

Ecological Civilization and Ecological Aesthetics in China: An Overview

Introduction

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century, the impact of human activities on the global ecosystem has been increasing dramatically. One of the direct consequences of the industrial civilization is the global ecological crisis. For the sustainable and healthy survival of the bio-community, including humankind, a new alternative type of civilization should be proposed and promoted globally. In Chinese, such an ecological civilization (i.e. eco-civilization) can be called ›*shengtai wenming*‹ (生态文明). In 2007, ecological civilization was proposed by Hu Jintao, general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), in his report to the 17th National Congress of the CPC (Lu 2019: 105)¹. Since then, China takes the construction of eco-civilization as the national policy. Under this national atmosphere, ecological aesthetics (i.e. ecoaesthetics or eco-aesthetics) becomes one of the hot academic topics in China. Some scholars pay special attention to the relationship between ecological civilization and ecological aesthetics.

This paper firstly introduces the conception of ecological civilization in China and its international response. Then, the second section of the paper introduces ecological aesthetics before 2005. With this as the background, the third section focuses on ecological aesthetics promoted by ecological civilization in China and its unique contributions. In conclusion, the paper talks about the future of ecoaesthetics within the whole project of constructing eco-civilization.

1 The Conception of Ecological Civilization in China

The German academic, political scientist and researcher Iring Fetscher used the phrase ›ecological civilization‹ in his 1978 paper entitled

»Conditions for the Survival of Humanity: on the Dialectics of Progress«. Fetscher (1978) argues that we need to change our present industrial civilization radically and to establish an ecologically balanced »alternative civilization«, which he calls »ecological civilization«. Briefly speaking, Fetscher's intention is to combine the problem of Marxism and ecology so as to reflect the problematic economic development optimism from the perspective of an ecological consciousness.

In China, the term »ecological civilization« appeared in the 1980s in the academic domain and was then borrowed by political discourse. Ye Qianji proposed the »construction of ecological civilization« in The National Ecological Agriculture Symposium in 1987 (Lu 2019: 106). It was taken up, developed, and vigorously and successfully promoted, most importantly by Pan Yue, the Vice-minister of China's State Environmental Protection Administration at that time. In 2007, the term was used by Hu Jintao, general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), in his report to the 17th National Congress of the CPC. Since then, official policy proposes that China should build an ecological civilization, creating more sustainable relations between production, consumption, distribution, and economic growth. Ecological civilization was incorporated into the official discourse as a new model of growth to replace the old unsustainable model. Rather than emphasizing economic construction as the core of development, as it did in the past, China had come to realize that development, should it be sustainable, must entail a list of elements including the right relationship between man and nature. It is not hard to see that there is a great change from the conception of »sustainable development« to »ecological civilization«, which is from economic concern to philosophical rethinking. Ecological civilization was listed along with economic, political, cultural and social progress as one of the five goals in the country's overall development plan at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, when Xi Jinping was elected general secretary of the CPC Central Committee. The key tenets of ecological civilization include the need to respect, protect and adapt to nature, a commitment to resource conservation, environmental restoration and protection, recycling, low-carbon use, and sustainable development (Lu 2019: 112).

In Xi Jinping's report to the 19th CPC Congress in 2017, the construction of ecological civilization was emphasized dramatically. In the first part of the report, Xi stated approvingly that China had

made much progress on ecological civilization since the last Congress. Notably, the report used terms like ›beautiful China‹ along with ›rich and strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious‹ to describe the goals for China's future. For the Chinese people, ›beautiful China‹ means ›green China‹, a China with a healthy ecological environment. The third part of the report concerned basic strategy. ›Greening‹ was listed along with ›creative, coordinated, open and sharing‹ as the five basic concepts for China's development. In the fourth part of the report, Xi stated that there were three great challenges that China faced: pollution, financial risks, and poverty relief. As the title ›Speeding reform of ecological civilization system and building beautiful China‹ indicates, part four of the report is about ecological civilization. According to the report, humans and nature are a life community. Humans must respect nature, follow nature, and protect nature. Only by following the principles of nature will humans avoid taking the wrong way in receiving nature's gifts. Part twelve of the report was on ›A Community of Shared Future for Mankind‹. It said that humans are facing many common threats, which no country can deal with alone. Xi called on all the peoples in the world to build a human community of shared future and construct a world with lasting peace, safety for all, shared prosperity, openness, inclusion, cleanliness, and beauty (Xi 2017: 588–601).

