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An Eco-poetic Approach to Architecture Across Boundaries

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Abstract

As highlighted by the post-Cartesian discourse across philosophical schools, Western thought had been struggling for a long time with conceiving interconnectedness. The problematic of Western dualism is most apparent with the so-called mind-body problem, but the issue does not only relate to the separation of body and mind but also the separation of living beings from their environments. Asian philosophy, on the other hand, has had a long history of thinking relations. The paper argues that an architectural philosophy that is open for a dialogue with Asian views would allow for a new approach to conceptualising the interconnectedness of minds, bodies, environments, and cultures. Linking Asian and Western aesthetics with a discourse on ecology, and setting it into dialogue with contemporary theories of architecture, the paper also refers to recent research on embodiment that is engaging from a new point of view with the natural sciences, and that appears to confirm positions of traditional Chinese philosophy. Reconsidering traditional Chinese art and aesthetics, the paper suggests, could initiate a new eco-poetic way of thinking the built environment and its design in favour of a future that is more than smart.

Keywords: design ecologies, architecture, embodied cognition, China, art, Shan Shui painting

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1. Introduction

Since antiquity, Western philosophical thought has favoured the compartmentalization of the world into components, characterised by their differences to other components. In this modality of thought division is emphasised over relation. Subjects are set apart from objects in the world. They are connected to their world(s) not directly, but indirectly via God(s) as intermediator(s). Introducing radical doubt as the basis for the new scientific method, René Descartes also famously prepared the final cut of the bond between subjects and worlds.

> [...] while I decided thus to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something; and observing that this truth: I think, therefore I am, was so certain and so evident that all the most

extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. [7, p. 53-54]

Consequently, as the 'thinking I' could 'be' without confirmation from an external world, the bonds between subjects and the world were subsequently eliminated by Descartes' successors. The process left the Western world with a paradox that is commonly referred to as the mind-body problem, and that relates to the conceptual separation of body and mind, of life and consciousness. Cartesian dualism is the culmination of a tradition that had conceived, since antiquity, of things and living beings as connected only indirectly via an otherworldly mediator. The final cut of all bonds constituted the logical consequence of conceptions that favoured the reduction of beings and things to their essentials, and prioritised necessities over possibilities and desires.

Radical doubt is the foundation of scientific thinking and the basis for its success. It is also the foundation of the crisis that marks Western thought and is made explicit in the separation of theory and practice [cp. 18, 41, p. 283]. Since Descartes, theoretical conceptions of the world have been in contradiction with how people experience being in the world – living with body and mind, among things and other living beings, connected. Virtually all Western philosophical schools have struggled to conceptually re-connect body, mind, culture, and nature, and virtually all have been faced with critique at one point or another, that they have not managed to overcome the dualist tradition, but instead fallen again into the Cartesian trap [cp. 13, 5, 16].

This crisis has also affected architecture, where a separation between theory and practice is still quite apparent, despite efforts made to reconnect the two. The shift that architecture undertook in the 18th century from the sensuous to the scientific, bringing with it an emphasis on presenting architecture 'objectively,' has had a long-lasting impact [29, 39]. Deconstruction, in the 1980s, provided for an apparently direct link between philosophical world making and architectural practice. Widely published and publicized, the collaboration was, however, relatively short-lived and ended in disappointment [6]. Architectural phenomenology has made important contributions reconnecting the theory and experience of architecture, as well as the practice of designing, but has struggled to be noticed outside of architecture, which also means that it has had hardly any impact on most of the architecture that constitutes our cities. Concepts of effective living, as advocated by the 'smart city' for example, have been more attractive for publication in the general news than substantive discussions about life as it relates to the built environment. In this context, recent calls for a

closer collaboration between architectural phenomenology and the natural sciences to address questions of embodied and situated cognition could be a potential remedy [28]. Architectural phenomenology might be able to take advantage of the trust generally afforded to scientific results. It might also be the right time for a new collaboration as researchers in the sciences, in line with insights in phenomenology, have begun stitching together the components into which they once dissected the world. It is a development that could be observed in the past hundred years in biology, the cognitive sciences, physics and chemistry [cp. 12, 37].

