we have reviewed here – sensory, formal, creative, appreciative, and ontological, or in Berleant's summary, the totality of human being in a primal state or an embodiment in the sense of being a unified organism, an experiential unity.^{xvii}
- 3) The aesthetic experience is a non-transcendent perceptual unity that joins object and perceiver together.

These descriptions parallel Tang Junyi's discussion of the unity of aesthetic experience.

In a recent essay, "The Art in Knowing a Landscape" in *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays*, Berleant states that contemporary scholars have opened aesthetics to the environment of everyday life and to comparative aesthetics, thereby deepening and expanding the field of environmental aesthetics.^{xviii} Here, Berleant specifically refers to landscapes and the text forms a quartet of readings that integrate art, the environment, landscapes, and knowing in the sense of appreciation.^{xix} He argues that landscape appreciation offers an important challenge to the prevailing view of the subjectivity of experience in Western philosophy, because it does not come in parts but emerges in a situational context in which the activity of appreciation is embedded and to which it contributes. The revealing point is that human presence creates the landscape, otherwise the "landscape" is simply a geographical area. The appreciation involves the dynamic presence of the body with its full range of sensory awareness.^{xx}

For comparative purposes, I summarize Berleant's reading of the body in landscape as follows,^{xxi}

- 1) Berleant first defines distance receptors and suggests that the distance receptors discern light, color, shape, pattern, movement, and distance, within the corresponding abstraction of space.

We also have the awareness of climbing and descending, turning and twisting, and encountering obstruction and free passage.

- 2) The notion of *synaesthesia* plays an important role in Berleant's sense of bodily experience, as it fuses the analysis of sense modalities with the directness of immediate experience in landscape appreciation, which engages the entire, interactive human sensorium. (This reminds us of the notion of intuition, and Berleant describes landscape appreciation as a process through which we become part of our environment through the interpenetration of body and place.)
- 3) The differentiation of the senses only occurs after the integrated, unitary wholeness of aesthetic experience is encountered during reflection and analysis.

These definitions of bodily experience resemble Tang's notion of unity which transcends the difference between the physical and metaphysical paradigms. In Berleant's words, "(landscape) appreciation is this entering into the experience as direct knowing, knowing that is engaged and replete. Its aesthetic is what makes a place come alive as a presence to those who live, work or visit it."^{xxii}

Nature and Habitation in a Chinese Garden

Berleant has a special interest in Chinese gardens, which he correctly describes as varying in scale from the extensive grounds of emperors, wealthy merchants, and officials to small urban gardens and the private countryside retreats of scholars and retired officials of more modest means. A significant number of these centuries-old gardens have been restored as public treasures, some of which are designated as World Heritage Sites.^{xxiii} Here, I use the Geyuan Garden (个园) in Yangzhou, in central Jiangsu province of the People's Republic of China, as an example to illustrate Berleant's meticulous reading. I visited the garden in March this year, which is the best month to visit Yangzhou as suggested by the traditional literati, with Berleant's recent work in mind.

The official information states that Geyuan Garden was known as "the garden of the long-lived Ganoderma" during the Ming Dynasty.^{xxiv} In 1818 (the 22nd year of the reign of the Jiaqing

Emperor), the salt distribution commissioner Huang Zhiyun bought the property and rebuilt the garden as a private retreat. The name Ge means individual personality, which echoes Berleant's view of the moral implications in the design of Chinese gardens.^{xxv} In China, the form of bamboo is considered to be straight and persistent, illustrating an honest, fair, modest, upright, and loyal personality. Huang's name, Zhi Yun, (至筠), also means bamboo, which explains why he named the garden Ge, and the word Yuan means garden.

Geyuan covers an area of 2.5 hectares (6.2 acres), and is primarily composed of bamboo and rocks. Rocks of different hues and shapes are used to represent scenes from the four seasons; hence, the rock garden is named the "Artificial Mountain of Four Seasons."^{xxvi} This fits Berleant's description of a classical Chinese scholar's garden perfectly. The aptness of Berleant's description can best be shown by comparing Geyuan with Berleant's own depictions of a Chinese garden,^{xxvii}

- 1) "The overall plan of a scholar's garden is usually irregular, as are the shapes of its discrete sections. It is unusual to discover geometrical forms, from their boundaries to their details, apart from the rectilinear outlines of some pavilions and halls, and sometimes a straight perimeter wall."
- 2) "Structures for study, contemplation, and conversation occupy a major part, perhaps as much as half, of the garden area. They are 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."
- 3) "Water is almost always present, often as a central large pond but also in smaller pools connected by narrow waterways traversed by small foot bridges. The ponds and waterways are usually framed by shrubs and trees, often displaying a profusion of lotuses on their surface, while beneath is the constant movement of colorful large and small goldfish."
- 4) "They are natural sculptures of arresting presence and absorbing detail: the Chinese consider them 'a concentration of the creative forces of the Dao'."

- 5) “Scenic ‘rooms’ are separated by walls and connected by doorway openings and passageways through halls and across pavilions, invite the visitor to wander along a circuitous route through a succession of scenic spots from one partly enclosed area to another.”
- 6) “These gardens are generally relatively small in extent, so when possible they are expanded by ‘borrowing’ the landscape outside its perimeter, adding the view of trees, distant mountains, a temple, or a pagoda to the garden’s ambiance.”
- 7) “These features of the garden structures convey a sense of continuity. As one wanders contemplatively through the garden, the visitor becomes part of the landscape and nature. Nature is habitation and habitation is nature.”
- 8) “Wandering through a Chinese garden can evoke an association with a scroll painting and perhaps even its embodiment.”
- 9) “One moves slowly and meditatively through scenes that are continuously changing with an awareness enhanced by the meanings associated with the trees and plants.”
- 10) “Classical Chinese garden, most especially, is shaped by and for human participation. It requires a peripatetic human presence to be completed and fulfilled.”
- 11) “Although Chinese gardens encourage a reflective, contemplative mood, this is 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 garden’s constantly varying environmental experience.”
- 12) “It 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.”