During the past 7 years, President Xi Jinping has often thematized the construction of ecological civilization. For example:

The country should protect the environment like one protects his eyes and treat the environment like one treats his life.

Lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as gold and silver.

Mountains, water, forest, farmland and lakes are all parts of a common living community [...] the administration of their use and ecological rehabilitation must be in accordance with the law of nature (CPC Central Committee 2017: 8, 21, 47).

Although there is not any clear and widely accepted definition of ecological civilization within China, the significance of the notion can be summed up as follows: (1) to reflect upon the forces driving the whole of humanity to ecocide²; (2) to reflect upon human future within the framework of three historical stages of human civilization: agricultural civilization, industrial civilization, and ecological civilization; (3) as the successor to industrial civilization, the goal of ecological civilization is very helpful in healing ecological destruction and

catastrophe caused by industrial civilization; (4) ecological civilization enables us to clarify the meaning of civilization, to bring into focus the decadent barbarism of late capitalism³, and to envisage more clearly its transcendence; (5) the notion provides a new vision of the future that can capture people's imagination and mobilize them for the required social transformation, say, from modern capitalism to eco-socialism⁴.

The on-going project of constructing ecological civilization in China has attracted an international response. The phrase 'ecological civilization' wiggled its way into the lexicon of the international community at the United Nations Environment Programme Governing Council meeting in 2013 in Nairobi. The Council appreciated the Chinese delegation's promotion of ecological civilization as an effort to achieve sustainable development in light of national conditions. This delegation reassured its counterparts that ecological civilization is a more comprehensive expression of sustainable development. Australian scholar Arran Gare has published some outstanding work on the nature and philosophical foundation of ecological civilization in China. His book in 2017 expresses his basic points and statements, which can be summed up as follows: (1) The deficient assumptions of modernity led to the civilization of modernity, which must be replaced by ecological civilization, i.e., an ecologically sustainable civilization, a civilization based on process metaphysics and a fusion of science and the humanities in human ecology; (2) Civilizations are characterized by deep assumptions about the nature of the world and the place of humanity within it, and thereby the ultimate ends worth striving for; (3) Ecological civilization will involve a transformation in deep assumptions, ways of thinking, and ultimate aspirations; (4) What is required is the means to achieve this integration in order to mobilize humanity to redefine its place in the cosmos and its destiny, and then on this foundation, to create a society that augments life and the current regime of the global ecosystem. This will require a reorientation of philosophy to overcome fragmentation and replace the defective philosophical assumptions that have dominated modernity, including mainstream science.⁵

2 Ecological Aesthetics before 2005

It can be certainly said that there is a close connection between civilization and aesthetics. As a very complex term, civilization may mean an advanced state of human society; the act or process of civilizing, as by bringing out of a savage, uneducated, or unrefined state, or of being civilized; or cultural refinement, refinement of thought and cultural appreciation, and so on. Aesthetic activities always play important roles in the process of civilizing and cultural refinement, which can be mostly represented by the idea of ›aesthetic education‹. So, as a modern discipline, aesthetics lies at the heart of civilization. However, the conceptions of ecological aesthetics and ecological civilization emerged separately and developed independently until 2005. Let's firstly take a brief look at ecological aesthetics before 2005.

