

## Nature, Engagement, Empathy: *Yijing* as a Chinese Ecological Aesthetic

Richard Li (Edith Cowan University)

John Ryan (University of Western Australia)

Kindred a moment with moon and shadow,

I've found a joy that must infuse spring:

I sing, and moon rocks back and forth;

I dance, and shadow tumbles into pieces.

-Li Bai (701–762 CE), from 'Drinking Alone  
Beneath the Moon' (Hinton, 2002: 81, lines 7–  
10)

### Introduction

As an ancient aesthetics, *yijing* (意境) has played a crucial role in traditional Chinese philosophy, literature and art since the eighth century CE. Although 'intricate' and 'ineffable', *yijing* can be translated as 'the realm of meaning' where *yi* denotes 'meaning' or 'idea' and *jing* signifies 'realm' or 'sphere' (Tang, 2014: 188). Characterised in numerous ways throughout Chinese history (for instance, as 'inner consciousness' by some early commentators), *yijing* couples the artist's emotional realm to objects or scenes in the external world. In this paper, we conceptualise *yijing* as an ecological aesthetics (or *eco-aesthetics*) and distinguish it from an environmental aesthetics. Whereas environmental aesthetics centralises the appreciation of beauty and considers the possibility of nature as an artistic object, *eco-aesthetics* attends to the ecological imbrications between species and elements in the context of the global environmental crisis. In particular, we focus on two dimensions of

*yijing*: the ideal of subject-object correspondence and the capacity of *yijing* to promote empathic identification with non-human beings and the inanimate landscape. Given the intensity of environmental issues in contemporary China, from atmospheric pollution to biodiversity decline (Shapiro, 2016), an eco-aesthetics grounded in *yijing* unfolds possibilities for sustainability, ethics and interspecies well-being. These assertions will be developed in relation to a growing body of research into Chinese environmental aesthetics (for example, Chen, 2015). Short case studies from Chinese urban planning, environmental conservation, and the creative arts posit *yijing* as a practical and affective aesthetic system for confronting environmental concerns in China and with potential applicability elsewhere.

The poet Wang Changling (王昌龄) first mentioned *yijing* in his work *Shige* (*The Poetic Style*) (诗格) in the eighth century CE during the Tang dynasty (618–907). As characterised by Wang and ensuing commentators, *yijing* puts emphasis on human emotional experience—or internal spiritual expression—and the actualisation of harmonious interrelationships between a subject (person, appreciator, percipient) and an object (scene, element, organism). Rather than constructing a sense of detachment, speculation and distance between viewer and object, *yijing* emerges in the interstices between human beings and the natural world on myriad levels: spirit, mind, body, senses, matter. Yet, notwithstanding its inherent ecological characteristics, *yijing* has not previously been examined by theorists from the perspectives of eco-aesthetics or ecocriticism. Hence, this investigation of *yijing* will be situated in these two interrelated fields that critique human-nature relations as well as the representation of the natural world in culture, art and literature.

The first section of the paper begins by differentiating between *yijing* and the closely related, but conceptually divergent, divinatory text *I Ching* (易经). The *yijing* aesthetic framework and the *I Ching* text share a common basis in Taoism, but have been conflated by numerous Western commentators due to the imprecision of the *pinyin* (拼音) mode of

transliteration. Despite multiple interpretations of *yijing* in the secondary literature, we choose to specify *yijing* as either an aesthetic *system, framework* or *ideal*. The latter is especially relevant because artists and poets through the ages have strived to express (or actualise) *yijing* in the composition of their works. The section goes on to present a critical overview of historical sources and elicits two aspects of *yijing* pertinent to establishing its ecological relevance: (a) subject-object correspondence (or *engagement*, following the work of Arnold Berleant and other philosophers); and (b) empathic identification (or *bio-empathy*). The discussion includes analysis of key philosophical works ranging from the Tang dynasty to the twentieth century, in addition to paintings, illustrations, calligraphy and poetry of relevance to the history of *yijing*. A salient example explored is the painting ‘Walking a Mountain Path in Spring’ by Song dynasty artist Ma Yuan (马远). The second section shifts to contemporary ideas in Chinese environmental aesthetics as well as the Western aesthetic principles—and specifically, recent debates concerning ideas of engagement and bio-empathy—that are essential to conceptualising *yijing* as an eco-aesthetics. The third section examines the eco-aesthetic dimensions of *yijing* in three real-world case studies salient to environmental sustainability in contemporary China.

### ***Yijing* in Traditional Chinese Art, Calligraphy and Poetry**

*Yijing* is related to, but differs from, the *I Ching* text, known as the *Classic of Changes* or the *Book of Changes*. The *I Ching* originated in the Western Zhou era dated approximately 1000 to 750 BCE (Smith, 2012). Due to transliteration slippages, commentators often present *yijing* as interchangeable with the *I Ching*. This confusion reflects the *I Ching* pronunciation based in the Wade-Giles (or Wade) system used in Western countries before 1979, after which it was replaced by the *pinyin* (拼音) standard (Wei, 2005). Most recent English translations of Chinese texts, as well as critical secondary literature written in English,

reproduce the *pinyin*. Scholar Richard Joseph Smith indicates his preference for using *yijing*: ‘I have retained this long-standing usage [*I Ching*] in the title of this biography, but in the body of the book I have rendered it according to the more current Pinyin system of transliteration: hence, *Yijing*’ (Smith, 2012: xix).

