

Embodied Perception and Harmonious Unity: Aesthetic Experience in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Painting and Chinese Song Dynasty Landscapes

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Abstract This paper explores embodied perception and its relation to aesthetic experience based on French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting. The discussion draws cases from both Western art, post-impressionist Paul Cezanne (1839–1906) and non-Western art, Chinese landscape paintings from the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). As I argue, their general vision for the primacy of embodiment in perception is similar; artists in both practices aim at a balance between representing visible forms of nature and interpreting their invisible, yet deeper meanings for human existence. Further, I will argue, a focus on Chinese aesthetic thought helps us recognize the aesthetics of moral existence and hence contributes significantly to self-cultivation. Influenced by Chinese philosophical traditions, Chinese landscape paintings, compared with Cezanne's works, exemplify more strongly the indispensable role of the human body and indicate more explicitly a link between embodiment and moral ethics. The latter suggestion of the moral underpinnings in aesthetic perception and experience is particularly significant since Merleau-Ponty has not elaborated upon this point in any explicit manner.

Keywords Aesthetic experience · Embodiment · Perception · Merleau-Ponty · Chinese landscape painting

1 Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty expresses in his phenomenology that the human body plays a significant role in our perception. It enables a synthetic combination of our sensory taking in different objects' qualities from the world on the one hand, and on the

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other, our subjective grasping them in their meanings for us. This primacy of embodiment has its vivid illustration in aesthetics¹ in which we see examples of Western (Paul Cezanne) and non-Western artists (Chinese landscape painters) who aim at a balance between representing visible forms of nature and interpreting their deeper meanings for human existence. Emphasizing on the primacy of embodiment in perception, Merleau-Ponty, however, leaves silence of the relationship between the body and moral education. This overlooked aspect of the moral underpinnings in embodiment is strongly developed in Chinese landscape paintings in which Chinese philosophical traditions expressed the essence through the silk surface, that is, a harmonious unity in a person's relationship with nature, with herself, and with others. Chinese aesthetics is therefore in its essence an education of living a dignified and harmonious life.

My discussion in this essay will center on three questions: (1) What is the relationship between aesthetics, the human body, and the creation of art? (2) What contribution, if any, will our knowledge of the human body bring to aesthetic experience?² And (3) what is the connection between aesthetics and ethics? In his major philosophical work *Phenomenology of Perception*³ and essays on aesthetics, Merleau-Ponty offers an analysis of the intertwining between artworks and the human body. On the one hand, he suggests that the artist's work embodies primary features of human behavior: perception, gesture, and expression. On the other, the personalized skill and style of the artist's lived body captures human existence in the world. Moreover, the artist has operated this skill in dialog with the world to arrive at a deeper grasp of human existence and of her dynamic relation to her environment.

I will organize the essay in the following way. In Sect. 2, I will first elaborate the philosophical foundations of Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied perception. I will then in Sect. 3 offer Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of paintings by Paul Cezanne, a paradigm post-impressionist who Merleau-Ponty takes to be a true philosopher practicing phenomenology in painting.⁴ In Sect. 4 I will explore the moral implications in Merleau-Ponty's theory, which leads me to a study of Chinese aesthetics in Sect. 5. Particularly, I will look at Chinese landscape paintings by Li Cheng (919–967 A.D) and Guo Xi (1020–1090 A.D), from the early Song and the Northern Song Dynasty. My purpose of introducing Chinese artists and reading their works through Merleau-Ponty is twofold: first, to suggest a cross-cultural value in

¹ The proper definition and subject matter of aesthetics have been contested issues since the terminology "aesthetics" was first introduced by German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in the eighteenth century. Based on its Greek root "aisthesis" which means perception or sensation, Baumgarten first coined this name of the discipline to connote a novel field of inquiry as a science of sensory cognition, that is, a science whose subject is not pure ideas but sensory objects in general.

² As Paul Guyer in his 3-volume work *A History of Modern Aesthetics* argues, the core subject matter of the discipline of aesthetics since the eighteenth century is a concern with a certain kind of experience. According to him, it is "the study of the nature and value of aspects of the human experience of art and (sometimes) nature." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014, p.1).

³ See Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Routledge, NY 1962, p. 185). Hereafter abbreviated as PP.

⁴ As Merleau-Ponty sees, there was proximity between the activity to which he had devoted his life as a philosopher and the activity to which painters devote theirs.

Merleau-Ponty's claim by introducing resources from non-Western art. Second, my discussion seeks to enrich the scope of Western-centered aesthetic experience by following a new direction suggested by the Chinese aesthetic thought on cultivating a world view of holistic and thus harmonious unity between one's environment and inner self.⁵ Chinese landscape art reminds us of a fundamental idea in aesthetic experience that experience is in its nature environmental. One person starts her life by learning from the environment and learning from others within it. She has to learn to be part of her environment and a member of her community. It is an educational process of self-formation in which understanding of the self is fused with one's perception of the world within which one is situated. What I find more explicit in Chinese Song Dynasty landscape paintings is the philosophical as well as educational theme of living a dignified and harmonious life. Its ultimate goal is to achieve harmony in a person's relationship with nature, with her self, and with others.

2 Embodied Perception and Expression

One central theme of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is the primacy of embodiment in perception.⁶ Merleau-Ponty develops this notion of embodied perception through three steps. First, he criticizes the deficiency in two positions, empiricism and intellectualism, when each of two holds an exclusive explanation of perception. Second, he recovers the primordial level of perceptual experience by advocating a synthesis of empiricism and intellectualism. Third, it is by virtue of the human body that Merleau-Ponty argues we are ultimately able to achieve this synthesis. The human body, on one hand, situates our consciousness in corporeal reality and thus is not a mere absolute subject understood by intellectualism; on the other hand, the body is subjective and active source through which we experience and know the world, and hence distinguishes itself from the usual empiricist presentation of the body as object. Merleau-Ponty's approach to perception rests on the premise that there is no duality between subject and object or between mind and body. A synthetic combination of both opens up a phenomenal field in which our sensory experience invests the object's quality with vital value, grasping it in its meaning for us. Perception in this sense is inhabited by a meaning which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence (Dillon 1997).

⁵ I introduce Chinese aesthetics and art not to make China serve the role of the exotic "other" which is always more or less suspect. Rather, the journey to China is an opportunity and also a means of reopening understanding of human existence based on some similarities that I see through the cross-cultural comparison. Jacques Taminiaux, a student of Merleau-Ponty and a professor of philosophy at University of Louvain in Belgium, holds a similar view that what his teacher regarded as the core of Cezanne's paintings are not so much foreign to Chinese pictorial tradition. As Taminiaux addresses, the connection between the two is based on three fundamental themes in painting: (1) dwelling in the things; (2) chiasm, or reversibility between the seer and the seen; (3) the dynamics of visible and invisible. For more details, see Taminiaux, Jacques. "A Phenomenological Look at Chinese Painting"《中国绘画的现象学一瞥》, 余碧平译, 载《哲学译丛》, 1999年1月, 第40-45页.