American ecologist Aldo Leopold's ›Conservation Esthetic‹ might be viewed as the early form of ecological aesthetics, because it takes the keyword ›community‹ borrowed from ecology as its theoretical foundation. In his 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac*, we can find the following influential maxim: ›A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.‹⁶ It is another American scholar named Joseph Meeker who firstly proposed the phrase of ›ecological esthetic‹. In his 1972 paper ›Notes Toward an Ecological Esthetic‹, Meeker's argument starts with the reflection of western aesthetic theories. He declares that since Plato western aesthetics has always been dominated by the great ›art versus nature‹ debate. Traditionally, aesthetic theory emphasized the separation of artistic from natural creation and assumed that art was the ›higher‹ or ›spiritualized‹ product of the human soul and ought not to be confused with the ›lower‹ or ›animal‹ world of biology. For Meeker, no matter we regard art as ›unnatural‹ product or as man's spiritual transcendence over nature, both ideas distort the relationship of nature and art. With this analysis as background, Meeker asserts that Darwin's evolutionary theory shows the evolution processes of living creatures and indicates that traditional anthropocentric thinking has overestimated human spirituality and underestimated biological complexity. From the 19th century, philosophers began to re-examine the closeness of biology and humanity and began to re-evaluate aesthetic theory in the light of new biological knowledge. Under such kind of research thinking, Meeker asserts that »aesthetic theory may be more

successful in defining beauty when it has incorporated some of the conceptions of nature and its processes which have been formulated by contemporary biologists and ecologists» (Meeker 1974: 124–125).

Briefly put, the strategy of Meeker's ecological aesthetics is as follows: taking Darwin's theory of biological evolution as a theoretical foundation and laying emphasis on humankind's biological nature, reflecting upon and reconstructing aesthetic theory in light of contemporary biological and ecological knowledge. Meeker also criticizes the intellectual bias between natural scientists and humanists and advocates crossing disciplinary boundaries between science and humanity. It is especially meaningful that Meeker points out that ecology is a potent new model of reality which offers good opportunity to reconcile the products of humanistic and scientific investigation. He concludes that »ecology demonstrates the inter-penetrability of man and the natural environment« (Meeker 1974: 136). This conclusion indicates clearly the theoretical orientation of Meeker's ecological aesthetics: drawing lessons from ecological knowledge fully and grounding the aesthetic research on the science of ecology.

Meeker's research is mainly a theoretical one. In contrast, Paul Gobster (1999), American Research Landscape Architect with the USDA Forest Service's Northern Research Station in Chicago, develops what he calls »An Ecological Aesthetic for Forest Landscape Management«. His research broadly addresses the question of how can we design, plan for, and manage landscapes to sustain mutually beneficial relationships between people and ecological systems. The context for much of his work has been park and forest landscapes in urban and wildland settings, with the focus on three interrelated topic areas: perception and experience of landscapes, meanings of nature, and access and equity issues. Among the three topics, the first one is closely connected to the aesthetic field, because it aims at the question of how people perceive and experience parks and forests. The second one is actually a philosophy of nature and its practical application, trying to answer the question of how nature is understood and valued by different individuals and stakeholder groups, and how these values can be incorporated into landscape restoration and management. Gobster (1995) seems to intend to develop Leopold's ecological aesthetics so as to integrate aesthetic and biodiversity values and to resolve conflicts between them.⁷ The attractive feature of Gobster's work is his effort of what he calls »Linking Ecology, Sustainability and Aesthetics«

(Gobster 2000),⁸ or his main concern for »What does Aesthetics have to do with Ecology« (Gobster 2007)?⁹