Although it is often reduced to its divinatory function, the *I Ching* presents a broadly ranging philosophy of classic Chinese culture focused on the complementary forces of *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳), which together serve as the basis for the emergence of the world and for all phenomena that human beings perceive. *Yin-yang* complementarity in the *I Ching* parallels the creative tension between *xu* (void) and *shi* (reality) central to *yijing*. While *yijing* and *I Ching* share characteristics, on account of their roots in Taoism, they are distinct—one an aesthetic system, the other a philosophical text—with each inscribing separate principles. On the whole, *yijing* is a system of aesthetics concerning artists’ emotions in painting, calligraphy, poetry, literature and music. Traditional Chinese thinking regards an artwork as ideal if it evokes *yijing*—or the inner emotional landscape in correspondence to external natural objects. We suggest that *yijing* is both a framework for representing immersive and empathic experience with nature but also a catalyst for aesthetic experience.

Chinese aesthetics arose at the crossroads of Buddhist ideas, particularly those coming out of the Chan (禅) tradition, and Taoist cosmology, which, in its attempt to make sense of the complex phenomena of life, enables the comprehension of natural objects in terms of eternal cycles of transformation (Inada, 1997). Taoism evolved from the *I Ching* approximately between 1000 and 750 BCE, but later diverged from the teachings of Confucius (551–479 BCE). Its principal text became Laozi (老子)’s *Tao Te Ching* (道德经) written during the sixth century BCE. Interestingly, Chan Buddhism—a school of Mahayana Buddhism—began in the late fifth and early sixth centuries CE in China, slightly prior to the formulation of *yijing*, but later spread to Vietnam, Korea and Japan where it took root firmly

(Hershock, 2005: 1–33, 67). As the foundational Chinese aesthetic framework, *yijing* not only concerns the fusion of emotion, spirit and the perceived world, but also the expression of an individual's manner of engagement with nature and the cosmos, leading to intellectual and spiritual realisations. Furthermore, as the essay later asserts, *yijing* is intrinsically an eco-aesthetics, although it has not ostensibly been conceptualised in such a way by scholars of environmental aesthetics or Chinese philosophy.

Historically speaking, *yijing* represents the intimate connections between works of art and the evolution of Chinese understandings of life. Drawing less from the domains of religion, philosophy and science than Western traditions, these understandings, including those of Taoism, evolved more directly from artists and poets through the ages (Rowley, 1959). However, *yijing* differs sharply to some of the predominate Western aesthetic paradigms, such as the Kantian sublime, that privilege the attainment of empirical knowledge and a distanced, reductionistic approach to what is apprehended (Giblett, 2011: 63; Pohl, 2006). In contrast, traditional Chinese aesthetics values immersive states and empathic identification towards the attainment of liberation from object-subject oppositions and from binarisms separating humanity and nature. Wang Changling first summarised the core principles of *yijing* in his text *Shige*, or *The Poetic Style* (also translated as *The Poetic Norms* or *The Poetic Patterns*) around the eighth century CE (Tang, 2014). He advised poets to seek a fusion of feeling and scene:

You should forget yourself and not be restrained. If the inspiration does not come, it is necessary to release your feelings and leave them alone, waiting for scenes (*jing*) to generate. Then if you reflect on those scenes, inspiration will come and, upon its coming, you should compose literary texts. If scenes and inspiration do not come, composition is not possible. (qtd. in L. Wang, 1983: 285–286).

In particular, Wang Changling theorised that ‘poetic style’ (a phrase we find analogous to the Greek term for phenomenal emergence—*poiesis*, or ‘bringing forth’) has three *jing* (境), a term defined variously as ‘realm’, ‘sphere’ or ‘scene’. These include *wujing* (物境) (related to natural scenes), *qingjing* (情境) (related to emotion), and *yijing* (意境) (related to inner consciousness) (Ruan, 1995). The three *jing* are hierarchically arranged. The highest, *yijing*, builds upon *wujing* and *qingjing*. Consequently, the actualisation of inner consciousness in relation to the outer realm as *yijing* necessitates the correspondence of emotional topographies to the perceived world of external phenomena.

Since its conception by Changling, *yijing* has evolved in many fields through the expansion and reinterpretation of its meaning. To be sure, *yijing* has been interpreted variously with manifold emphases across Chinese history and within different fields such as aesthetics, art history, cultural studies, literary studies and philosophy. Although a salient aspect is its focus on a percipient’s emotions, *yijing* has been characterised from diverse disciplinary perspectives and historical contexts. Traditionally, *yijing* related to works of painting, calligraphy and poetry. However, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the scholar and poet Wang Guowei (王国维) (1877–1927), considered one of most important Chinese commentators on aesthetic philosophy, expanded the pertinence of *yijing* to other liberal arts genres, including operas and novels (Bonney, 1986). In the twentieth century, another influential aesthetician, Zong Baihua (宗白华) (1897–1986) further expanded the conceptual coverage of *yijing* to all artistically related fields. In particular, he combined the traditional engagement with *yijing* in paintings, calligraphy and poetry with modern architecture, sculpture and gardens (Zong, 2014). Trained in German aesthetics, Zong argues that the primary distinction between Western and Chinese aesthetics derives from differences of worldview (Peng, 2010). In general, traditional Chinese aesthetics embraces fusion (or what some refer to as ‘the oneness of humans and nature’), whereas the Western paradigm

demarcates sharply between perceiving subjects and perceived objects (Peng, 2010: 142). According to contemporary scholar Peng Feng (彭锋), ‘Chinese aesthetics regards the highest aesthetic ideal as *yijing*, a realm in which subjective feeling integrates with objective scene and results in a harmonious unity’ (Peng, 2010: 142–143).

