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**ARNOLD BERLEANT:
GUIDE TO MY RESEARCH
ON ENVIROMENT AESTHETICS**

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I fondly call Arnold Berleant my first American friend and he calls me his first Chinese friend. We first became friends in 1988, 33 years ago. 33 years is long time, enough for a baby to grow into a professor, a scientist, or even a national leader. For myself, these 33 years was an academic journey guided by Arnold Berleant along the path of environmental aesthetics. I feel humbled when my peers in the Chinese academia commended me as “the pioneer of Chinese environmental aesthetics” because I know I was guided by someone before me: Arnold Berleant. I am grateful to Arnold Berleant, without his help and guidance I could not have achieved the results, however meager it may be, on environmental aesthetics.

1. Leading the way

The story begins in the 1980s. At the time, a friend of mine was studying in the United States who knew I was studying aesthetics and sent my *CV* to the American Society for Aesthetics, applying for a membership on my behalf. Serving as the Secretary-General of the Society at the time, Arnold Berleant received and accepted my application. So I became a foreign member of the American Society for Aesthetics. Ever since the year 1988 onwards, we have kept in correspondence, as proved by the stack of envelopes I have saved till this day, all the letters from Arnold Berleant.

In 1992, I invited Arnold Berleant to visit Zhejiang University in China, where I was teaching at the time. Arnold Berleant gladly accepted my invitation. This was his first visit to China. The trip he has designed was to fly via Hong Kong to Shenzhen and to Chongqing, and then from Chongqing to Hangzhou via the Three Gorges. It was surely a magical and romantic trip. However, I was worried that the second lap of his trip would not be easy, so I sent my student Shu Jianhua who took a train to Chongqing and met Arnold at the airport. Shu took them for a ride on a ship from Chongqing across the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River, then landed in Yueyang, Hunan, and went to Hangzhou by train. At that time in China, public transportation was not as convenient as it is now, and buying ship tickets and train tickets was not so easy. Fortunately, being smart and resourceful as Shu Jianhua was, they overcame all the difficulties. Arnold Berleant really enjoyed the trip as he told me

upon our meeting all about the magical and magnificent views of the Three Gorges, and the diligence and shrewdness of my student.

For this first meet, Arnold Berleant brought me some gifts: his book *Environmental Aesthetics* in English and two of his papers that have been translated into Chinese, i. e. “Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic” and “Aesthetic Paradigms for an Urban Ecology”. It was his book and these two papers that opened up a new horizon in my academic career.

My first publication on aesthetics was in 1981, a paper titled “On Natural Beauty” (Seeker, 1981, Vol. 2). At the time, I was in Changsha working as an editor. In 1989, I was appointed as a professor by the president of Zhejiang University, teaching aesthetics. There was a journal called *Scenic Areas* in Hangzhou, in which I published travel notes and essays on landscape aesthetics. At the time, I had the concept of landscape aesthetics (natural aesthetics), but not yet the concept of environmental aesthetics.

Inspired by Arnold, I became interested in environmental aesthetics and urban aesthetics, and my new academic journey began:

First, expanding my academic interests from landscape to environment. Though both originated from nature, landscape aesthetic and environmental aesthetics are inherently different, as the former is for tourism and stresses the appreciation of scenery while the latter is for life and stresses a living experience. Arnold Berleant said something about this, which I think is quite classic. He said: “The environment is the natural process in which people live...the nature that people live in.”¹. This thought inspired me, and I began to think about environmental aesthetics from the perspective of living. I identified living as the subject of environmental aesthetics and further classified living into three hierarchies of being livable, easy, enjoyable. The key to livability is ecology, while living easily is utilitarian, and the most important thing about enjoyable living is happiness. The essence of environmental aesthetics lies in “happy living”, i. e. people living happily and joyfully in nature.