⁶ See William Schroeder, *Continental Philosophy: A Critical Approach* (Blackwell Publishing 2005, pp.197–205). As Schroeder reads, Merleau-Ponty's main contribution "is to illuminate lived perception."

Let us first look at the two positions Merleau-Ponty criticizes. Empiricism holds the view that all our knowledge is derived from perceptions or from our senses. Empiricism understands perception as a pure impression produced in a subject; to see a round shape, for example, is to have an impression of roundness. According to empiricism, impression is generated in the perceiving subject as a causal result of the brain's response to external stimuli from an objective world as given. Sensation is therefore the immediate consequence of nervous excitation. And the qualities appear in the subject are treated as the product of some mental chemistry. The mistake here, as Merleau-Ponty argues, is that empiricism hides from us in the first place "the cultural world" in which nevertheless almost our whole life is led (PP, 27).⁷ For most of us, nature is hardly separated from the human world which is full of things that bear cultural meanings, for instance, cities, streets, buildings, etc. But for empiricism, these objects only have a definition of what we perceive through the physical and chemical properties of the stimuli which act upon our sensory apparatus, so that only by accident has the human world any meaning. Empiricism extorts experience by making the human world a mythical illusion, when in fact it is human existence concretizes and recognizes its meaning. Reducing the perceiving subject to a merely passive sensory receptor and generator, empiricism excludes from perception the anger and joy which one nevertheless reads in a face of somebody else. But the fact is that there is nothing in a face that is predestined to look angry or happy. Empiricism devotes the subject's mental life solely to introspection and projection of memories. In doing so, empiricism renders perception to be merely a progressive noting down of qualities.

But not only does empiricism distort experience of the cultural world, the natural world is also falsified (PP, 28). The natural world which empiricism describes is a collection of sensory stimuli as well as qualities. The mistake here is that the context (figure-background, relationship among elements of the field) and holistic functioning of the nerves are ignored. Empiricists fail to account for elementary facts about perception based on the facts learned by psychology and verified by factual perceptual experience because all perception is contextual and there are no isolated atoms of sensation. Empiricist view of a conception of pure impression, i.e., the experience of an "undifferentiated, instantaneous, dotlike impact" (PP, 3), will not produce any perception since even the simplest sensory given must have a figure-background structure. Our actual perceptions always have a bearing on relationships and not on any pure, undifferentiated terms. Take a simple example of a white patch on a homogenous background. Each point in its turn can be perceived only as a figure on a background. The ground acts as a field for the patch, which overlays it. The edge has a distinct definition as an edge which defines the shape of the patch. This figure-background structure, informed by Gestalt theory,⁸ is not a contingent characteristic of factual perception; rather, it reveals the fundamental fact

⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, the lived body, as the core of the person, is always dependent on culture.

⁸ The gestalt psychologists discovered the structure of the figure-ground relationship in which an element of ambiguity is always introduced into the figure by the ground. As Merleau-Ponty argues, the clarification of this ambiguity in the perceived world calls for a creative and personal response to the world by the lived body. See PP, 3–65 for more detailed discussion.

that the perceptual object is always in the middle of something else and it always forms part of a field.

“The red patch which I see on the carpet is red only in virtue of a shadow which lies across it, its quality is apparent only in relation to the play of light upon it, and hence as an element in a spatial configuration. Moreover the colour can be said to be there only if it occupies an area of a certain size...” (PP, 5)

The pure impression is, therefore, inconceivable, and a pure sensation would amount to no sensation. The elements of the patch coalesce to form a whole, a meaning—which exists when a part creates more than it presents. Moreover, perception develops out of a field of ambiguous relations to which the completion of perception would mistakenly assign some determinacy. We should not think of the quality of an object as fully developed and determined because the fact is that experience offers nothing like that. In the world, there are many unclear sights. For example, a landscape on a misty day is unclear for our perceptions, although it is not ambiguous in itself.

By using the world as our starting-point to understand a perception, empiricism is criticized for offering a passive role of the knower in perception which tends to reduce one to the status of a mere receiver of information. This error conceals rather than reveals subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty rejects this empiricist view that experience is passively undergone, that the mind is a white board on which sense impressions are imprinted and in which they combine to make up complex ideas. A true description of the phenomenon of perception, on his view, seeks to return to the pre-objective realm which is characteristic of context, meaning, and indeterminacy. The world, in this pre-objective realm, appears as a coherent, continuous whole rather than in atomic segments. The question then is how we acquire the meaning in this continuous whole. Empiricism's answer is that association and projection of memories provide this explanation. On this view, the meaning of the word red is provided by previous experience in which one referred to the same word. Knowledge thus appears as a system of substitutions in which one impression is associated with an earlier one without justifying the association. This ultimately reduces the meaning of words to the “misinterpretation of vague resemblance or to the meaninglessness of association by contiguity.” (PP, 18) For Merleau-Ponty, however, the parts of a thing are not bound together by a merely external association. The mountain, for example, must present in its actual appearance some characteristic which gives ground for recognizing it as a thing. In reality, we perceive a unity of a thing before noticing the contiguity and resemblance of stimuli. In other words, the constitution of the whole in perception is not achieved by association, but is a condition of association. Elements can be associated only if they are antecedently related to one another in a field of potential figures. Our appreciation of a quality is always bound up with a whole perceptual context in which meaning resides in each quality.

Intellectualism, on the opposite end of this spectrum, holds a view that perception starts with a fruitful attention which leads our consciousness to formulate perceptual judgments about shape, depth, color, etc. Perception is a purely intellectual process, a form of reasoning through which a world forms itself around humans from the

outset and exists for humans. The absolute source of knowledge and experience, intellectualism alleges, is the human mind, not the external world or body, as empiricism would argue. Perception is preceded by meaning-giving operations in one's mind and is conditioned by laws of judgment that only psychological analysis can construe. Two basic versions of intellectualism exist: one relies on attention, and the other on judgment. The problem with intellectualism, according to Merleau-Ponty, is similar to the problem with empiricism. He claims that intellectualism is not a real alternative to empiricism because intellectualism simply assigns to the mind all the tasks that empiricism seeks to complete by relating sense data to one another.

Intellectualism starts with a notion of attention by which the human mind elucidates meaning implicit in the object, because the perceived object must already contain the intelligible structure which it reveals. If my mind finds a rectangle in the shape of a study desk, it is because the desk has already put the rectangle in it. By surveying given elements, attention acts like a beam of light that illuminates the darkness and thus makes explicit those meanings and structures that already exist in the objects. In this sense, attention creates nothing⁹ and it would be difficult to explain knowledge acquisition if we rely exclusively on intellectualism since little distinction is made between how we perceive an object in the first place and how we develop knowledge later.