Although *yijing* has a history of over one-thousand-two-hundred years, there has nevertheless been no precise consensus amongst scholars on a unified meaning. As Peng suggests above, the concept tends to be regarded as the highest criteria for the evaluation of traditional Chinese creative arts. From the disciplinary perspectives of linguists and literary scholars, *yijing* has been described as ‘the principles of illusion’ (Liao, 2011: 13). In art, *yijing* denotes an ‘exceptional state of mind’ or an ‘artistic conception’ (Ye, 1995: 260). According to Li Zehou (b. 1930), another important Chinese aesthetician, *yijing* parallels the Western concept of ‘empathy’ and signifies ‘the melding of the appreciating (or creating) self with the appreciated (or created) object’ (Li, 2010: 152). In Chinese thinking, the affective principle of ‘empathy’ is known as *qingjingjiaorong* (情景交融), denoting the interpenetration of feeling and scene, or, to put it differently, the unification of perceiving self and perceived object. The term consists of two parts: *qing* (情), which refers to ‘emotion’; and *jing* (景), which refers to ‘scene’. In other words, *yijing* aesthetics involve the alignment of internal feeling and external scene. Li further explains that the fusion of feeling and scene occurs when:

the appearance or action of the object calls forth my mental and emotional activity, which is subsequently dissolved in the full concentration of my faculties in the process of appreciation or creation, so that it is eventually replaced by the features and actions of the object, resulting in the unity of my own subjective emotions with the objective form. (Li, 2010: 152)

*Yijing* emerges as a property inhering within the conjunction of feeling and scene. As Li continues, *yijing* is an aesthetics in which ‘reason dissolves completely into the emotions and imagination, and loses its independent character to become a sort of unconscious or nonconscious player’ (Li, 2010: 153).

Zong Baihua argues that the essence of *yijing* is the unification of *xu* (void) and *shi* (reality)—complementary aspects of traditional Chinese aesthetics (Zong, 2005). These two aspects exist in dynamic interrelation and generate an integrated whole, the original source of which lies in the Taoist concepts of *yin* and *yang*. The concept of *xu* denotes emptiness, nothing or void. It comprises *xu* (虚) and *wu* (无), which are often aggregated in the longer composite, *xuwu* (虚无) (Fan, 2010). The concept of *shi* can be translated as fullness, substance or reality. However, a prioritisation exists: in traditional Chinese thought, *xu* was a more potent source of vitality and emergence than *shi* (Cheng, 1994). Regarded as a universal source, *xu* is an essential Taoist principle; out of *xu* emerges *shi*. Cheng further explores *xu* in its practical application to artistic practices, but also at the philosophical level, specifically the concept’s influence on Chinese painting (Cheng, 1994). He explains that, in the process of making a painting, *xu* is required at every step including in the basic brushstrokes and the overall composition. *Xu* is ‘a sign among the signs, providing the pictorial system with its effectiveness and unity’ (Cheng, 1994: 64).

Furthermore, visual and poetic rhythm is important to traditional Chinese aesthetics. The achievement of rhythm depends on the artist’s engagement with *xu* and *shi* as reflected in features such as the arrangement of brushstrokes. In fact, Chinese artworks often incorporate poetry as an expression of the artist’s inner state. In the form of calligraphy, the poem is typically included within the frame of the painting rather than set apart from the scene. The actualisation of *yijing* in the work involves the artist striving to match the content of the poetry to the painting. For example, twelfth-century Song dynasty court painter Ma Yuan’s

ink-on-silk painting, ‘Walking a Mountain Path in Spring’ (山径春行图), combines poetic rhythm and an ‘ideal’ pictorial composition as reflected specifically in his use of diagonals with willow branches overarching a stream on the left side of the painting (Tregear, 1980).



Figure 1. ‘Walking a Mountain Path in Spring’ by Ma Yuan. Credit: Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

In the painting, the scholar’s contemplative outward stare is in step with the movements of orioles as a boy trails behind him, carrying a lute. The mountains of the background fade into the fog as one oriole perches on a willow branch while the other ascends, wings outstretched, through the empty space of the upper right quadrant of the composition. The expression of *yijing* in this work comprises *xu* (emptiness)—in the adumbration of the mountain behind the willow branches—set in complementary relation to *shi* in the strolling scholar, trailing boy, the lute, willow trees, orioles, stream bank and other distinct pictorial features. Taken together, the elements constitute a scene of beauty, peace, unity, affect and intensity, as expressed by the Song dynasty emperor Ningzong (宁宗) in the poetic couplet written in

calligraphy at the top right of the frame: ‘Brushed by his sleeves, wild flowers dance in the wind / Fleeing from him, hidden birds cut short their songs’ (qtd. in Kleiner, 2010: 66). Ningzong’s short poem calls attention to the harmonisation of subject (scholar) and object (nature), but also the creative tension that gives rise to the world. Whereas the flowers respond fervently to contact with the scholar’s sleeves, which drape organically toward the ground, the two orioles cease their singing and flee. In other words, the scholar is entangled with elements and other beings in the springtime mountain environment; he affects non-humans in a manner that signifies his corporeal co-constitution with all that he perceives. The artwork conveys the ‘embodied perception’ of the scholar in the landscape by pictorialising *avant la lettre* and through a Taoist tradition phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that ‘perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception’ (2005: 378). Other commentators on ‘Walking a Mountain Path in Spring’ have interpreted its meaning in metaphorical and, even, political terms. For instance, the use of the feminised symbols of birds and flowers represents a woman (or women) in a palace stirred by the emperor’s presence (Tregear, 1980).

‘Walking a Mountain Path in Spring’ evokes *yijing* by establishing resonances between natural imagery, human subjects and poetic calligraphy. The work also promotes a sense of cohesion between the feelings of the viewers (or readers) and the natural scene that Ma Yuan depicted over eight-hundred years ago. Hence, there is a particular cohesion between viewer, subject (scholar) and object (birds, flowers). As audiences appreciate the painting and reflect on the poem and calligraphy, they are presented the opportunity to tap into the emotional world of the artists. As shown in this work, *yijing* signifies the potential for a landscape representation to achieve verisimilitude with forms observed in natural environments while, at the same time, disclosing the intricate spiritual and emotional relationships between nature, humans and non-humans. The Ming era philosopher Wang

Fuzhi (王夫之) invoked *yijing* ideals when he stated in the 1600s that ‘a phenomenon is created from emotion [qing or 情], and emotion coheres with the phenomenon’ (qtd. in Chiu, 2005: 16).