There are indications that the views of the world have begun to shift, possibly related to recent ecological concerns, and that, long term, questions of meaning will gain relevance again, notably assisted by the natural sciences this time. In the context of what has been outlined above, this paper suggests that taking a step across the boundaries of Western thought might be helpful in explicating gaps in Western thought. In contrast to Western philosophy, Asian thought has had a long history of thinking relations. Favouring the ambiguous over the certain, the poetic over the scientific, it was famously dismissed by numerous Western thinkers as not worthy of consideration. Asian views of the world, however, gain new relevance in a context in which the natural sciences have moved to advocate the uncertain and not anymore the certain, and have confirmed that cognition is conditional on bodies interacting with environments [24, 31, 32]. The paper suggests that re-integrating Chinese aesthetics into the languages of architectural thinking could be a first step towards developing tools for a new ecological approach to architectural design, re-contextualising architecture in a play of relations of matter and atmosphere. An architectural philosophy that is open for a dialogue with Asian views could initiate a new approach to conceptualising the interconnectedness of minds, bodies, environments, and cultures and might initiate a new eco-poetic way of thinking the built environment and its design.

2. Crossing Boundaries

In China, the development of art and aesthetics proceeded largely detached from Western influences until science and related ideas entered with Christian missionaries. Poetic in character, Chinese aesthetics had maintained a strong link to the ancient rites [21]. The complexity of relations that is described in ancient Chinese philosophical texts is mirrored in Chinese traditional art, where a similar fluidity of concepts appears to be at work. Translations of key Western texts began in 1582. More than 70 missionaries undertook the task assisted by Chinese collaborators [22]. Between 1721 until after the

Opium Wars 1842, following a ban by the pope of Confucian rites in connection with Christian practice, all missionaries except those directly employed by the emperor were expelled from China, and work on the translations slowed. Nevertheless, the first book on linear perspective, entitled Shixue, was published during this time in 1729. It was reprinted in 1735, which indicates that the book had become quite popular within a relatively short time [cp. 44, p. 302].

Chinese art provides evidence of how radically Western ideas altered the way the world is thought of and experienced. When Chinese painting began to incorporate linear perspective in the 18th century, the term for perspective changed from Far Near (yuan jìn) to Through View (tòu shì), indicating a conceptual shift from poetic practice to objective argument [17, 19, 40]. While 'Far' and 'Near' appear to indicate a duality, this duality is very different from the Western counterpart. There is no separation. There are no categories. The terms indicate limits or poles, in between which the qualities of things oscillate, never fixed. A translation by James Legge of the *Commentary* to the classic *Book of Changes* states:

> Near [jìn] at hand, in his own person, he found things for consideration, and the same at a distance [yuan], in things in general. On this he devised the eight trigrams, to show fully the attributes of the spirit-like and intelligent (operations working secretly), and to classify the qualities of the myriads of things. [1, chapt. 2]

In *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams* by Guo Xi, written around 1080 CE [3, p. 367], one of the oldest and most important texts on Chinese landscape painting available to us, the Far Near method is further explained:

> Mountains have three types of distance. Looking up to the mountain's peak from its foot is called the high distance. From in front of the mountain looking past it to beyond is called deep distance. Looking from a nearby mountain at those more distant is called the level distance. High distance appears clear and bright; deep distance becomes steadily more obscure; level distance combines both qualities. The appearance of high distance is of lofty grandness. The idea of deep distance is of repeated layering. The idea of level distance is of spreading forth to merge into mistiness and indistinctness. [3, p. 168-169]