In another version of intellectualism, judgment is introduced as "*what sensation lacks to make perception possible.*" (PP, 37) On this view, perception is a judgment on the basis of given signs, and judgment often has the job of offsetting the possible dispersal of sensation. The problem with this view, however, is that it ignores the conceptual differences between perception and knowledge, and hence perception degenerates into a function of linking objects indifferently. This view of perception also runs contrary to our actual experience, in which there is a distinction between seeing and judging. Ordinary experience sees sense experience as taking appearance at its face value, whereas judgment is considered as an effort to know something and to take a stand. Furthermore, by referring to the twentieth century psychology and epistemology, Merleau-Ponty advocates the view that mind is not a purely mental judgment, but a synthesis of the integrated operations of all the senses a lived body possesses.¹⁰ The lived body does not simply impose a mental structure on the world, as intellectualism claims. Rather the lived body forms a background which is taken up, lived, and altered in response to the external world. More specifically, there is a whole background of habits, practical knowledge, and skills that is available to the lived body, and they together form a unity of actions that interact with the world. The human body does not learn the coordination between its various parts through merely intellectual processing; rather the body develops an adjustment system along with its living in the world.

Intellectualism, despite its appearance to the contrary, shares the same prejudice with empiricism regarding the objective world and is equally incapable of accounting for our perceptual experience. They both assume that there is already a

⁹ As Merleau-Ponty comments, "[J]ust as in empiricist consciousness which constitutes nothing at all, attention remains an abstract and ineffective power, because it has no work to perform." See PP, 32.

¹⁰ Thus the lived body reacts to the perceptual field as an organic whole. See PP, 73–97.

structure in the world ready to be decoded by perception. Empiricism overlooks the fact that we need to know how any internal connection is made between the object and the act which it triggers. Intellectualism overlooks the fact that the difference is not in the form of judgment but in the sensible text to which it gives form, to perceive in the full sense of the word is to apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgment begins. Merleau-Ponty characterizes the prejudice in empiricism and intellectualism as follows: "In the first case consciousness is too poor, in the second too rich for any phenomenon to appeal compellingly to." (PP, 33) In effect, both empiricism and intellectualism enter into knowledge at a higher level than perception. Perception opens us into a primordial world of the thickness and depth in which a meaningful structure is constructed through the exchange between the human body and the world.

A phenomenological understanding of sense experience needs an alternative to both empiricism and intellectualism. Locating his own position between the two, Merleau-Ponty develops a theory of embodied perception that relates the vital value in perception to the human body's inherence in the world. The world and the subject were conceived as being in a dialectical relation in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, neither one could be defined without the other (Madison 1981). In so doing, he situates the human body back into its living world. "To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world." (PP, 33) The body operates in all aspects of our experience of the world and articulates the world into meanings by relating what is grasped to its past and future. A lived body in Merleau-Ponty's account is both a perceiving and an expressing being. First of all, to say the lived body perceives the world is different from the claim that the lived body is the real and ultimate source of the structure of the world. On the contrary, the world teaches us how to survey it correctly, and in this sense the lived body is tutored by the world. Our perception is creative, but our body does not create the world; it rather conforms itself to the world. Once our body is taught how to perceive, feel, and direct itself toward the world, it can transform these strategies into bodily habits. This way of tutoring is similar to learning how to drive. At first, we attentively try to remember all the locations of buttons; we carefully touch the pedal and brake to see how they work; we cautiously watch the driving mirror to observe whatever is passing by the car. Different automobile controls build up together a context of the small automobile world, and we, by engaging our body with these devices, gradually grasp the car's various structures and functions. All these are things the world teaches us. During this whole learning process, the world tutors us how to explore bodily things in it. As we become skillful in driving in all kinds of situations, we begin to know intuitively when to use which control in the car, what to look at in the mirror, etc. Until then, our body works on mastering these car devices, through the gradual development of habits.

With respect to the lived body as perceiving being, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes two concepts entailed in the notion of intentionality: purposes and directedness. Different purposes determine various perspectives and lead us to focus on specific features of the perceptual field. For example, when a teacher gives a lecture, her intention of knowing how well students understand her lectures will direct her perception to focus her perception on students' facial expression. Merleau-Ponty claims that although we have the ability to focus on an individual's intentionality, we do not attend to it all the

time. Perception takes place at a higher level that is conditioned by structures inherent in the world itself. Besides purposiveness, intentionality in Merleau-Ponty's account has another meaning—directedness. Directedness is bound up with motoric intentions, behavioral activities, bodily habits, etc., which operate in the way the lived body sweeps over things. The lived body is the source of this directedness in that it initiates all our kinesthetic, linguistic, and emotional activities. We change body location to achieve a vision of something; we gesture with body language to express our feeling. Certain bodily movements partly contribute to the fascinating result of speech. All these experiences show that no activity can happen without the involvement of our lived body. The body operates in all aspects of our living experience of the world; our fundamental contact with things arises from practical, tangible experiences of our body's relating and habituating itself to things. Perception, as one of our fundamental senses, encounters things through the body's exploration of them. The lived body is therefore a perceiving being.

Our lived body is an expressing being as well. Our bodily relationship with objects provokes in us reactions we either like or dislike, and it expresses our response to various situations we confront. Our bodily perception and movements are themselves an expression of who we are, how we live, and what we favor. Our lived body is therefore both the source and the vehicle for expressing our existence in the world. We are embodied vehicles of perception, intentions, actions, and affections. For Merleau-Ponty, the lived body is a unity since what is expressed and the expression itself are inseparable. Merleau-Ponty offers an analogy between the lived body and speech. Each speaker has recognizable, personalized gestures, expression habits, and thoughts. Likewise, the lived body has its distinctive, individual way of dwelling in the world. Not only are our lived bodies unique with regard to their shape, color, form, etc., but even human practical capacities in general, tool-using abilities for example, are taken up in personalized ways. Our lived bodies are unities of our habitual responses to situations and perceptions, conveying significant aspects of how we live. Embodied expression is therefore the realization of meanings, no matter whether it is through perception, action, or speech.