Tang’s “Travelling in Art:” Chinese Aesthetics and its Manifestations in Art

I want to highlight Berleant’s reading by referring to Tang Junyi’s beautiful phrase “Travelling in Art,” which is one of the four concepts of his conception of landscape appreciation, namely,

“hiddenness,” “cultivation,” “resting,” and “traveling.” Tang’s insightful analysis contributes to the understanding and appreciation of Chinese landscape aesthetics that Berleant has promoted. Moreover, Tang’s *The Spirit of Chinese Culture* can be regarded as a companion to Berleant’s landscape aesthetics.

Tang suggests that the notion of “Travelling” (*You*, 遊) in Chinese landscapes embodies both the physical and the mental and spiritual, as manifest in the appreciation of different Chinese architectural forms, such as towers, palaces, gardens, and home interiors. Tang writes:

“A tower is called a tower when it is high enough for people to climb to and have a bird’s view over the surrounding. Its height is why it is being praised for and it allows one to travel up vertically. Chinese palaces are elegant not for its height, but more on its width and extensiveness...because one can wander – travel – in it.”^{xxviii}

Tang states that unlike the churches and castles in the West, Chinese architecture allows and enables the visitor to travel in the space, even if it has a deep courtyard, and layers of curtains and draperies.^{xxix} He subsequently discusses the corridors in Chinese architecture, stating that wandering around the house and strolling along the corridors allows one to rest while “travelling.” The concept of travel has another layer of metaphysical meaning, as it echoes the Daoist concept of the intertwining relationship of the concreteness in the empirical world and the vacuous (*hsu*) in the metaphysical world (虛實相涵). Tang further suggests that in addition to “travelling” (遊), the notions of “hiddenness” (藏), “cultivation” (修), and “resting” (息) emphasize the unity of the visitor’s inner feeling with the outer space in landscape traveling.^{xxx} He states,^{xxxi}

“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 travelling.”

When travelling in a Chinese garden, one can appreciate the landscape by hiding alone (“hiddenness”), reflecting on one’s moral life (“cultivation”), sitting around and resting the body (“resting”), and walking through the aesthetically natural or artificial space of the garden

(“travelling”). Tang also shares with Berleant that the experience transcends the rigid binary opposition between subject and object in Western aesthetics, and that the visitor gains an overall understanding, self- nourishment, and enrichment when the mind departs from the garden and travels into the realm of the Dao and back again.^{xxxii} To conclude, Tang conceives aesthetic experience as the capability of going beyond our usual perception. In the realm of the Dao, this going beyond enriches the viewer and results in his or her aesthetic appreciation of the fluid nature of the work’s artistic qualities. This is best illustrated by Chinese landscape painting in ink.

In his article on Chinese gardens, Berleant claims that Daoism is key to understanding the Chinese scholar’s garden, and that its philosophy functions as a pervasive perceptual presence and cognitive undertone.^{xxxiii} Berleant considers the Chinese garden as a landscape that represents the Daoist idea of *wu-wei*, or no action. Tang regards the Daoist idea of travelling as the key to the aesthetics of the gardens, as it integrates the physical freedom of the body and metaphysical transcendence of the mind. Moreover, Geyuan Garden demonstrates Berleant’s observation that all of the elements and parts of the 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.”^{xxxiv} With this in mind, I could only see the correspondence between Berleant’s landscape aesthetics and Chinese aesthetics, which supplement and enrich each other in different languages.

ⁱ Berleant, Arnold *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays*, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012, 131-147.

ⁱⁱ Tang, Zunyi. *Zongkuo Wenhua de Jinshen Jiaji* (The Spirit of Chinese Culture). Taipei: Zhenzong Publishing co., 1979.

ⁱⁱⁱ Berleant, Arnold. *Rethinking Aesthetics*, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2004.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 35.

^v *Ibid.*, 18.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 33.

^{vii} Sullivan, Michael. *The Arts of China*. Los Angeles: University of California Press Ltd., 1984, 131.

^{viii} See <http://www.ceiba.cc.ntu.edu.tw/fineart/database/chap18/18-03-06x.jpg> & <http://www.guoxue.com/nl/syxy/007.jpg> for details.

^{ix} Berleant, 2004, 106.

^x Chan, Wing-tsit (trans. and compiled), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963, 207.

^{xi} Tang, 187.

^{xii} Berleant, 2004, 109.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 91-92.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 95-98.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 92.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 95-98.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 107-109.

^{xviii} Berleant, 2012.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 68.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 69.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 70.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 77.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 132.

^{xxiv} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geyuan_Garden, retrieved 13 September 2014.

^{xxv} Berleant, 2012, 141.

^{xxvi} "Introduction to the history of Geyuan Garden." <http://www.ge-garden.net>. Retrieved 13 September 2014.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, 132-142.

^{xxviii} Tang, 303.

^{xxix} *Ibid.*, 304.

^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 305.

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, 316.

^{xxxii} *Ibid.*

^{xxxiii} Berleant, 2012, 136.

^{xxxiv} *Ibid.*