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## Constructing an aesthetic discourse: Aesthetic education where Daoism meets postmodernism

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the prevalence of aesthetic education as one of the main developmental objectives in curricular worldwide, the mainstream philosophical discourse on its definition is predominately framed by western philosophy due to a paucity of cross-cultural studies on the subject. The article aims to achieve a contemporary understanding of aesthetic education from both the Chinese and Western aesthetic perspectives. Through the lens of postmodernism, the relationship between Daoist aesthetics and the western postmodern aesthetic perspectives, particularly the Deleuzian concept of rhizome, is identified. Both aesthetic perspectives concern *de-authorship* and promote *self-consciousness/self-awareness*. The study reconceptualises the functions of aesthetic education with the Chinese aesthetic philosophy that promotes the *nurture of better people through benevolence*.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

#### KEYWORDS

Aesthetic experiences;  
aesthetic environments;  
rhizome; Daoism; Deleuze

## Introduction

Aesthetic education is a conventional practice in many curricula for encouraging creativity and imagination (Amadio, Truong, & Tschurenev, 2006). However, previous studies examining the philosophical aspects of aesthetics in the educational context are rare. As part of a doctoral study on young children's aesthetic experiences, this article discusses the similarities and differences between the Chinese and Western aesthetic perspectives to enhance the understanding on the essence of aesthetic education.

## Aesthetics

Contrary to a common belief that aesthetics is originally a Western concept, aesthetics in the West has a history of only about 300 years. Meanwhile in China, aesthetics has a much longer historical root. According to Li (2010), Chinese aesthetics derives from the Chinese character “beauty/beautiful” (*mei* 美), a word that is recorded in the oracle script. According to the earliest Chinese dictionary *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* 說文解字 (Xu, c.55 – c.149/1972) created in the late Han Dynasty, the word “beauty” is composed of a sheep (*yang* 羊) sitting on the top of “largeness” (*da* 大), suggesting that “a large sheep is a beautiful sheep” (volume 4a). While “beautiful means delicious” (volume 5),

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“beauty” is considered synonymous to “good” (volume 12b). As such, *aesthetics* in the Chinese perspective has been founded on the concept of *beauty* and *good* since the word was coined.

The term aesthetics did not exist in the West before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was first adopted by Alexander Baumgarten (Winston, 2010) in 1735 as a subject of philosophy (Guyer, 2004). Aesthetics was once only “an area of scholarly study and inquiry” of arts (Smith, 1970, p. x). Therefore, Western aesthetics as a branch of philosophy is “devoted to conceptual and theoretical inquiry into art and aesthetic experience” (Levinson, 2003, p. 3). It was studied as a philosophical subject about systematic and logical thinking of facts (Winston, 2010) until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Kant (1987) became one of the first persons to relate the term to *beauty*. The Western philosophical argument on aesthetics is linked primarily to the *imitation of truth*, such as nature’s beauty. Plato does not regard arts as imitation of any truth (Courtney, 1968) while Aristotle (335 BCE/1992) advocates in *The Poetic* that art is imitation of life. This disagreement notwithstanding, both philosophers conceive the argument on the basis of personal cognition.

Nevertheless, ancient Chinese philosophers took a different stand. Beauty in the traditional Chinese aesthetics is “not the ordinary form but significant form – natural form that has acquired a socially-defined content” (Li, 1988, p. 36). *Yixiang* (artistic imagery 意象) is pivotal as Chinese aesthetics does not concern with “cognition or imitation, but emotion and experience” (p. 72). Such Chinese perspective on the subjectivity of beauty is similar to the stress on the subjective representations of feelings of pleasure or displeasure in the Kantian aesthetics. However, Kant focuses on the subjective feelings of pleasure (Kant, 1987) while the former on the act of expressing emotions (Bo, 1980).<sup>1</sup>

### Different humanistic views

Kant (1790/1987) moral philosophy that promotes positive freedom appreciates subjectivity in aesthetic judgements and expressions of beauty. *Beauty*, in Kant’s perspective, is about “beautiful what we just LIKE” (p. 52, emphasis in original), which signifies personal preference for things such as nature and food that we enjoy. He promotes freedom of imagination in aesthetic experiences (Guyer, 2004), asserting that through imagination, people can individualise their aesthetic judgements about the same object. His proposition is the first attempt in the West to discuss the role of imagination in aesthetic criticism.