Limited by the conditions of international communication in 1990s, Chinese scholars did not have enough access to ecological aesthetics in the west. To some extent, they developed their own theories of ecological aesthetics without reference to the literature mentioned above. The landmark of this special field in China is »The First Nationwide Symposium of Ecological Aesthetic in China« in 2001, the formal beginning of the new century. Both Zeng Fanren and Cheng Xiangzhan participated in the conference and began their works on ecoaesthetics. Zeng Fanren's main idea of »ecological existential aesthetic conception« is found in his conference paper in 2001, which is entitled »Ecological Aesthetics: A New Aesthetic Conception of Ecological Existence in the Post-modern Context«, which was published in the following year. The paper asserts that ecological aesthetics first emerged in a postmodern context. It shares a close relationship with both the continuing crisis of environmental degradation set on by pollution, nuclear threat, as well as developments in the field of deep ecology. Specifically, ecological aesthetics is an aesthetic perspective within ecological existentialism which holds significant implications with regards to shifts in perspectives of modern aesthetics, the evolution of eco-literature and the restoration of traditional Chinese ecological wisdom. Issues such as the proper conceptualization of the discipline itself, appropriate measures in addressing the re-enchantment of the world, establishing an intellectual position on modernity as well as science and technology, and its relationship with the field of practical aesthetics are but several among a whole host of matters awaiting resolve in the field of ecological aesthetics.¹⁰ Based on this paper, Zeng developed his theory very rapidly and published his first book in 2003 entitled *Collected Papers on Aesthetics of Ecological Existence*. The core idea of the book is a phrase, »ecological existence«, which is an ecological interpretation of Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology.¹¹

3 Ecological Aesthetics and Ecological Civilization in China

Based on the above, the main trend of ecological aesthetics before 2005 can be summarized as »Linking aesthetics with ecology«. The

story changed dramatically since 2005, which can be called ›Linking aesthetics with ecological civilization‹.

In 2005, the concept of ecological civilization was taken as a new vision for research on ecological aesthetics. This change was visible in the conference ›An International Conference on Aesthetics and Literature in the Vision of Contemporary Ecological Civilization‹ hosted by Shandong University in 2005. There were more than 180 participants from the United Kingdom, Norway, Finland, Holland, South Korea, Japan and China. The collection of the conference papers was formally published in 2006 entitled *Man and Nature: Aesthetics and Literature in the Vision of Contemporary Ecological Civilization*. Zeng Fanren submitted his conference paper entitled ›The Notion of Ecological Aesthetics in the Vision of Contemporary Ecological Civilization‹, which is based on an article entitled ›On Ecological Civilization‹ published in *Guangming Daily*, April 30, 2004. The newspaper article asserts that human civilization is in the process of transforming into ecological civilization, which is a new form of civilization after industrial civilization. Borrowing some key ideas from the *Guangming Daily* article, Zeng asserts that the coming of ecological civilization raises a series of new questions for aesthetics, promoting the aesthetics in industrial civilization to transform in order to adapt to ecological civilization.¹² Following the 2005 conference theme, Zeng Fanren continued his inquiry into the relationship between ecological aesthetics and ecological civilization. He entitled his 2013 book as *The Exploration and Dialogue of Aesthetics in the Era of Ecological Civilization*, which is a collection of his related papers and articles in the new century. Based on the ecological nature of human existence, the book explores the way to unify the ecological, humanistic and aesthetic conceptions, the ideal of ecological aesthetics.¹³

Cheng Xiangzhan thinks that the notion of ecological civilization guides a new direction for the future of ecological aesthetics. Inspired by the ideas of respecting, protecting and adapting to nature promoted by the 18th National Congress of the CPC (2012), he defines ecological civilization as a ›civilization in harmony with nature‹: human agent as the creator and subject of civilization ought to respect nature ethically, to adapt to nature in the ways of production and living, and to protect nature in practical actions. According to his understanding, the significance of promoting the ecological civilization for the constructing of ecological aesthetics can be summed up in the following four points: 1) leading to explore ecological aesthetics with

the focus on the relationship between aesthetic activity and ecological civilization; 2) to ecologicalize¹⁴ the aesthetic subject from Cartesian subject to embodied subject; 3) to ecologicalize the aesthetic object, i. e., objects appeared in ecological awareness, so as to differ ecological aesthetics from nature aesthetics and environmental aesthetics; and 4) to put the theory of ecological aesthetics into the ecological practices such as urban and rural planning and design so as to build up beautiful China.¹⁵