I summed up these ideas in an article titled “Contemporary Mission of Environmental Aesthetics”, published in *Academic Monthly*, a renowned Chinese journal, and the paper was then reprinted by *Xinhua Digest*, an important journal of academic quotations in China. Then, in 2013, an excerpt of the article became the reading material in Chinese test of the college entrance examination that year. This article was later translated into English and published in a Japanese journal, *The Contemporary Mission of Environmental Aesthetics*. The Journal of Asian Arts and Aesthetics, Vol. 3, 2010. On January 22nd, 2009, I gave a lecture at Stanford University under the same title, “The Contemporary Mission of Environmental Aesthetics”.

Second, the subject of my research on environmental aesthetics shifted from nature to the city. I like to travel, and have a natural fondness for natural scenery. Arnold Berleant’s proposal of “Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic” drew my great attention and I began to think about the aesthetics of Chinese cities. In 1995, I wrote a paper titled “Aesthetics of Historical and Cultural cities” published in

vol. 4 of *Journal of Wuhan Museology*. The paper was reprinted in 1997 in vol. 4 of *Urban Development*, an important journal of urban studies in China. In May 2001, as the only representative from China, I attended the 3rd International Conference on Sustainable Cultural and Urban Development hosted by the Cheongju City Government of South Korea hosted by the United Nations University. The presentation I made on the conference was titled “Aesthetic Charm of Historical and Cultural City.” On December 11th, 2008, *Guangming Daily* published the transcript of my public lecture in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province covering two full pages, titled the “Cities, Our Homes”. This article was later reprinted by *Xinhua Digest* in vol.7 (2009) and had a significant impact.

After that, I published an article titled “Building the City into a Cozy Home – Reflection on the Modernization of Chinese Cities” (*Journal of Zhengzhou University*, vol.3, 2009). The English version of this article was published by a magazine in Japan (“The Establishment of the Concept ‘Home’: The Reflection of Chinese City Urbanization”. *The Journal of Asian Arts and Aesthetics*, vol. 2, 2009). “Cities are our homes.” The proposal was not of my creation. In his paper “Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic”, Arnold Berleant stated that “Urban design is a design of our homes.” However, I did develop this idea a little by identifying the sense of home as the highest state in environmental aesthetics. I established "building a home" as the core of my environmental aesthetics thoughts. This idea was highly commended by Holmes Rolston III in his comments on my book *China's Environmental Aesthetics*: "Chen's great strength is his account of how in China humans and nature operate together in a creative dynamic with the differing elements in each supporting and reinforcing each other, resulting in a more beautiful China. ... The Chinese have a strong sense of being 'at home' in nature. "The sense of home represents thus the highest level of identification with the environment."²

In 1999, at a conference on aesthetics held in China, I proposed "cultivating an environmental aesthetics". This paper was originally published in *Corporate Culture* (vol. 3, 2000) and was officially published in *Hunan Social Sciences* (vol. 5, 2000). In April 2007, my monograph *Environmental Aesthetics* was published by Wuhan University Press. I chose such a title intentionally to show its connection to Arnold Berleant's book *Environmental aesthetics*. Without Arnold Berleant's "Environmental Aesthetics", there would be no "Environmental Aesthetics" of mine.

2. Collaboration

Arnold Berleant is not only the guide of my research on environmental aesthetics, but also my mentor and a collaborator on our common academic pursuit. Our collaboration began during my work at Wuhan University. In 2003, I received the funding for my research "Fundamental Issues of Environmental Aesthetics" from the Humanities and Social Sciences Fund of the Ministry of Education of China. The project was conceived as early as in the year 1992 and was granted the funding after nearly 10 years.

To facilitate the development of environmental aesthetics in China, I recruited several doctoral students with environmental aesthetics as their research interest, which is the first time academically in China. The biggest difficulty at that time was the lack of literature and research materials. We decided first to introduce to China important Western literatures on environmental aesthetics. Therefore, I proposed to Arnold the publishing of a series titled "Translated Classics on Environmental Aesthetics", for which we served as editors. He was responsible for selecting the appropriate books, I was responsible for the translation and publication. Arnold Berleant appreciated and accepted my proposal and we immediately went in full swing for it.