In evaluating (appreciation) beautiful objects, Kant proposes that the process of analysing our responses (self-awareness) towards beautiful objects produces the knowledge of beauty (Winston, 2010). Regarding the impact of aesthetic experiences on morality, Kant (1987) claims that “the beautiful prepares us to love something, even nature, without interest; the sublime, to esteem it, even contrary to our (sensible) interest” (p. 267). The aesthetic notion of Kant has become an anchor of Western aesthetics within a humanistic perspective, which can be adopted by two means: intuition and intelligence. While intuition seeks visual perception and emotional expression, intelligence requires logical thinking in terms of regulation and interpretation. This intuitive approach to Kant’s humanistic perspective on

aesthetics (about beauty and self-awareness) shares similarities with the Chinese aesthetic perspective, except that Chinese aesthetics has developed a stronger social and educational basis.

From the Chinese aesthetic perspectives, beauty lies in harmony between nature, social activities and communal rituals (Zhou, 1997). Li (2010) claims that ancient Chinese rituals have constituted the concept of *mei* (beauty 美), especially the “communal totemic dance” (p. 5), which is regarded as one of the rituals that “took disparate individual sensuous existence and sensory activities and knitted them consciously together” (p. 6). Thus, through “committing to memory and rehearsing” (p. 3) the ritual, *mei* appears when individual skills and communal cooperation are maturing. Besides, Confucius (Sheng-Bin, 2012) claims that poetry as a generic art form performs the functions of *xing* (興), *guan* (觀), *qun* (群), and *yuan* (怨) (in the chapter *Yang-Huo* of the *Analects*, 140 BCE). *Xing* (興) refers to a natural object that can trigger some principles guiding moral-cultivating thoughts which are then turned into words of a poem. *Guan* (觀) means that by reading a poem, one can observe the aspirations of the poet. *Qun* (群) refers to the practice of reading one’s own poem to other poets. This practice may allow other poets to know this poet through the aspiration suggested in the poem. Similarly, this poet can also get to know what kind of person the other poets are so that they can avoid isolating friends or following the crowd (the trend) blindly. Lastly, *yuan* (怨) refers to how poets express their discontent with the reality through poetry. These functions confirm the idea that through artistic writing, people can create a community where they can express their aspirations and resentment, and familiarise with other creators through sharing their works. Thus, human consciousness, intention, and individual will can be aroused and unified, contributing to a harmonised community. Beauty in the ancient Chinese context consists of both beautiful objects and aesthetic appreciation that was “inseparable from perception” (p. 10). The Chinese aesthetic tradition “emphasises the moderation of violent sensuality, the rationality inherent in the perceptual senses, and the social inherent from the nature” (p. 10), hence forming a humanistic notion of emotions and experiences of nature’s beauty. Although both Chinese and Kantian aesthetics adopt a humanistic perspective, the Kantian perspective seems to emphasise moral development on the personal level (Kant, 1987). In contrast, the Chinese perspective is always social and communally grounded. These similarities and differences in the humanistic perspectives on aesthetics, such as the interest in nature’s beauty, cognition and emotions through intuitive perceptions (in both the Chinese and Western perspectives), provide a platform for a cross-cultural discourse on aesthetics in the postmodern paradigm.