3 Embodiment in Paul Cezanne's Paintings

The primacy of embodiment finds extensive application in Merleau-Ponty's theory of painting since for him, it is art that is most successful in giving expression to man's fundamental contact with being (Crowther 1982; Bate 1974; Foti 2000). Paul Cezanne, in particular, becomes the paradigm artist for Merleau-Ponty since the latter sees a similarity between what he advocates in Phenomenology and what Cezanne elaborates in painting.¹¹ Put in other words, just as Merleau-Ponty seeks in

¹¹ Such a close link that Merleau-Ponty finds between himself as a philosopher and Cezanne as the painter does not come naturally in the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics, for we know from Plato's *Republic* that those two activities are antithetical. It is therefore my intention in this Sect. 3 to offer a clarification. See Jacques Taminiaux's explanation of this proximity in his essay "The Thinker and the Painter," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1993). The *Aesthetic Reader* has

philosophy a middle way between empiricism and intellectualism, Cezanne defines his post-impressionist paintings by taking a similar halfway between academic realism and impressionist paintings.

More specifically, Cezanne in his paintings expresses a “metaphysical doubt” (Toadvine 1997), aiming at the immediate impression of nature, while at the same time reacting against the conventional means used to achieve this artistic expression. “Conventional means” refer to techniques dominantly used in both academic realist paintings and early impressionist works of art. Academic realism mainly conceives painting as the incarnation of imagined scenes and the projection of dreams outward. For them, painting demands outline, composition, and distribution of light. Cezanne says of the old masters that they “replaced reality with imagination and by the abstraction which accompanies it.”¹² By contrast, the impressionist painters rely on optical sensations to depict the fluctuations of light. They want to capture the fleeting changes of nature, and the way objects appear to instantaneous perception. In order to do this, impressionist painters typically use only the seven primary colors of the spectrum to achieve the effect light and air have on objects. Cezanne, however, struggles in his own way of expressing art, somewhere between these two mainstreams. He sees both painting traditions problematic, be it a mere imitation of nature or a projection of painter’s subjective imagination. Cezanne looks for a third way to capture all integrated operations in an artist’s perception of actual objects. He seeks to express faithfully the total grasp of nature as perceived.

Rejecting his early influence from academic realism, Cezanne stresses that artistic creation is not an act of intellectual “imagination” projecting an inner world outward. His earlier pictures—up to about 1840—are painted fantasies in which board strokes are drawn to depict the figures. And these fantasies of figures present the moral physiognomy of the actions rather than their visible aspect. (CD, 61) As Cezanne later realizes, academic realist notion of art separates art from nature. But he wants to make them the same, drawing on the canvas a personal apperception which he embodies in sensations and which he asks the understanding to organize into a painting. Similar to Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of a dichotomy in perception between sensation and judgment, Cezanne also seeks to avoid the ready-made alternatives in artistic presentation between nature and composition, between sensations and understanding.

While he distinguishes himself from realist painters, Cezanne also rejects impressionists’ techniques. Impressionism is trying to capture the way objects appear to instantaneous perception. To achieve the effect of natural lights cast on objects and striking our eyes, impressionism has to use only the seven colors of the spectrum and exclude “siennas, ochres, and black.” (CD, 61) In so doing, impressionists overlook the context in nature which always generates a color through a co-effect of other peripheral colors. We never perceive in reality, and

Footnote 11 continued

assembled together Merleau-Ponty’s all three essays on painting along with a good collection of critical essays on his philosophy of painting.

¹² Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Cezanne’s Doubt”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson. (Evanston: Northwestern 1993a, p. 62). Hereafter abbreviated CD.

hence should not paint on canvas, a color merely in its local tone, meaning the color which is taken on isolated from its surroundings. In nature, every color “elicits the appearance of its complement, and these complementaries heighten one another.” (CD, 62) Consequently, Cezanne sees it as problematic when impressionists paint pink colors onto gray; they draw the background with mere green colors so as to capture the momentary lighting effects on paper. Cezanne’s critique is that by excluding the other two colors, i.e., pink and gray, impressionists falsify the relationship of interacting and contrasting among complementary colors. Impressionists have missed the phenomena of color contrast that modifies all the other colors so that they take away from the green background its characteristics of a real color. In other words, not only must there be a green in the picture, there should also be the complementary pink-like red on canvas that will elicit the green. And this color relationship is part of an object’s form. To keep truthful to each color’s own material substance and not to break down its resonant tone, Cezanne paints with a variety of warm colors as well as black, and present a progression of colors interacting with each other which finally captures an object’s solidity and natural weight.¹³ Cezanne aims to express the unity of an object in each quality because he sees in the world of ordinary objects a structure that manifests the concrete form and mass in each quality.

Similarly, in his attempt to retain the natural depth of objects, Cezanne substitutes for the single-lined contour a multiplication of outlines which present us a three-dimensional object. Cezanne rejects the geometric composition used in traditional painting, believing that “the contour of an object conceived as a line encircling the object belongs not to the visible world but to geometry.” (CD, 65) In Cezanne’s famous work “Mont Sainte-Victoire.c.1902-1906” we can no longer find the clear outline of mountains, which is easily recognizable in some of Cezanne’s early paintings on the same mountain theme. In the later version, we see on canvas many shifting color planes layered on top of each other, and their different levels of depth become more visible. By giving up a clear outline, Cezanne tries to capture the totality and complexity of the ways natural objects present to us. Cezanne’s expression of three-dimensional form is as explicit in still life paintings as in the landscape. In his work “Still life with a Curtain, c.1895,” edges of apples run into each other, and a snow-white tablecloth captures some apples fallen onto the table. By using the juxtaposition of brushstrokes to place the objects so that they do not detract from one another, Cezanne expresses each object’s three-dimensional form and its full solidity.

Expression in Cezanne’s paintings is much richer than merely recapturing the structure of objects, nature, and reality, for it is only through the human lived body that we perceive the color contrast, depth, and solidity of objects. We, embodied human beings, are the source of perceiving perspectives. Using these, the painter interprets what appears to him from nature and then shows it before us as an object with full significance. A painting thus converts appearances of objects—for example, their colors, smoothness, softness, etc.—into existing, visible objects. Art is therefore an expression of what exists. This being said, the painter is not merely

¹³ One good illustration is Cezanne’s painting “Flowers in a Blue Vase c.1873–1875.”

an ape,¹⁴ for only a human being is capable of suspending the habits of thought provided by science and of revealing the primordial experience of encountering objects. This experience is primordial in two senses: first, our perception of nature is pre-reflective in that it is prior to scientific knowledge. Second, given that our perception is an embodied one, our characteristic personality is also incarnated in our vision. The primordial experience is thus the cradle of our thought and vision in which they are intervening. For Cezanne, the power of his expression is subjected to neither merely sense nor concepts. We see in Cezanne's painting his attempt to capture the experience in which his perception of nature and his interpretation that turns it into art are inseparable.