After three years of hard work, the "Translated Classics on Environmental Aesthetics" was published. The first collection included six books: 1. *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Arnold Berleant), 2. *The Beauty of Environment* (Yrjö Sepänmaa) 3. *Nature and Landscape* (Allen Carlson) 4. *Art and Survival* (Caffyn Kelley) 5. *The Crazannes Quarries*" (Bernard Lassus) 6. *Living in the Landscape* (Arnold Berleant).

The publication of this series of books is our most important collaboration. This series of books is widely welcomed by Chinese readers not only in the fields of aesthetics and environment, but also in disciplines such as urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture, and design. The series has been included as a must-read for graduate students by the School of Architecture of Tsinghua University in China and many professionals outside the field of aesthetics know me rather because of this series of books than due to my personal works.

Another important collaboration between Arnold and me is organizing international conferences. In 2003, Yrjö Sepänmaa, the famous environmental aesthetician, planned to organize an international conference on environmental aesthetics in Finland and sent me an invitation. At the beginning, I hesitated because of some difficulties at the time, but Arnold Berleant insisted that I should go. I remember to this day what he said in his letter: Since you have chosen the field of environment aesthetics, an international conference like this is a must-go because it is of great importance to your future research. Thanks to his resolute and clear-cut opinion, I attended this session of the International Conference on Environmental Aesthetics. This was my first time to participate in an international conference held in a Western country. Since then and until 2015, I have participated in international conferences almost every year, trying to make the Chinese voice heard in the international academic circle of aesthetics.

The 2003 conference in Finland was greatly rewarding for me in the two following aspects:

1. Broadening my horizon. The theme of this environmental aesthetics conference was agricultural aesthetics. Agriculture is also the object of environmental aesthetics research, which I had never thought of in the past. Because of this conference, my environmental aesthetics research began to focus on agriculture. My *Environmental Aesthetics* has a special chapter on "Agricultural Environmental Beauty". Here, I use the term "agricultural environment" instead of "rural environment",

which is meaningful. At the beginning of this century, the Chinese government proposed a national policy of building a beautiful China. My environmental aesthetics came in handy and has contributed to rural development and urban beautification in some places.

2. Making new friends. Through this conference, I made a lot of friends in environmental aesthetics from different countries, who offered rich international resources for my study on environmental aesthetics in China.

Later, I had the idea of organizing an international conference on environmental aesthetics in 2004. Arnold Berleant soon expressed great support for the idea. Originally, the proposed name of the conference was "International Conference on Environmental Aesthetics". However, due to the limited number of researchers on environmental aesthetics in China and the concern over poor attendance, the conference was renamed as "Beauty and the Way of Modern life" and "Environmental Aesthetics" became one session of the conference. Upon my invitation, Arnold Berleant agreed to be the honorary chairperson of the conference, and I served as the chairperson of the conference.

The conference was held in Wuhan University from May 14th to 16th, 2004. Arnold Berleant made a keynote speech on "Beauty and Contemporary Lifestyle". During the conference, he was hired as a visiting professor of Wuhan University, and the president of Wuhan University awarded him a letter of appointment.

Thanks to Arnold Berleant's great support, the conference was very successful. About 30 international scholars attended the meeting, including the Former Presidents of the International Association of Aesthetics (IAA): Arnold Berleant, Yrjö Sepänmaa, Aleš Erjavec; Jos de Mul, who later became President of the IAA; Chung-ying Cheng, President of the International Society for the Yi-jing; and Yoshio Shimizu, President of the Japan Society of Kansei Engineering. In China at that time, this attendance was surely of international distinction.

After the conference, on invitation of the publisher of the "Translated Classics on Environmental Aesthetics", Hunan Science & Technology Publishing House, and its supervisor, the Publication Bureau of Hunan Province, the six overseas scholars attending the conference (Arnold Berleant, Chung-Ying Cheng, Aleš Erjavec, Patricia Johanson, Johanna Hallsten, Yrjö Sepänmaa) and I visited Changsha and attended the "International Forum on Environmental Aesthetics". The conference venue was the Puri hotel on the West Bank of the Xiangjiang River in Changsha. At the time, the hotel was newly built and large parcels of the land in front of the building were going through landscaping. The conference delegates planted trees in the garden during their stay and Arnold happily planted a small tree in the open space. He said that it was meaningful and symbolic that the group of scholars engaged in environmental aesthetics planted trees to beautify the environment. After the Changsha Conference, the Hunan Provincial Tourism Bureau took us to the famous scenic spot Zhangjiajie. The Zhangjiajie Scenic Authority organized the "Wulingyuan International Forum on Environmental Aesthetics" with the seven scholars from the Wuhan conference as the keynote speakers.