*Yijing* has similarly been a formative aesthetic principle in traditional Chinese poetry. The correspondence between emotion and scene has been integral to the generation of *yijing* in poetic forms over hundreds of years (Tang, 2014). The nineteenth-century scholar Wang Guowei understood the essence of poetry as the interpenetration of *yi* (idea) and *jing* (realm); he assessed the merits of verse and the skill of poets according to the actualisation of union between emotion and scene, or *qingjingjiaorong* (Tang, 2014: 190). Contemporary commentator Tang Yanfang (唐□芳) characterises the role of *yijing* within traditional Chinese poetry as a dialectic between ‘pictorial concreteness’ and ‘purposeful semantic ambiguity’ reflecting the dynamics between *xu* and *shi* (Tang, 2014: 191). An example from the poetry of Wang Changling is illustrative of *yijing* in verse. His poem ‘The Myriad-Year Tower’ opens with the lines ‘Lofty above the river, the Myriad-Year Tower / How many thousand autumns has it braved? / Year after year there’s joy in seeing the mountains endure / Day after day there’s grief in watching the water just flow’ (Changling, 1976: 114, lines 1–6).

Immediately, modern-day readers are confronted by the poet’s perhaps surprising empathic identification with a ‘tower’—presumably a human-constructed element that has become part of the natural landscape by virtue of its age, history and heritage. A Western audience in particular might be reminded of Gilpin’s (1788) aesthetic category of the picturesque with its quintessential assemblage of historic ruins, rocky formations and panoramic vistas. However, without the intimation of emotional reserve or perceptual distance typical of the picturesque, Wang Changling penetrates the affective terrain of what he apprehends—an ancient feature in an even older setting—rendering it closer both to himself and his audience. The poet empathises with the ‘joyous’ state of the tower: an

inanimate object brought to life as a witness to the mountains unyielding season after season despite the inherent mutability of the landscape. In contrast, the tower expresses melancholy vis-à-vis the murky, sluggish, intermittent flow of the river. Correspondences between the inner domain of the poet and the outer world of nature involve antithetical emotional states that cohere as *yijing*. ‘The Myriad-Year Tower’ concludes with the lines ‘Why did the monkeys leave the evening mountains? / The cormorants aimlessly drift around the cold island / Who can bear to climb and look into the clouds and mist? / Toward evening the vastness stirs the traveler’s grief’ (Changling, 1976: 114, lines 13–16), echoing Wang Fuzhi’s contention that ‘emotion coheres with the phenomenon’ (qtd. in Chiu, 2005: 16). Rather than contemplative distance between a perceiving subject and a perceived object, there is an overarching sense that the poet has dissolved perceptual boundaries through the affective aesthetics of the verse.

### **Contemporary Chinese Ecological Aesthetics: Subjects, Objects, and Empathy**

As it has been interpreted by scholars and put into practice in works of art since the eighth century CE, *yijing* can be theorised from a contemporary standpoint as an ecological aesthetics *avant la lettre*. Encoding ideals of empathic identification and non-oppositional engagement between subjects and objects, *yijing* promoted awareness of multispecies relationalities and natural elements well before the German scientist Ernst Haeckel devised the term *ecology* in 1866. In further framing *yijing* as an eco-aesthetics, this section will review ideas in contemporary Chinese ecological aesthetics, with attention to the theoretical works of Chen Wangheng (□望衡) and Cheng Xiangzhan (程相占), as well as Western aesthetic models, principally Arnold Berleant’s work on engagement and Vischer, Nagel and Callicott’s conceptualisation of *bio-empathy*. The values of engagement and empathic identification—embodied in *yijing* for hundreds of years—can advance contemporary

sustainability, ethics and well-being for humans and non-humans in East Asia and potentially elsewhere.

Chen Wangheng's book *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*, recently translated to English, provides a cogent account of the importance of the natural world in sino-aesthetics (Chen, 2015). In his historical overview, Chen alludes to the Tang poet Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元) (773–819) and the Song poet and painter Su Shi (苏轼) (1037–1101) as prominent early environmental aesthetics scholars. Traditional Chinese theorists conceived of the appreciation of beauty in nature as the highest ideal humans and art can strive to attain. In their views, such appreciation is not detached or distanced from nature, but rather aims to promote harmonious engagements between humans and non-humans as denoted in the Chinese term *tianren heyi* (天人合一), which comprises three meanings: *ziran* (自然) (natural world or what is self-so), *tao* (道) (truth of nature), and *shenling* (神灵) (divine being) (Chen, 2015: 11–12). Hence, the aim of art, poetry, architecture, urban planning and other creative practices should be to evoke *yijing*—characterised by Chen as an ‘aesthetic feeling’ for that which is apprehended or the ‘fluid interdependence between perceiving subject and perceived object’ (Chen, 2015: 151). Defined as an aesthetic feeling *for* something rather than a psychological state, *yijing* parallels Edmund Husserl's contention that consciousness is always “consciousness of something” and “that every judging relates to something judged” (Husserl, 1999: 86).

Images inspired by *yijing*, such as Ma Yuan's ‘Walking a Mountain Path in Spring’, correspond pictorially (and externally) to the artists' inner domain of emotions, feelings and thoughts about nature. Similarly, the Tang poet Sikong Tu (司空图) (837–908) described the state of correspondence as ‘images beyond the image’ (*xiangwai zhixiang*) (象外之象) or ‘spirit beyond taste’ (*weiwai zhizhi*) (味外之旨) (qtd. in Chen, 2015: 152). Chen goes on to suggest that the traditional Chinese aesthetic awareness of *yijing* can be fostered in contemporary

contexts to develop sensitive and ethical approaches to environmental issues. Promoting greater awareness of place and belonging, ecological aesthetics can complement the purposes of environmental conservation, leading to what Chen refers to as ‘aesthetic environmental protection’ or *shenmei de huanjingbaohu* (审美的环境保护) (Chen, 2015: 181).