It is now time to gather up a few important similarities between Cezanne and Merleau-Ponty. Pictorial expression on Cezanne's canvas is a two-level operation, recapturing a structure inherent in things in nature and articulating a new meaning that is executed through Cezanne's endeavors. Cezanne resembles Merleau-Ponty in that both reject the simplistic view of art as merely the imitation of passive impressions and perception as merely passive. Cezanne seeks to show that one's gaze goes beyond what would be seen by a merely receptive retina or what is imprinted on the film of a camera. For him, the belief that what a person sees truly exists is present in the act of perception. Furthermore, Cezanne's paintings are intertwining operations, in which distinctions between what comes from things and what comes from him are quite vague.¹⁵ What comes from Cezanne in his pictorial expression is his ability to see the inherently meaningful aspects of reality. Defining art as "man added to nature," Cezanne wants to express meanings of things as they are perceived by our lived bodies. Painting captures the richness of the lived and embodied perspective by depicting lived perception, cultural symbols. Painting significantly transmits these meanings to us, both by being an object with form, color, and the like, and by representing particular objects, scenes, and symbols and doing so within a historical and cultural perspective.

Painting is like phenomenology in that they both make the implicit structured realm of perception explicit—painting by showing that world through images and phenomenology by describing that world through words. Both painting and phenomenology try to restore the thickness, depth, and weight of the world in opposition to the reductive abstractions of science, reflection, and linear perspective. What fascinates Merleau-Ponty is exactly the painting's ability to illuminate the deeper structures of the perceptual world by concentrating on one aspect of our perceptual process. The philosophical significance of painting is not limited to its qualities as a finished product. Rather, painting echoes human perceptions of the world and human lives. Painting is a living extension of a flesh-and-blood person, and it manifests the human condition in much the same way one's body does: by realizing in gesture a particular coherent style.

¹⁴ CD 67, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Emile Bernard's claim that a realistic painter is only an ape as indicating precisely the opposite of the truth.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty's essay "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern 1993c, p. 95). Hereafter abbreviated ILVS.

4 Embodiment in Art and Its Educational Implications

It should be noted here that in addition to his extensive exploration of Cezanne's painting, Merleau-Ponty also compares phenomenology to activities of artists such as Balzac, Proust, Valery, Klee. Phenomenology shares with art, as practiced by these artists, the task of disclosing the significance of the world as it emerges in pre-scientific perceptual experience. They both endeavor to achieve a truthful understanding of human effort and human lives. The artist, like the phenomenologist, is also concerned with human experience in the world, for they both face the infinite task of expressing what exists. The truth of embodied experience, as Merleau-Ponty defines it, is not already given in the world, waiting to be discovered. Rather, arts and phenomenology bring truth into being. An artwork bridges a fundamental link between man and world through namely embodiment. "The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art."¹⁶ The comparison is rich. First, both an artwork and lived body are expressive in multiple ways. Just as a lived body is a synthesis of physical, spiritual and perceptual dimensions, an artwork should also be perceived with an understanding of all its elements: the form as well as the content, the history as well as the culture. Second, an artwork and a lived body are both means and sources of expression through which structures of lived experience become transparent. Third, both an artwork and lived body have the most direct, vivid contact with our living world. They are like our habits, undergoing a continuous process starting from taking up something new, then turning into something personalized. Our habits work themselves into the object, and the object transforms our habits. In this process, the structure of things is revealed through our experiences (O'Neil 1970).

In what follows, I want to look at the educational implications of Merleau-Ponty's theory of painting. If education is a process through which we enrich our world view, reflect on our behavior, and refine our morality, then a Merleau-Pontyan theory of painting, which stresses the interplay between perception and reflection, will contribute significantly to our growth.

A first point to note here is that on Merleau-Ponty's terms, a painting implies learning and understanding of the world, for it expresses a situation that is taken from nature and developed through the painter's imaginary reconstruction. The painter takes a journey of education in which she first of all has learned to make selections among different themes, objects, spatial relations, and so forth. All these factors constitute in painting a pictorial event that presents a situation regarding nature. The next stage in a painter's education involves learning to respond to the situation in a further articulated manner. In Merleau-Ponty's view, embodied expression in artworks is stylized by each painter. In everyday life, each person has her own style of relating her body to the phenomenal field. As for the artist, such style is more pronounced. In creating these original responses through the medium

¹⁶ PP 150, also, PP 151 "A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal and spatial situation. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms."

of art, the artist not only responds to, but re-learns the situation which gives rise to her creation. For an artist, a situation is grasped in the context of a world of history and culture to which she belongs. Meanwhile, the artist's response to it is in dialog with either her contemporaries or predecessors. It is in this sense we find a deep account of the painter's expression that places her in the context of human existence. Its educational aim is to explain how culture is infused in an artwork and how the language of an artwork speaks to us through shared history.

Merleau-Ponty contends that there is a unity of the entire discipline or tradition of painting in which all painters are engaged. "A single task," as he calls it, exists from "the first sketches on the walls of caves" to our "conscious" painting (ILVS, 97). This single task constitutes a single history of tradition, though indirect and silent, provides meaning to all paintings. Cezanne is not an exception. As a highly sophisticated artist reacting against certain traditions of art, Cezanne reaches out, at the same time, for qualities that he found in the work of the past—the order and balance of the art of Poussin, for example. This discussion of art tradition has distinguished Merleau-Ponty from Malraux, the art critic who sees modern painting as both coming up with and being solely concerned with the subjective expression of the individual (ahistorically). Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, stresses the continued attempt at expression throughout the whole history of art. More specifically, he attempts to explain this continuity in the painting tradition by "putting the painter back in the visible world and retrieving the body as spontaneous expression." (ILVS, 102) He sees an artwork as a human gesture that has the unity of a structure. Paintings, in this sense, are not finished products; they are rather "echoes of human effort, human perceptions of the world, human lives." (Carman 2004, 15) The entire history of painting is built upon a continuous exchange, renewing the undertaking of painting in each new work. The development of a painter's style is thus a dual process—the painter is placing herself into an existing paradigm and at the same time taking on those existing paradigms in order to transform them. Unlike Malraux who takes a painter's style to be a sovereign way of transforming the world, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the significance of an existing pictorial paradigm, the role of which is indispensable to creating a new paradigm.

John Dewey in his discussion of the notion "double change," conveys a similar idea that expression evokes an interaction and an exchange between the past and the present.

The junction of the new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a recreation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the 'stored,' material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation. It is this double change which converts an activity into an act of expression.¹⁷

The spirit of this "double change" is an assimilation of present experience with the past, during which our responses toward the past are generalized and the present

¹⁷ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. (the Berkeley Publishing Group, New York 1934, p.60). For more discussions on connections between Merleau-Ponty and Dewey, see Victor Kestenbaum, *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning*. (Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press 1977).

guides the direction of our actions. Aesthetic expression, for Dewey, is not about a static or dead record of the past experience, but is rather a living process of intertwining the past with the present. In the course of this process, human experience which is artistically shaped becomes expressive (Alexander 1987).