The three conferences in 2004 had a huge impact. At that time China's environmental problems have not attracted enough attention, not to mention the environmental aesthetics, which was still a novel concept at the time. The three conferences on environmental aesthetics strongly promoted this idea with a high academic standard, and contributed positively to the cause of China's environmental aesthetics research, its environmental protection and beautification.

After that, I organized three international conferences on environmental aesthetics in China, in Wuhan University in 2006, Xiangyang in 2009 and Wuhan University in 2015. I invited Arnold to the three meetings, but unfortunately, he could not make it. Yet, he cared a lot for the meeting and gave me valuable suggestions and guidance. Looking back at my collaborations with Arnold, they were not only successful, but also wonderful. Arnold's contribution to China's environmental aesthetics not only lies in his books, which had a huge impact in the Chinese academic circles, but also in his participation in academic activities in China, including the academic conferences and lectures. He promoted the development of China's environmental cause with his unique efforts.

3. Encouragement

Under the guidance of Arnold Berleant, I published in 2017 a monograph titled *Environmental Aesthetics*. The book won the Second Prize in the China Scientific Research in College Outstanding Achievement Award (Humanities and Social Sciences). Since no First Prize was given for the year, the Second Prize was actually the highest prize in this category. I gave the good news to Arnold Berleant, and he soon replied with a letter of warm praise and encouragement.

In 2009, the British scholar Gerald Cipriani and his student Su Feng translated my book *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* into English and it was published by the internationally renowned publisher Routledge. This book has received attention in the Western world. The famous scholar Allen Carlson wrote an entry specially for my book in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. In addition, several overseas scholars including Holmes Rolston III, Jos de Mul, David Adam Brubaker, and Andrew Lambert wrote reviews and comments on the book (their articles were published in the Chinese journal *Poyang Lake Journal*, vol. 4, 2017). In his letter to me, Arnold Berleant gave the book great praise:

Dear Professor Chen,

I write to tell you that I am reading your book, *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*, with great pleasure and profit. The book is very well written. I recognize the positive assistance of Gerald Cipriani, which you were fortunate to have. The book is a wonderful source for understanding the Chinese tradition in environmental appreciation. It makes me understand why Chinese scholars find my work so congenial. There will be much for us to discuss when you visit here, and I look forward to that.

With my very best wishes,

Arnold

Later, he formally wrote a review of the book which was published online in *Contemporary Aesthetics*. His review is as follows:

Wangheng Chen's *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*

Environmental aesthetics as a focus of philosophic inquiry first developed in the West in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the UK, the US, Canada, and Finland. It gained increasing attention partly because of the growing environmental movement and partly because perennial questions in philosophy found new relevance and a fresh focus in aesthetic values in environment. While this new interest appeared in China only in the final decade of the last century, a profound awareness of nature and appreciation of environmental values are rooted in ancient Chinese culture. The fascination with nature has infused its art, its literature, and its religion. In *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics*, Wangheng Chen, Professor of Philosophy at Wuhan University, PR China, has opened the way for Western scholars to discover from a contemporary vantage point the richness of the traditional Chinese understanding of nature and the human place in the natural world. Chen has brought together a rich array of concepts, thinkers, poets, and artists who have contributed to forming the distinctive Chinese melding of nature and human life. His book provides a valuable counterpart to Western research in environmental aesthetics by developing an historical and cross-cultural account of Chinese thinking and valuing of nature.