In the 1990s, Chinese environmental aesthetics began to gain traction as a philosophical discourse with the publication of Cheng Xiangzhan’s *Chinese Environmental and Aesthetic Theory* (1991). Drawing from Chinese and Western models, the work of Cheng aims to strike dialogue between eco-aesthetic ideas from different cultural traditions (Cheng, 2009). In an article from 2013, Cheng refers to the ‘aesthetic intersubjectivity’ of early Taoist texts—such as *Zhuangzi* (庄) from the Warring States era (476–221 BC)—that emphasise the intrinsic value of non-humans and recognise their rights to live and flourish (Cheng, 2013a). He postulates that the cross-fertilisation of ecological aesthetic ideas and approaches helps to ease some of the long-standing conceptual demarcations inhering within Western models that propound subject-object binarisms and effect a dominant view of nature as existing apart from humanity. In the traditional Chinese appreciation of nature’s vitality (*shengqi*) (生气) and spirit resonance (*qiyun*) (气韵), ‘the perception of a landscape is not simply the awareness of scenery but of the complex and dynamic fields of energy transformation that are present’ (Cheng, 2013a: sect. 4, para. 5).

Thus, in terms of energetic transformation, Cheng discerns between *environmental aesthetics* and *ecological aesthetics*. He argues that Western environmental aesthetic scholarship has privileged the appreciation or enjoyment of the environment, the perception of beauty, and the distinction between art and nature as objects of aesthetic attention. Although it does not necessarily contest the focus on modes of appreciation or beauty, ecological aesthetics, in contrast, prioritises awareness of nature, species, elements, materialities, cycles, flows, patterns, interactions and global (or local) environmental issues

(Cheng, 2013b). In Cheng's view, ecological aesthetics must attend to the pervasive crisis of the Anthropocene by grounding models of appreciation in ecological ethics, using knowledge of the natural world to vitalise the imagination and educe the emotions, and countering the biases of aesthetic models that place human appreciation well above the value of other beings, elements and things (Cheng, 2013b: 221–222). In other words, an ecological aesthetics resists an aesthetics of human exceptionalism while aiming to uphold ideals of harmony, unity and dynamic interrelation between beings.

For philosopher Arnold Berleant, an ecological aesthetics of engagement reflects notions of interdependence and inclusivity originating in the biological paradigm of ecology (Berleant, 2012). In particular, an eco-aesthetics for Berleant takes four factors into consideration: environment, aesthetics, ecology, and experience (Berleant, 2012: 118). Notably, *environment* and *ecology* are discrete terms with unique significations, in Berleant's model. Ecology transforms environment from a visually appreciated scene—likened to a work of art—to a 'complex composed of interacting, interdependent constituents' (Berleant, 2012: 118). Although the complex is mutable, dynamic coherence—evocative of *yijing*—results from the transactions between organisms, elements, conditions and other variables. Like the roving scholar enmeshed in the energetic flows of *yijing* in the painting (Figure 1), humans engage with the environment as a living context—a dynamic field of exchange—that corresponds in myriad ways to our own bodies, thoughts and emotions. Berleant understands the value of engagement as pivotal to an ecological aesthetics transforming ecology into experience, and vice versa (Berleant, 1993). On an especially intriguing note, he posits that ecological ideas have figured more substantively into Chinese aesthetic research, although the concept of ecology derives relatively recently from the Western scientific tradition.

Building on Li Zehou's translation of *yijing* as 'empathy', we claim that the ecological dimensions of traditional Chinese aesthetics align with recent Western

theorisations of *bio-empathy*. Berleant discusses empathy as an ecological value through a reading of nineteenth-century German philosopher Theodor Lipps' elaboration of the principle of *Einfühlung*, which he in turn adopted from Robert Vischer's concept of 'aesthetic sympathy', shortened to 'empathy' in subsequent translations. In his 1873 text 'On the Optical Sense of Form', Vischer characterised empathy as the unconscious extension of one's physical form 'and with this also the soul—into the form of the object' (Vischer, 1994: 92). For instance, the *yijing* aesthetics of Ma Yuan's painting involve the roving scholar corporeally affecting what surrounds him in a state of attunement with and projection into the montane environment. Moreover, Vischer distinguished between sensory and kinaesthetic modalities of empathy. From Lipps' perspective, empathy involves projective mechanisms in which internal resonances integrate with the qualities of a perceived object. Evocative of *yijing*, empathic resonance instigates identification between the observer and the observed without any of the agents involved relinquishing their discrete identities (Stueber, 2010: 7–8). For Berleant, following Lipps, empathy draws together human appreciation and a perceived object in a state of attunement and correspondence (Berleant, 1993: 16). He further elaborates that 'when empathy with a physical movement takes place, there is a consciousness that is wholly identical with the movement' (Berleant, 1993: 16). (Consider the resonances between the scholar, the flowers, and the birds—between *xu* and *shi*—in Ma Yuan's painting and the Emperor's poem rendered in calligraphy). With no pretense of subject-object absorption or complete incorporation between beings, empathy is an ecological value that entails 'feeling oneself into the aesthetic object, an activity that engages not just our attention but also kinaesthetic sensations' (Berleant, 1993: 17).