This notion of a continuous exchange throughout the entire history of painting leads Merleau-Ponty to postulate a unity of human style which, beyond each individual painter, unifies all painters' gestures together in one single expressive effort. Merleau-Ponty calls this the unity of culture. A painting is a cultural artifact, so is our body. Our body bears socially established techniques, styles, and patterns of response—to which there corresponds a whole layer of cultural objects. The tools we use and the houses and cities we live in all bear human marks. Culture hence plays a significant role in both the painter's expression and the viewer's perception. It comes into our perception by determining what we focus upon and how we respond. For example, in Chinese paintings dragons often provoke a favorable reaction. Viewing dragons as symbolizing their noble, brave, and powerful ancestors, Chinese painters often draw them with warm colors (yellow in most cases for it is a color the ancient Chinese royal family wore), and respectable though August physiognomies. But when a Chinese viewer sees a Western painting of the same object, she feels uneasy about the painter's expression: a dragon with a dark-colored body and wicked eyes. The Chinese viewer perceives a negative attitude toward dragons in Western culture; they are feared and evil. Though just an example of imaginary animals, dragons have already been clothed in cultural influences.

An artwork functions as an educational institution created from the ground of perception. It occurs when an individual's perception interacts with a certain historical/cultural/social context presented by a medium. Moreover, the moral underpinnings of a painting are that it carries on a dialog at an intersubjective level between painter and viewer. The two meet in the pictorial world that presents a situation in which they can co-exist. The painter, on one side of canvas, by lending her body to objects in reality and expressing her perception of the structure of things, provides the viewer with a relationship to life, i.e., the viewer's embodied experience of the world. The viewer, from the other side of canvas, by allowing her body to follow every single line, pigment, shape, etc. on the canvas, takes up the objects infused with human purpose. Of course it often requires a learning process for a viewer to understand the tacit expression in a painting. At the very beginning, the viewer is presented with a "speech," the language of which is already structured by the painter's personalized expression, that is, the painter's arrangement of that particular object, that unique color, etc. A painting calls attention to certain experiences that the viewer may not be aware of initially. It is a course of learning for the viewer to be able to direct her habitual perception toward the situation in painting. This is similar to how we take up a practice and transform its demands into our habits. By understanding an artwork, the viewer enlarges her own perceptual experience of the world. A painting, in this sense, creates a dialog between painter and viewer about perspectives on the world. Both sides of the dialog are responsible for carrying on the conversation. Therefore, there is always the exchange of experiences of reality between the artist and the viewer. Artworks thus intersubjectively bridge everyone in the world. This point becomes clearer if we look at the

fact that a painting always embraces not merely one element: It inherits familiar structure of paintings from earlier works, and it is a source of possible influences. Besides, it also creates new possibilities of meanings. In this sense, painting is an expression that encompasses three elements: (1) What comes from things in the world, (2) what the artist's work adds to the previous ones, and (3) what the artist has taken from others as opposed to what is his own (ILVS, 102).

So far, we have explored the educational implication in Merleau-Ponty's theory of painting. The uniqueness of his theory is the connection he conceives between an artwork and the lived body. His aim in describing how the lived body works is similar to Cezanne's aim in revealing the depth and solidity of objects. Neither of them is merely talking about the perception from a first-person viewpoint. Rather, they both are trying to show how an embodied human being would perceive the world.

5 A Study of Chinese Aesthetics and Art

In earlier sections, we find an account of the work of art that places it in the broader context of human existence. This analysis can contribute to our understanding of art as a cross-cultural phenomenon. In this section, I want to pursue this cross-cultural line by looking into examples from Chinese landscape paintings of the Song Dynasty.¹⁸ My discussion involves two questions: Does embodiment have an equal primacy in Chinese landscape paintings? If so, how?

Concerning the first question, embodied perception is significantly evident, first of all, in the techniques of presenting a Chinese landscape painting. When we present a scroll of Chinese landscape painting, the appropriate way to open it is gradually unfolding the scroll, little by little. This unique manner of unfolding a scroll is not merely an artistic format of presentation, it is essential to how one grasps the information expressed on canvas—it invites the audience to undertake an embodied journey in the virtual world of landscape construed on silk. When a scroll is unfolded, its content becomes visible as a sequence of images in space and in time. Every moment when the scroll unfolds, a different path of the journey presents before eyes. It can be a continuation of previous path; it can also be a change to a new path. Shifting perspective is a common technique in Chinese landscape painting during this period. At one moment, a person is delighted with the winding mountain streams, and in the next moment, she is walking close to fathomless valleys. At one moment, she is dazzled by the glow of the mountain and the color of the waters, and in next moment, she hears the voices of apes and the call of birds.

The French sinologist and philosopher Francois Jullien once compares the spirit of Chinese landscape with Western landscape by offering a semantic analysis of the notion of "landscape." Forged in the Renaissance as a term defining perceptual

¹⁸ In Chinese art history, the Song Dynasty, beginning in the tenth century, marks a time when landscape painting took deep root and enjoyed the large favor of the literati. Seen in retrospect, the painting developed from a craft of representing personalities to an art that attempts to apprehend the breathing life of the world. Privileging the landscape as a whole, the Chinese painting experienced a rapid growth during the Song and Yuan Dynasties.

experience, the landscape is a “part of land that nature presents to the eye” and the aspect of land “can be embraced in a single look.”¹⁹ As Jullien argues, Chinese landscape, often using the term as “mountains-waters,” breaks from the European “semantics of territory, of specifying part, and of visibility.” (Jullien, p. 121) For the Chinese “chose to think of the landscape—like any reality—as an interaction between poles, high and low, vertical and horizontal, compact (massive) and fluid, opaque and transparent, motionless and moving, and so forth.” (Jullien, p. 122)

Let us take an example of Chinese landscape painting. In the hanging scroll *A Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks*,²⁰ one is invited to “enter” the picture on the lower left and to explore as we take our journey through the landscape. We first walk across the bridge, take a rest at pavilions, and then wander around the mountain pathways. One cannot take a panoramic view from a single position outside or inside the painting; likewise, one cannot have a bird view of the mountain peaks when standing at the foot of mountain. Rather, little by little, nature is revealed as if we were actually walking in the out-of-doors. Following the journey the unfolding scroll leads, you keep running into different landscape sceneries: streams, valleys, waterfalls, etc. Captured by one’s perception, all these encounters in a pictorial journey seize one’s attention and invite a full participation of one’s senses. Much as a journey takes full bodily motions, a landscape painting consists of full elements of embodiment through which one may travel, sightsee, wander, and live. Earlier in the paper we discussed Merleau-Ponty conceives of a context as indispensable to all perceptions. Similarly, the whole configuration in Li Cheng’s landscape illustrates a contextualized perception that bears relationships with other elements on silk. For instance, the temple with its hexagonal tower occupies the very center of the painting just parallel to the peaks which dominate the far distance and the top of the picture. The looming distant peaks presents a background for the bent, gnarled trees and defines the space where these trees grow. Each element in its turn can be perceived as a figure on a background, which collectively consists in a context.