The only book of its kind in English, *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* is an impressive achievement in its own right. Not only does Prof. Chen offer a clear, detailed historical account of the origins of environmental thought in China; he introduces Chinese concepts and practices, that express and apply that understanding, such as *Feng Shui*. This account develops into a philosophical discussion of environment and the Chinese words that express that traditional understanding. Central here is its fusion of what we in the West call 'subject' and 'object' as an inseparable unity in perception and understanding. This informs the idea of landscape and environment, more generally. Together with the unity of nature and humans that is integral to Taoism runs a moral strain, a Confucian concern for the social dimensions of environment.

From this cultural grounding, Chen moves into particular kinds of environments: gardens, palaces, agricultural landscapes, and the urban environment, pursuing the idea of beauty in these different contexts. Not just a *tour de force* for its success in gathering and elucidating a long and complex tradition, the book is filled with expressions of that history in poetry, painting, and architecture. Numerous quotations and photographs of temples and landscapes embody as well as document this tradition. Although the quality of the reproductions does not do justice to the images, Chen's erudition is enhanced by Feng Su's careful

translation of his text and by Gerald Cipriani's fluent and graceful stylistic editing, so that the book reads as smoothly as if it had been written originally in English, a rarity in the translation of Chinese texts.

Contemporary Chinese research in environmental aesthetics is strongly informed by the Western literature that established this field of inquiry. Chen identifies congenial sources in the present author's idea of aesthetic engagement that develops an understanding of the unity of humans and nature that parallels the Chinese tradition. The more recent Western inquiries into the aesthetic dimensions of everyday life introduced by Yuriko Saito and Katya Mandoki also resemble the Eastern fusion of aesthetic values with the activities of daily life. From these beginnings Chinese environmental aesthetics has developed its own character and momentum. Prominent here is the concept of ecological aesthetics or 'ecoaesthetics,' as it is often called, developed in the work of Yongcheng Zeng, Fanren Zeng, Dingsheng Yuan, and Xiangzhan Cheng, among others. This uses the scientific concept of ecology to epitomize the contextual character of human existence as part of the natural world. While ecology provides a scientific grounding for the traditional Chinese understanding of living in nature, what it affirms is fundamentally a philosophical view that has struggled against the pervasiveness of the Platonic-Cartesian dualism that has dominated Western intellectual and scientific life. Much of the work on ecological aesthetics by Chinese aestheticians has been polemical, but from this grounding one may hope that original studies will emerge that show the fruitfulness of this contextualism in developing a fresh understanding and new ideas in responding to the environmental challenges of the present day, challenges as deeply serious in China as in the West. *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* can serve modern environmental researchers well by encouraging Western scholars to reciprocate Chinese scholars' knowledge of Western environmental philosophy.

The global environmental crisis is undoubtedly the most pressing consequence of the industrial transformation of the human world. Wangheng Chen's *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* is important for the background it provides through its historical account and cultural insights. Affirming the importance of aesthetic values for the human environment has at no time been a more pressing need. Chen conveys the scope of environmental thinking in China and the rich cultural meanings of nature and environment. The book offers a many-layered introduction to environment, both natural and human, and signals a fresh and productive turn in environmental aesthetics. Perhaps Chen's book will help stimulate efforts at collaborative inquiry by scholars working across traditions.

Arnold Berleant, 7/15/19

Since beginning my study on environmental aesthetics in the 1990s following Arnold Berleant, to the publication of *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* in English in 2015, twenty years have passed. I felt particularly gratified because my achievement has been affirmed by Arnold Berleant, to whom I will always be grateful.