A Western conception of empathy as 'feeling oneself' into what is perceived aligns with *yijing* as *qingjingjiaorong*—or the intermeshing of feeling (subjective, internal) and scene (objective, external). Yet, we also suggest that *yijing* goes a step further towards an

eco-aesthetics in that the ‘aesthetic object’ can be both inanimate elements (rocks, soil, water) or other living creatures, as Ma Yuan’s painting poignantly illustrates. Hence, *yijing* is inherently *bio-empathic*. One of the earliest Western expressions of a bio-empathic theory is Thomas Nagel’s 1974 essay ‘What Is It Like To Be a Bat?’ (although he never invokes the term *empathy* in the text). Forwarding a critique of reductionism, Nagel addresses the philosophical problem of extrapolating from our own lives to the inner lives of bats (or, for that matter, any other non-human entity). Rather than taking the position that the extrapolation process is indefensible, Nagel concludes that devising a phenomenology to describe bat experience, instead, necessitates beginning with the human subject and his or her affective states. Extending ourselves into the phenomena we apprehend (bats, birds, wildflowers, or otherwise) raises the ingrained problem of subjective and objective demarcations, but ultimately provokes human encounter with the ineffable and irreducible: ‘Reflection on what it is like to be a bat seems to lead us [...] to the conclusion that there are facts that do not consist in the truth of propositions expressible in a human language’ (Nagel, 1974: 441).

Environmental ethics and its precursors have linked bio-empathy to the intrinsic value of non-human species. The linkage—between ethics and empathy—is also crucial for framing *yijing* as an eco-aesthetics. Here, Western aesthetic theory serves as a useful lens for elucidating the intrinsically ethical and empathic potentialities of *yijing*. German theologian Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) is credited with developing an early life-centred model and a will-to-live theory integrating reason and empathy, but has been criticised on the grounds of strong anthropocentrism (Martin, 2016: unpaginated). One of his critics, the environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott, in his essay ‘In Defense of the Land Ethic’, nevertheless pivots to bio-empathy as the most significant moral theory for establishing and defending the intrinsic value of non-humans (Callicott, 1989: 154). Drawing from Adam Smith, Hume,

Darwin, Leopold and E.O. Wilson, Callicott forwards a bio-empathy framework through the assertion that the human capacity for altruistic behaviour and empathic identification has an evolutionary basis. It is a means to ensure cooperative, interspecies survival. Hence, the value of bio-empathy is especially imperative in our present era of devastating and exponentially increasing human effects on climate, ecosystems and species worldwide, including in China and other parts of Asia and the world. Crucially, for Callicott and other environmental theorists, as well as for our conceptualisation of *yijing*, empathic identification includes both conscious, living forms of life (bees, birds, flowers) and what are considered, in Western ontologies, non-conscious, non-living ecological elements (rocks, soils, water).

Models of contemporary Chinese eco-aesthetics combined with conceptions of bio-empathy support the possibility of *yijing* as an ancient aesthetics of contemporary relevance and promise. Moreover, *yijing*'s emphasis on engagement, rather than opposition, between perceiving subjects and perceived objects offers a foundation for empathic identification. Our understanding of *yijing* and of ecological aesthetics, more generally, aligns with Cheng Xiangzhan's energetic (*ch'i*-based) model of aesthetics in which environments are not merely visual scenes reducible to their constituent parts but rather 'complex and dynamic fields of energy transformation' (Cheng, 2013a: sect. 4, para. 5). For this reason, the framework of Chinese ecological aesthetics proposed here is companionable with recent developments in *material ecocriticism*. The so-called 'material turn' in *ecocriticism* (a term first mentioned by William Rueckert in 1978) critiques the view of the environment as an inert material acted upon by humans or symbolic structure to be interpreted, and instead recognises the 'distinctive forms of agency and effectivity on the part of material forces' (Joyce and Bennett, 2010: 4). Political ecologist Jane Bennett's concept of 'vibrant matter' (indeed redolent of the Chinese concept of *ch'i*) involves a process she describes as 'encountering a vital materiality [in which] all forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively,

affective and signaling’ (Bennett, 2010: 111, 117). An inclusive model such as this expands our field of relations to animate, conscious beings and inanimate, non-conscious objects similarly. In light of new materialism, a traditional Chinese painting, such as Ma Yuan’s (Figure 1), can be more fully appreciated for its themes of ecological awareness, human engagement with the environment in all its expressions and forms, and the co-extensiveness of the emotional domain and the exterior world apprehended by the human sense faculties. Hence, the synergies between Western eco-aesthetic principles and the ancient *yijing* framework are multiple and pronounced.

### ***Yijing* as an Eco-Aesthetics: Three Case Studies**

Having theorised *yijing* as an eco-aesthetics, we now ask the following: How might the aesthetics be relevant to contemporary Chinese contexts in an era of rapid biological degradation and species loss? In fostering empathic identification and a sense of engagement between subjects and objects (or what we have posited as *correspondence*, *interpenetration* and *immersion*), how might *yijing* help to promote sustainability and well-being in built and natural environments? Three brief case studies will be explored—one each from urban planning, environmental conservation, and the creative arts—in Chinese contexts.

Respectively, the examples we present in this section include (a) the Xiamen (厦门) Island Ring Road, (b) Mount Lushan (庐山) National Park in Jiangxi Province, and (c) the digitally-based interactive climate change data visualisation work *Taiji II*. As a whole, the three quite different case studies exemplify *yijing* put in practice—historically and contemporarily—as an ecological aesthetics reflecting ‘the unity of feelings and scenery, which adds up to more than the sum of the two for it implies their mutual transformation into each other’ (Chen, 2012: 333).

In the context of urban planning and architecture, Chen Wangheng (2012: 151) states that the impetus of the constructed environment should be toward *yijing*, or ‘aesthetic feeling’ for something and, more specifically, toward ‘urban aesthetic feeling’ for something (*chengshi yijing*) (城市意境). Urban elements should fuse aesthetic and utilitarian concerns. Cityscapes that engender spirit (*chengshi yiyun*) (城市意蕴), structure or form (*jiegou*) (结构), and attractiveness or beauty (*meili*) (魅力) result in enhanced liveability for humans and non-humans. In particular, the incorporation of ruins—consider again the poem ‘The Myriad-Year Tower’—into modern cities preserves *genius loci* in spite of dizzying rate of urban expansion in China. In striving towards the expression of *yijing*, planners, policy-makers, architects and designers can ensure that natural and cultural elements better harmonise; and that the city as a whole becomes increasingly a self-sustaining, ecological system. These aesthetic ideals are expressed in the ‘garden city’ concept, introduced in 1958 by the engineer Qian Xuesen (钱学森). Many garden cities, such as Shenzhen (深圳) in Guangdong (广东) Province, coalesce *xianshan* (显山) (showing the mountain), *lushui* (露水) (revealing the water), and *toulu* (透绿) (revealing the green) (Chen, 2015: 167).