In addition to the above similarity, shifting perspective in Chinese landscape paintings reflects an attitude which shares a Merleau-Pontyan idea of how a painting reveals the structure of nature. As K.M. Linduff nicely points out, a balanced combination of shifting perspective with a doctrine of realism in Chinese landscape allows for a visual exercise which examines minute details as well as how nature operates (Linduff 2008). For instance, in his masterpiece *Early Spring*,²¹

¹⁹ See *On the Nonobject through Painting* by Francois Jullien, trans. Jane Marie Todd, University of Chicago Press (2009, p. 121). By “nonobject”, Jullien means a notion exemplified by paintings that do not seek to represent observable surroundings. This book is also titled as “*The Great Image Has No Form.*”

²⁰ Early Song Chinese Landscape *A Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks*, by Li Cheng (919–967), 宋·李成《晴峦萧寺图》。

²¹ See painting “Early Spring” (ca. 1072) by Gao Xi (1020–1090, Northern Song Dynasty), 北宋·郭熙《早春图》 Guo Si, (ca. 1052–1122), Guo Xi’s son, compiles a treatise based on his father’s comments on landscape painting: “A great mountain is dominating as chief over the assembled hill, thereby ranking in an ordered arrangement the ridges and peaks, forests and valleys, as suzerains of varying degrees and distances. The general appearance is of a great lord glorious on his throne and a hundred princes hastening to pay him court, without any effect of arrogance or withdrawal.” See Guo Xi and Guo Si, *Lofty power of Forests and Streams*, in SHQS, vol. 1, 498b.

painter Guo Xi uses varied texture strokes to build up three-dimensional “cloud-representing” rocks. Various layers of dark wash are presented in a circular motion as rushes on the surface of the silk, contrasted with much lighter and pale washes. Dark trees against the pale washes of riverbed contribute to the effect of depth. This subtle technique of using layers of ink—called ink-wash—starts in the tenth century among Song Dynasty Chinese painters who gradually let go of the lines/boundary used in late Tang Dynasty (around 900 AD). Before Guo Xi’s time, there was a tendency to delineate everything, to describe the outside of contours as separating things from each other. The adoption of ink-wash results from a doctrine of realism—to generate volume that appears to be projected from surface, and also appears to project backwards into the space so that the viewer grasps the sense of three-dimensional body. I think that all these presentations in Guo Xi’s work are to large extent paralleled to Cezanne’s pursuit of a complex mountain image in *Mont Sainte-Victorie*. Both paintings aim for truth to natural appearances, but not at the expense of pictorial examination of how nature operates.

In his essay *Eye and Mind*,²² Merleau-Ponty contends that painting reveals our internal relatedness with nature—“‘Nature is on the inside,’ says Cezanne. Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them.” (EM, 125) Centuries before Western artists began to see natural scenery as anything more than background, Chinese artists had developed the depiction of landscape in a way that evokes a power to take us out of ourselves and to provide spiritual solace and refreshment.²³ In ancient China, mountains have long been seen as sacred places—place for spiritual meditations, home of immortals. A gentleman’s love of landscape, mountains in particular, consists in the cultivation of his fundamental nature in rural retreats. Chinese philosophical interests in nature have greatly contributed to the rise of landscape painting, including both Daoist stress on a unity human nature should achieve with pervasive Dao (or way, nature) and Neo-Confucian philosophy²⁴ interest in “Li” (or law), that is, the principles or patterns within all phenomena. I am aware that it will require another substantial paper to closely compare and elaborate ideas in these two Chinese philosophical traditions. For the purpose of my discussions in this essay, I will list some direct impact these philosophical ideas have on landscape paintings.

Nature, as Chinese landscape painters conceive it, is not a physical manifestation of its magnificent creator (God, for example, in Western religious context), but something that is what it is by virtue of itself. The Chinese term for “Nature” is Zi-ran, or “self-thus,” and under Daoism’s influence, we are content to accept nature as a fact. From this, it follows that nature is neither benign nor hostile to men. Hence,

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty “Eye and Mind” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern 1993a). Hereafter abbreviated EM.

²³ Taminioux, when invoking Cezanne’s claim “nature is inside,” also makes a connection to the classical advice of a Chinese painter (Su Shi, 1037, 1101, Northern Song painter and poet) who commented that “to paint a bamboo, one must first be able to grow it inside oneself.” See *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, pp. 278-292.

²⁴ A school of philosophy that is developed from the renaissance of reinterpretation of Classical Confucian Literature during the tenth–twelfth A.D.

man is not conceived of as forever struggling against nature but forming part of it. Accordingly, there are no angels and gods in ancient Chinese landscapes; instead, man is advised to submerge her being in the infinite flux of things and to allow her own growth to become part of the cycle of birth, growth, and decline that goes on in nature. In both Li Cheng and Guo Xi's paintings, unidentifiable small-scale human figures take a corner position: Li's figure at the lower left and Guo's at the lower right. Nevertheless, these human presences resonate in the total picture a balanced tone in which the mountains, the human existence, the sunlight, and the mosses are all equals. Under the Daoist view, all of nature—including human—is one organic whole developing in accord with its inner way.

This balanced, harmonious unity in landscape symbolizes a pair of concepts from Daoism's theory of nature—Yin and Yang. A Chinese classic *I-Ching (the Book of Changes)* first introduces these two notions, designating originally the shady and sunny slope of a mountain, respectively. Later, their meanings are extended to denote the polar aspects of things and forces, for instance, black and white, weak and strong, light and heavy, and so forth. Note that in nature we witness ample examples of the polar qualities, for example, sunlit cliffs versus shaded peaks, tall trees above versus deep valley below, flat rocks versus dense forest. All these formulate a similar pattern in nature. According to Daoism, these opposite effects of Yin and Yang are complementary, not conflicting with each other. More important, they are indispensable to each other in order to generate and create diverse things in reality. Again, we can observe in nature how polar effects bring transformations and changes. In other words, the co-existence and co-function of Yin and Yang guarantee constant interactions between the two and eventually lead to a balance of the whole. Harmony, therefore, takes place in an environment consisting of not only similar elements but also polar forces. Nature, understood in Yin-Yang terms, operates as a dynamic force. In the case of the Chinese landscape, it puts into play the dynamism of opposing yet corresponding elements. The Chinese literati produce paintings with a deeply held belief in a continuum of existence and its immanent way of coming into actuality.