My research on aesthetic environment, just as Arnold Berleant said in the book review, has always stressed "the dual dimensions of nature and human in the interpretation of the environment", that is, the two dimensions of ecology and civilization, and the emphasis on the unity of the two dimensions. The proposal of this view was also influenced by Arnold Berleant. In *Environmental Aesthetics*, he pointed out that "any discourses on environmental aesthetics are bound to have what I call a cultural aesthetic" and "cultural aesthetic is a huge matrix of perception and it actually constitutes the environment of each society." (See Chapter 2 of *Environmental Aesthetics*). Arnold's notion of "Culture" here is synonymous with "civilization" in the Chinese language, but "civilization" seems to be of a higher state than "culture", as "civilization" is generally considered as the essence of "culture". I believe that any beauty is a manifestation of civilization, and beauty lies in civilization, not ecology. I think that it is necessary and important to incorporate ecology into aesthetics, especially into environmental aesthetics, but environmental aesthetics is not ecological aesthetics, and environmental beauty is not ecological beauty. As Arnold Berleant said, the environment is a "physical – cultural domain" (see Chapter 2 of *Environmental Aesthetics*). I think the environment should be the unity of ecology and civilization, and the unity of nature and culture. On this basis, I proposed the idea of "beauty of ecological civilization". Then, with the publishing of an article titled "Beauty of Ecological Civilization: New Form of Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics" in *Guangming Daily* (July 15th, 2015), the concept of "aesthetics of ecological civilization" was further proposed. Later, an article named "On Aesthetics of Ecological Civilization" was published in (vol. 1, 2017) and its English version was published in *Contemporary Social Sciences* (vol. 2, 2018), an English journal in China. Then, I published several articles on the aesthetics of ecological civilization in which it is emphasized that, although beauty lies in civilization, it is also embodied in ecology, especially in its original form – the wilderness. It is advocated that civilization and wilderness should not contradict each other, rather they should achieve "harmony with division" or "harmony on pact".

These articles attracted the attention of Gernot Böhme, a German scholar. In 2019, during his stay in Wuhan for an international conference, he had some academic communication with me and afterward he published an article titled "What's the relationship between ecology and aesthetics?". In it, Böhme commented on my thoughts of environmental aesthetics and gave a high evaluation. Arnold Berleant forwarded the article to me and congratulated me:

Dear Wang-heng,

Greetings! I hope you and your family are doing well these days. We are busy as usual. I am writing to send you as an attachment an article written by Prof. Gernot Böhme that was just

published in *Die Zeit*, the most prestigious weekly journal in Germany, in which he discusses your work in environmental aesthetics, as well as mine. The article is, of course, in German, but perhaps you have a colleague who can translate it for you...

After reading Böhme's article, I found that Böhme actually criticized Arnold, but Arnold didn't mind the criticism and believed that academic argument was normal. He sent me this article criticizing him in order to congratulate and encourage me. But what I received was not only encouragement, but something much more. One of them is Arnold's attitude towards academic argument, which set a shining example for me. Through his article, Böhme on one hand gave me his praise and commendation; on the other hand, he also questioned and criticized some of my views.

Arnold Berleant will soon be ninety years old. Still, he stands on the forefront of aesthetic research. His book *The Aesthetic Field* has been translated into Chinese by my students and is being published by Wuhan University Press. With the three previously translated books I have helped with, namely *The Aesthetics of Environment*, *Living in the Landscape*, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, and the soon to be published *The Aesthetic Field*, four of Arnold Berleant's books are introduced to China and we expect still more. The above four books are testimony to my friendship with Arnold Berleant and his important contribution to Chinese readers and aesthetics research in China.

I sincerely wish Arnold Berleant to stay forever young at heart! Please keep writing books, and me and my students will continue translating them into Chinese. Let us keep the story going!

Dear Prof. Chen,

I did not receive your last letter and, apparently, you did not receive mine. I wrote you that my article was published in the current volume of *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 17 (2019) in the Short Notes section. Here is the link: <https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=867>

I had not received the paper of Zhang Wentao before your present letter. I shall read it with interest and send you my comments.

Thank you for telling me about the interest of Chinese scholars in my work on environmental aesthetics. I am grateful for this and I am very pleased that I can contribute to Chinese scholars understanding of environmental aesthetics just as I have learned much from work done by Chinese scholars like yourself.

With warm wishes,

Arnold Berleant, 7/15/19



¹ The quote is from the first chapter of Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

² On the original lecture and its publication, see Rolston's website: <https://sites.google.com/a/rams.colostate.edu/rolston-csu-website/environmental-ethics-rolston-bookpublications/environmental-aesthetics-in-china-east-west-dialogue>. The quote is on page 75. See also 61-108.