The Xiamen Island Ring Road (*Huandao lu*) (环岛路) greenbelt is an example of *yijing* in the built environment (Chen, 2015: 159). The thirty-one mile road traverses some of the finest coastal areas of Xiamen—a garden city on China’s south-east coast. The combined driving, cycling and walking course closely corresponds to the natural contours of the landscape. Rather than a mundane (and, in all likelihood, more direct) superhighway distanced from the marine environment, the Ring Road offers a slow circuitous mode of travel, highlighting the urban, cultural, and natural aspects of the metropolitan area. The route connects places of historical interest, including the Qing dynasty Hulishan (胡里山) Fortress (built in 1894), with contemporary symbols of China’s international economy, such as the Xiamen International Conference and Exhibition Center. Sometimes in the form of

boardwalks, walking paths allows pedestrians to appreciate sculptures, exercise areas and coastal features at close-range. Reflecting ideals of ecological aesthetics, the Ring Road also provides habitat for the diverse bird species that migrate through Xiamen throughout the year.

*Yijing* also pertains to national parks, conservation areas and wilderness reserves in non-urban locations. In the Western tradition, conservation spaces have been set in sharp contrast to so-called industrial, capitalist urban landscapes, such as Xiamen, perpetuating various forms of nature/culture binarism. As it goes, ‘wilderness’ is the untouched realm of animals, plants and other non-humans whereas ‘civilisation’ is the domain of humans (Giblett, 2011: 102). As Giblett further argues, Western environmental aesthetics—as manifested in the traditions of the beautiful, picturesque, sublime and uncanny—has propounded such divisions through the privileging of the visual appearances of nature. For instance, some of the earliest national parks in the United States—as well as areas designated under the 1964 Wilderness Act—involved the forcible removal of indigenous people and Anglo-European homesteaders in order to create an image of wilderness places as untouched and uninhabited.

In contrast, as an aesthetic ideal bringing subjects and objects into greater states of engagement, *yijing* has influenced the character of conservation areas in China. Rather than a wilderness area devoid of cultural history, Mount Lushan National Park in Jiangxi Province is a well-known tourist attraction that exhibits the interplay of natural, historical, spiritual and visual elements. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the park includes Mount Lushan, Hanyang Peak (汉阳峰) (the highest in the Park), and an elaborate system of ridges, valleys, caves, waterfalls and rock formations. The biodiversity comprises over three-thousand plant species and two-thousand mammals protected in reserves such as the Poyang Lake (潘阳湖) Migratory Bird Zone. In 126 BCE, the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian (司马迁) (c. 145– 86 BCE) recorded Mount Lushan in his text *Shiji* (史记), or *Records of the Grand Historian*,

completed around 94 BCE. Additionally, the fourth century CE monk Huiyuan (慧远) established the ‘pure land method’ (a tradition of Buddhist teachings) in the Donglin Temple (东林寺) on Mount Lushan. Established on Mount Lushan in 940 CE, Bailudong (White Deer Cave) Academy (白鹿洞书院) was devoted to classical learning.

For thousands of years, Lushan has attracted artists, scholars and poets seeking *yijing*, which appears in their artworks as nature’s vitality and spiritual resonances. Compared to Western environmental aesthetics—emphasising so-called wild, untouched and uncivilised landscapes—*yijing* integrates humankind and the natural world through artistic inspiration and emotional identification. Not only focused on the perception of beauty and appearances, *yijing* expresses the intricate and often non-visible interrelationships between the people, mountains, water, and plant and animal life of the national park. The poem, ‘Observing from Below the Waterfalls of Mountain Lushan’, offers an example. Written by the famous Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai (李白) (or Li Po, 701–762), the work conveys *yijing* as a property of the Mount Lushan waterfall. Li depicts the waterfall in imaginative, celestial terms: ‘Purple mists arise from the Incense Peak in the sun / Dangling waterfalls at the river’s far end appear / Cascading from atop three thousand feet adown / Is it plunging the Milky Way from the Ninth Sphere?’ (translated by Wang Daoyu, 王道余) (Wang, 2008). Li also expresses a kind of empathy—the outward extension of his subjectivity—with the waterfalls and mountain peaks of the Lushan landscape. Western aesthetics might link Li’s experience to the sublime—which, in a Kantian mode, emphasises the vastness of nature that exceeds human perceptual powers (Giblett, 2011: 63). However, rather than expressing a sense of distance and separation, Li identifies with the waterfall through his emotional states that both engage with and foster *yijing*, incite imagination, and facilitate immersion in, and engagement with, all that is seen.

A contemporary creative arts instantiation of *yijing* as an eco-aesthetics of engagement and empathy is the digital work *Taiji II* (2016–ongoing) by Chinese-Australian artist and designer Richard Li. Based on a previous installation by Li entitled *Taiji* (2013–15), which used sleep EEG data (Li, 2015), *Taiji II* engages the public in producing visualisations of Chinese climate change and pollution data. As ecocritics have argued, embodied experience—such as that facilitated in *Taiji II*—can personalise the immensity of climate change and its abstract presentation in the media (for instance, in terms of statistical or political measures). On this note, theorist Tim Morton (2013) characterises climate change as a ‘hyperobject’—a phenomenon so distributed in time and space that it exhausts a subject’s perceptions and emotions. Offering an arts-based response to climate change and public discourse surrounding the issue, Li devised *Taiji II* to explore *yijing*-inspired data visualisation in a digital context. The aim is to generate aesthetic experiences that integrate ancient Chinese ecological aesthetics with emerging visualisation technologies. As the dataset for the project, Li draws from statistics used by the Real-time Air Quality Index (AQI) for Beijing and other Chinese cities, which indicate the presence of fine particulate matter, or PM<sub>2.5</sub>, in the atmosphere (World Air Quality Index, 2016).