There is a stark contrast between what the Far Near method and Western linear perspective achieve. While Western painting until the mid-20th century is typically
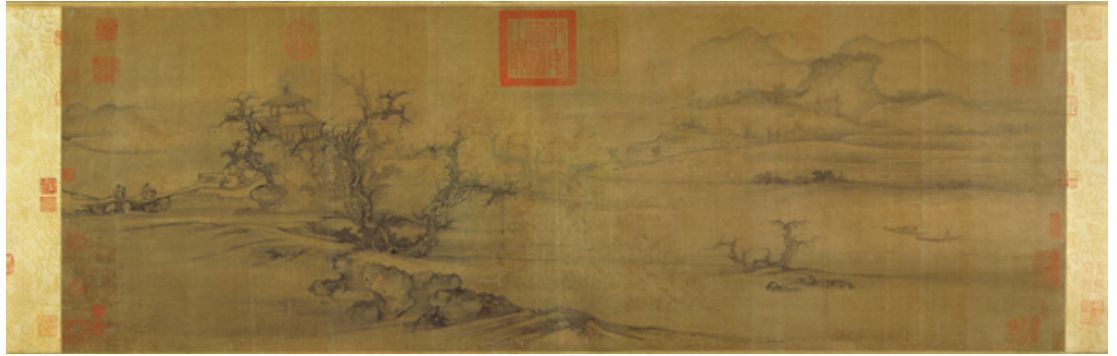
Figure 1: Guo Xi, Old Trees, Level Distance, ca. 1080. Handscroll, ink and colour on silk, 35.6 x 104.4 cm. Gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, by John M. Crawford Jr. in honor of Douglas Dillon, 1981.

oriented towards fixed ideals and absolutes, Chinese traditional painting attempts to emphasise the vitality of nature, vagueness, and change [14, 21, 43]. When Western art emphasised the genius author as a mediator to an understanding of the world, Chinese art de-emphasised the presence of the author as mediator. Instead, it stressed the function of the artwork as an interface between the viewer and the world [14]. In *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams* Guo Xi further states:

> You see a white path disappearing into the blue and think of traveling on it. You see the glow of setting sun over level waters and dream of gazing on it. You see hermits and mountain dwellers and think of lodging with them. You see cliffs by lucid water or streams over rocks, and long to wander there. [3, p. 153]

The attitude towards the work of art as a mediator between viewers and world, or rather between living and acting inhabitants and the world, was maintained over many hundreds of years. They are still mirrored in the famous Chinese painting manual *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, which was originally written around 600 years after Guo Xi's text, between 1679 and 1701:

> Figures should, in fact, be depicted in such a way that people looking at a painting wish they could change places with them. Otherwise, the mountain is just a mountain, the figures mere figures, placed by chance near each other and with no apparent connection; and the whole painting lacks vitality. [36, p. 220]

There is a notion of art as interactive in traditional Chinese aesthetics that is discussed in Western aesthetics only in the 20th century when media art emerged [34]. Chinese scrolls were explicitly conceived for interaction with a viewer. Chinese 'perspective'

appears to take this interaction into account. The view lines point outwards, and view-points — shifting at short intervals — draw the viewer in again and again into a different scene. The viewer enters into relations with a new set of scenes as she or he moves along. There is no fixation as the figures and objects seem to shift constantly, entering into new relations as the viewer unrolls the painting. And even though in Chinese traditional art there are also paintings meant to hang on the wall, they act differently than the framed paintings that are common in Western art. They draw the viewer into its play of relations between poles, between the far and the near and the mountains and waters. The term for landscape painting is Shan Shui painting, mountain(s) water(s) painting. There is no landscape in the Western sense, no 'cut out' from the world that is represented, as the sinologist Francois Jullien has highlighted [19]. The Shan Shui painting, no matter whether it is a scroll or hung on a wall, embeds interactivity.

Considering that traditional Chinese art appears to reflect what could be considered contemporary in Western thought, it is rather astonishing that Western aesthetics, with but a few exceptions, has largely ignored Asian thought. In publications of architectural philosophy and theory by Western scholars, Asian points of view are virtually absent. In China, the situation is rather different. In the 20th century, during the New Culture Movement, not only did Marxist thought but also Western aesthetics influenced by, for example, neo-Kantian philosophy and pragmatism enter China, and was popularised by influential overseas returnees, such as Cai Yuanpei and Hu Shih [9, 10, 22]. Philosophical thought in China has been strongly influenced by Western aesthetics. While many Chinese and overseas Chinese philosophers have linked Western and Asian aesthetics, e.g., famously Li Zehou [21], this thought has not transcended into the discipline of architecture. Architecture, in China, is viewed primarily as a technical discipline, and thus the influence of art and aesthetics has been very limited. At least partially, the reason for this is based on the fact that architecture was established as an academic discipline in China in the beginning of the 20th century, with the US American Beaux-Arts schools serving as a model [4, 33].