This idea of human–nature harmony is characterized as “spirit resonance” in classic art literatures. One classical work on Chinese painting is *Gu Hua Pin Lu* (“Ancient Paintings Classification Register” 《古画品录》) by Xie He (479–502), a painter and art critic of the Southern Qi Dynasty (420–589). He formulates six general principles as a basis for the creation and appreciation of painting which have had far-reaching influence to Chinese aesthetic judgment since then. The “Six Principles” are as follows:

“What are these Six Elements? First, Spirit Resonance which means vitality; second, Bone Method which is [a way of] using the brush; third, Correspondence to the Object which means the depicting of forms; fourth, Suitability to Type which has to do with the laying on of colors; fifth, Division and Planning; that is placing and arrangement; and sixth, Transmission by Copying, that is to say the copying of models.”²⁵

²⁵ See *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, ed. Susan Bush and Shih Hsio-yen, Hong Kong University Press (2012, p. 40).

The first principle, also taken by Chinese artists and literati as the most important principle among the six, describes the ideal for the essence of Chinese painting. It suggests vitalizing spirit or power should resound harmoniously through the paintings imparting expression or spiritual significance. The phrase “spirit resonance” is a translation of Chinese words “Qi Yun (气韵),” referring to the breath of life and the resonance of it. Thus the artist was required to “convey spiritual meaning to the action of his expressive shapes.” (Arnheim 1997) This principle associates life-motion with the Daoist notion of “the Spirit of Heaven and Earth” (Watson 2013). Forming a trinity with heaven and earth enjoins us from applying the subject–object dichotomy to nature. The internal resonance of the vital forces is such that human body and spirit is constantly in accord with the myriad things in nature. Zhuangzi, a leading Daoist, recommends that we listen with our minds rather than with our ears; with Qi (the force, energy) rather than with our minds.²⁶ Contemporary Chinese scholars interpret Zhuangzi as suggesting we are so much a part of the internal resonance of the vital forces themselves that we can listen to the sound of nature through listening to our inner voice (Tu 2004). This idea of inner rhyme of nature explains, again, why in mountain scenes of Chinese landscapes, diminutive human figures often appear at ease in an extremely rough path. David Richardson describes this feeling of being “at ease” as an “un-Western feeling” in contrast to certain “existentialist feelings of terror, dread and alienation” in the early nineteenth century Western Romantic paintings caused by the sublimity and awfulness of God.²⁷

Having explored these examples of embodiment, I now can answer the second question raised at the beginning of this section regarding the worldview of Chinese landscape painters. A harmonious unity is what I will characterize it. It is an aesthetic sense of harmony by virtue of which a painting links two levels of nature: One is rooted in the deep reality of the world and hence an expression of Dao (the way everything exists in the world), and the other is the disposition one needs to cultivate in order to conform to the first level. Education hence becomes meaningful in this context of human–nature interaction, for it is a leaning process to achieve a larger self in relation to others and in reference to the world. Before I turn to this educational link in next section, I want to point out a significant difference of the degree to which the body is engaged in mountain scenes in Chinese and Cezanne’s artworks. The human body in Chinese mountain paintings is much more actively engaged in the artist’s depiction as well as in the viewer’s perception. The Chinese silk takes up the body engagement in a natural and practical way that is not accessible in Cezanne’s mountain painting. Recalling the third step in Merleau-Ponty’s development of the theory of embodied perception, I would argue that Chinese landscape paintings presents a much stronger example of the synthetic role

²⁶ For translations of Zhuangzi, see *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press (2013).

²⁷ See David B. Richardson “Nature-Appreciation Conventions and the Art World” in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 16:2 (1976: Spring) p. 186. The center question Richardson raises an interesting question “Which comes first, nature-appreciation conventions or art-appreciation conventions?”.

the body plays between nature perception and human understanding than Cezanne's work does.

6 Conclusion: Embodied Perception in Chinese Aesthetic Experience

As we see in previous discussion, the link between embodiment and moral education is not explicitly recognized by Merleau-Ponty. Chinese aesthetics, in contrast, presents an explicit correlation between these two aspects. Let us look again at Chinese cosmology in painting. The aesthetic experience of mutuality with nature is often the result of strenuous and continual effort of self-cultivation. As social and cultural beings, we do not have privileged access to the great cosmological harmony and can never get outside ourselves to study nature from neutral ground. As Tu Wei-ming suggests, inner transformation is the crucial "precondition for us to participate in the internal resonance of the vital forces in nature."²⁸ We have to first harmonize our own feelings and thoughts before we are ready to follow the spirit of heaven and earth. This emphasis on an inner transformation through self-cultivation is at the core of the Confucian view of education and ethics. Harmony, in the context of Confucianism, is given a moral interpretation: "The gentleman harmonizes, and does not merely agree. The petty person agrees, but he does not harmonize."²⁹ What then is the difference between harmonizing and agreeing? A Confucian harmonizing will require a person show a true respect for others without losing one's own critical thinking and independent judgment. This way of harmonizing carries a significant meaning in education in our times, for it is a moral requirement for self-cultivation as well as for citizenship in a liberal, democratic society.

I conceive of education as the process of recreation in a medium that takes the creativity of perception to completion. In other words, working in a medium enables the body to continue the creative process started in the artist's perception itself, and bring her own unique style to a point of existing in a unified concrete form.

For ancient Chinese landscape painters, the painting expresses a harmonious unity in a person's relationship with nature, with her inner self, and with others. The contribution Chinese aesthetics brings to aesthetic experience consists in the idea that education is in its nature environmental and has to start from a self-cultivation. This being said, I see a more explicit link between embodiment and moral education in Chinese aesthetics compared with that in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting. A human starts her life by learning from the environment and from others like her. Education therefore is a complex continuing process of self-formation which always occurs in a context of community and environment. This process cultivates both intelligent and practical understanding of the self. It has been often pointed out that exclusive engagement in scientific inquiry could lead to an alienation of the human self from the world of meaning and value. The embodiment

²⁸ See Tu 2004, pp. 27–40.

²⁹ Book Thirteen, Section 13.23 in Lau, D.C (trans). (1992). *Confucius: The Analects*, bilingual edition, The Chinese University Press, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

in aesthetic experience serves as a reminder of the humanistic understanding in our living experience as a desirable base for human growth. Aesthetics experience, based on this idea of harmonious unity, is not merely to refine a person's artistic taste by emphasizing abstractive and personally stifling preference of one's own societal/historical/cultural heritage over others. Rather, aesthetic experience should facilitate people to engage actively in the multiple dimensions of their lives and communicate mutually as well as fruitfully with others whose life circumstances are related to their own in a cosmopolitan context.

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