*Taiji II* was also inspired by Taoist health practices, including *taijiquan* (太极拳). The work involves modulating the flow of *ch’i* (breath) through the body and the installation in order to achieve harmonisation between subjects (human participants) and objects (technology, data, the climate change issue). A gesture-based platform known as Kinect tracks the movements and vocalisations of the participants in the gallery as they interact with the data. The technology integrates the data and the participants’ movements as a whole Taoist body—creating coherence between subject, scene, technology and nature. *Taiji II* allows participants to engage with—and directly affect—the visual patterns they perceive on a projection screen. As participants moves their bodies, the projected visualisations—based

on the PM<sub>2.5</sub> data—transform into a symphony of shapes, patterns and colors. Inspired by *yijing* precepts, including engagement and empathy, *Taiji II* uniquely facilitates embodied harmonisation with abstract data. The emotionally moving experience promotes ecological awareness of the interrelationship between bodies, climate and nature.

## Conclusion

This article has considered the prospective contribution of traditional Chinese *yijing* aesthetics—interpreted in connection to Western ideas of engagement and empathy—to contemporary ecological contexts and exigencies. As an early Chinese aesthetics, *yijing* is distinct from the *I Ching* text, popular both in the East and West for the practices of divination it outlines. In contrast, *yijing* foregrounds the aesthetic harmonisation of perceiving subjects (selves, bodies, psyches) and perceived objects (nature, environments, cosmos) in Chinese literature, poetry, music and visual art. As we have argued, *yijing* is an aesthetic framework for representing ecological interactions (as in Ma Yuan’s painting and Wang Changling’s poetry) but also a vital means for stimulating, fostering and shaping interactions between beings and elements. As a relational eco-aesthetics engendering consciousness of our transactions *with* and *within* the natural world, *yijing* can advance the aims of sustainability in contemporary China and elsewhere, as the three case studies of the previous section indicate.

Yet, how effective can aesthetics, more generally, be in addressing ecological decline? What role can aesthetic affectivity take in the environmental crises of climate change, water pollution and biodiversity loss that impact not only China but the rest of the globe? And why does *yijing* present a more promising framework than other eco-aesthetics? To be sure, many aestheticians have argued for the significance of *Western* aesthetic ideas for promoting environmental awareness, sustainability, ethics and justice (for example, Berleant,

2010; Brady, 2003; Carlson, 2009; Eaton, 2008). In an early paper in the field, Hepburn (1963: 195) postulated that post-Romantic scientific detachment resulted in a ‘loss of nerve over the aesthetic interpretation of nature’. Subsequent environmental theorists—particularly Berleant and his model of engagement—have propounded alternatives that eschew the rigid subject-object dichotomies underlying the ethos of detachment and the diminishment of emotional identification with nature critiqued by Hepburn.

As an eco-aesthetics embracing ancient Taoist thought, *yijing* intrinsically resists the chimera of perceptual detachment by eliding the Western constructs privileging intellectual human subjects over natural objects. *Yijing* aesthetics co-constitutes subjects and objects in a field of embodied relations from which affect is *not* excluded in favour of the Kantian systemisation of what is apprehended. Instead, the prominence of empathic identification fosters engagement with nature whereby beings and elements co-exist in a shared world and negotiate a common future. Rather than marginalising feeling in the aesthetic appreciation of nature—in an effort to actualise the scientific ideal of objectivity—*yijing* prioritises corporeal human entanglements and resonances with non-human lives and the abiotic milieu. As a consequence, *yijing* affirms to us that ‘the environment’ (i.e., animals, plants, water, air, soil) is not something out there—external to ourselves as the object of our aesthetic striving and formulation—but rather something vital that is imbricated with our bodies, minds, spirits and emotions. From this strong relational basis, conceptions of aesthetics, sustainability and their interrelationships—specifically, as pertinent to and benefiting all beings and elements—can come into view and, thus, can be put into practice.

Considering its Taoist origins, *yijing* should be regarded as an endemic Chinese eco-aesthetics with the capacity to bring ancient philosophies to bear on contemporary concerns. Vis-à-vis the rapidly changing Chinese context, rather than importing aesthetic frameworks with Anglo-European underpinnings (such as the sublime, a-historical emptiness of

wilderness monuments found in the United States), *yijing* can be leveraged to better ensure the longevity of an integrated ecocultural heritage, while providing a foundation for envisaging new spaces and sustainable infrastructures. In distinction to the comparatively superficial emphasis on the beauty of nature and its appropriateness as an object of appreciation, *yijing* eco-aesthetics can enhance the integrated well-being of rural and urban places. *Yijing* can also ensure that aesthetics seriously regards the ethics of the environment and non-human beings, in spite of the powerful political sway towards economic expansion and urban development as premier social goods for humanity. As a relational eco-aesthetics, *yijing* counters the anthropocentrism underlying many of global ecological problems by foregrounding the importance of human ‘nerve’ rather than promulgating the possibility of physical, psychological or spiritual dissociation from nature. In summoning the aesthetic sensibilities of the past for the benefit of a global co-mingled future, *yijing* is apropos to landscapes in China and elsewhere. Subsequent investigations of *yijing* eco-aesthetics could aim to identify other features that render it advantageous for human and non-human flourishing in the twenty-first century and outside of East Asian contexts.

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