In the natural sciences discoveries were made in the past hundred years that appear to confirm ancient Asian wisdom and radically challenge Western dualistic views. These insights have been noticed in architectural phenomenology, but have rarely been reflected in architectural practice [26] – neither in Asia nor in the West. One could point out that Chinese myth conceived the world as emerging out of chaos, similar to how Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers have suggested the world might have emerged. One could further point out that the uncertainty and irreversibility that they have highlighted also finds a counterpart in Chinese philosophy [2, 31], and that the way

human beings are conceived in Chinese philosophy as interacting with environments in a circular relationship, is in congruence with 20th century discoveries in biology and cognitive science [27, 38]. Nevertheless, one also needs to be cautious. There is evidence that 20th-century modern scholars have failed in their interpretations of Chinese architecture and gardens because they made traditional Chinese architecture fit modern concepts [23]. Crossing boundaries requires the careful consideration of a methodology for the crossing. To be caught in a postmodern trap instead of a modern one would not be helpful. As anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has highlighted, shifting contexts allows for novel views and for making explicit that which had been hidden [35], but one needs to be careful how one does it. Donna Haraway has elucidated Strathern's method in the following way:

> It matters what ideas you use to think other ideas with. [...] Marilyn practices the art of comparison and analogy in the sense that she defines analogy as the bringing together or colliding together – or however they got together – of entities, beings, worlds, ideas, systems that are dissimilar, so that one holds still long enough to be an extended metaphor for investigating the other. [15]

In art, writers of the Xúngēn movement and artists, such as Qiu Zhijie and Xu Bing, for example, have shown that new ways of making, considerate of the Chinese traditions, are possible. In architecture, on the other hand, there are only a few examples that could compare. The architecture of Wang Shu could be seen as being an exception, but whether Wang Shu's architecture truly evokes Chinese conceptions of space has been questioned [8]. Nevertheless, Wang Shu is certainly correct in assuming that there is something at work in traditional Chinese art that is worthy of being re-discovered. It might provide us with new ways of conceiving an architecture that is ecological in a very direct sense of the word, reflecting a complexity of relations that would otherwise be difficult to envisage.

3. Conclusion

Research by Chinese scholars has highlighted how important a specific way of see-ing, and thus also of conceiving space, has been for traditional architecture in China [11, 20, 42]. The studies also provide a sound basis and a point of departure for comparison with recent studies of space in the West [25, 30]. The paper has outlined that further research in traditional Chinese aesthetics and the practices of making art could enrich current knowledge. It is suggested that such research could subsequently allow for the development of tools for the design of an architecture that resonates

the interconnectedness of culture and nature and life within. As there is evidence that interpretations of Chinese architecture and gardens by 20th century modern scholars have failed because they made Chinese traditional architecture fit modern concepts, caution should be taken in the design of a methodology for interpretation, to avoid being caught in a similar trap – this time a postmodern version. Further research is necessary to clarify practices and related aesthetic concepts as they relate to conceptions of space in China. Ideas of nature, as expressed in Shan Shui painting, and how they have influenced conceptions of space, for example, will need to be reviewed in more depth. Notions, such as embodied experience, performance, and ambiguity in relation to practices of making and writing, i.e., calligraphy, and to conceptions of space in aesthetics, would allow for another point of entry into research for future strategies and tools for design. The paper has outlined an approach for a new eco-poetic way of thinking the built environment and its design that is capable of conceptualising the interconnectedness of minds, bodies, environments, the sciences, and cultures. It is an approach in favour of a future in which technological progress is not considered a value in and of itself, a future in which the technological environments we live in are open for critique and design.

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