With shared interests and visions, Zeng Fanren and Cheng Xiangzhan launched an academic dialogue titled ›The Construction of Aesthetics in the Age of Eco-civilization: A Dialogue on the Idea of Eco-civilization and Today's Transformation of Chinese Aesthetics‹. They assert that the emergence and flourishing of eco-aesthetics in China in the 21st century is a historical necessary response to the new age of eco-civilization. The transformation from industrial civilization to eco-civilization is not only a significant economic and social transformation, but also a transformation from modern western anthropocentrism to eco-humanism or eco-holism, and a transformation from modern aesthetics of subjectivity to aesthetics of ecological existence. Eco-aesthetics not only takes ecology as its base, but also takes eco-philosophy related to ecology, especially Heidegger's philosophy of ecological existence, as its base. Chinese eco-aesthetics borrows a lot of theoretical resources from western environmental aesthetics and is closely connected with the economic background of traditional Chinese agricultural society and the idea of ›the unity of nature and mankind‹ in traditional Chinese philosophy.¹⁶

4 Conclusion

It is well known that the global ecological crisis is threatening the very existence of humanity. Some scholars including myself assert that the most radical response to global ecological disaster is the creation of a new, ecological civilization. That is to say, an international transition to new eco-civilization is necessary for all human beings. The ongoing Chinese project of ›Advancing Ecological Civilization and Building a Beautiful China‹ is the significant social practice globally.

Aesthetics lies at the heart of civilization. Ecological aesthetics is the ecological transition of aesthetics moving towards ecological civi-

lization. Both of them need eco-friendly deep assumptions and ideals behind them, which should be explored philosophically. The unique feature of ecological aesthetics in China is its close connection with ecological civilization, which means that the theoretical construction of ecological aesthetics is one intrinsic part of the whole project of constructing ecological civilization. They should encourage and promote each other. The future of human survival depends on the successful construction of ecological civilization, to which ecological aesthetics should contribute more positive power.

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Notes

- ¹ Lu's book offers a brief historical narration of the development of the concept of ecological civilization. See Lu (2019: 105–113).
- ² The neologism »ecocide« can be used to refer to any extensive destruction of the natural environment and disruption or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory to such an extent that the survival of the inhabitants of that territory is endangered.
- ³ Late capitalism is a term coined by continental European socialists in the late 1930s that has come to refer to modern capitalism from World War II onward. Later capitalism refers to the historical epoch since 1940, including the post–World War II economic expansion called the golden age of capitalism.
- ⁴ Ecosocialism is a vision of a transformed society in harmony with nature, and the development of practices that can attain it. It is directed toward alternatives to all socially and ecologically destructive systems, such as patriarchy, racism, homophobia and the fossil-fuel based economy. It is based on a perspective that regards other species and natural ecosystems as valuable in themselves and as partners in a common destiny.
- ⁵ See Gare (2017).
- ⁶ See Leopold (1968: 224–225).
- ⁷ See Gobster (1995).
- ⁸ See Gobster (2000: xxi–xxviii).
- ⁹ See Gobster et al. (2007).
- ¹⁰ The paper was translated into English and published in *Critical Theory* (2017). The English journal's chief editor is Zeng Jun of Shanghai University, and Cheng Xiangzhan was invited to act as the special chief editor of the volume.
- ¹¹ See Zeng (2003).
- ¹² See Zeng (2006).
- ¹³ Zeng (2013).
- ¹⁴ North American environmental education guru, David Orr, explains that all education is environmental education, so too all education can be ecologicalized—can help teach and reinforce ecological understandings.
- ¹⁵ See Cheng (2014: 17–19).
- ¹⁶ Zeng and Cheng (2014).