Postmodernism refers to an art-related movement that emerged after the period of “modern” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Oxford Dictionaries online, 2014). The movement challenges the dominated practice of modernism by criticising culture, literature, art, philosophy, and architecture. This challenge grows into a way of thinking that critiques all master narratives (Lyotard, 1984) and promotes multiplicity (Baudrillard, 1994). Postmodernism even entails thought that is provisional with continuity (Vattimo, 1998). Considering Piaget’s (1960) suggestion that developmental stages should allow flexibility and variables, this study focuses on the postmodern aspects of “changes”, “multiplicities”, and “co-constructed” knowledge (Creswell, 2013). As knowledge in

postmodernism is co-created through “multiple ways of knowing” (Creswell, 2013, p. 36), the article now moves on to the discussion about the cross-cultural study of aesthetics.

### *An encounter between Daoism and the postmodern aesthetic perspective*

After the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Western aesthetic theories developed into various schools of thought including *instrumentalism*, *mimesis*, *formalism*, *expressionism* and *postmodernism*. Instrumentalism concerns art with rules (Dickie, 1997). Formalism (Bell, 1914; Kant, 1987) focuses on colour, lines, shapes and texture instead of content or meaning, while mimesis (Aristotle, 335 BCE/1992; Plato, 380 BCE/2009) considers art the reproduction of the sameness of natural objects. Expressionists use distorted reality to express their own emotions, feelings, and ideas (Collingwood, 1938; Croce, 1902/1909; Tolstoy, 1896/1960). These schools of thought represent various philosophical concerns over either man-made or natural objects. These four perspectives focus on the representation of art, but postmodernism (Baudrillard, 2005; Hutcheon, 1988; Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1984) differs by advocating that art should embrace *self-reflexivity*, *inter-subjectivity*, *decentredness*, and *multiplicities* in terms of culture, nations, relations, and meanings (Shusterman, 2003; Townsend, 1997). *Self-reflexivity* in the postmodern perspective entails constant self-consciousness or self-awareness. *Inter-subjectivity* refers to the belief that knowledge and meanings should be co-constructed instead of being practised through individual thinking alone. *Decentredness* is advocated by Lyotard (1984) through his de-authorship concept of denial with the grand narrative. This concept is in synchronisation with the idea of *multiplicities* regarding the plurality of realities. These postmodern perspectives of western aesthetics share similarities with a stream of Chinese aesthetics – Daoism.

The aesthetics of Daoism emerged in the same period as Confucianism. Daoist central figures Laozi (老子) and Zhuangzi (莊子) promoted the understanding of *Dao* (the Way道), a spiritual status of “*wu*”, “indeterminacy” or nothingness無) (Laozi, 2008) that “cannot be captured in language, concepts, or names, but can only be grasped and experienced by the creative intuition of a free spirit” (Li, 2010, p. 105). In *Dao de jing* (Book of Dao道德經), Laozi (551 BCE/2011) writes about how everything becomes “the oneness” (or being as one 一, Ames and Hall’s translation), the concept of things becoming a unity (Chapter 39).

Of old there were certain things that realized oneness:

The heavens in realizing oneness became clear;

The earth in realizing oneness became stable;

The numinous in realizing oneness became animated;

The river valleys in realizing oneness became full;

The lords and kings in realizing oneness brought proper to the world.

[*Tian de yi yi qing* 天得一以清; *De de yi yi ning* 地得一以寧;

*Shen de yi yi ling* 神得一以靈; *Gu de yi yi ying* 谷得一以盈;

*Wanwu de yi yi sheng* 萬物得一以生; *Hou wang de yi yiwei tianxia zhen* 侯王得一以為

天下貞。]. (Ames & Hall, 2003 - Laozi’s Daodejing Chapter 39/2008)

According to the criticism by Chen and Hou (2009), Laozi’s concept of *the oneness* (or being as one 一) refers to the free spiritual status of *Dao*. Some Chinese

aestheticians suggest that *Dao* constitutes an aesthetic perspective of “*truth, kindness, and beauty*” (*Zhen, shan, mei* 真, 善, 美) (Chen & Hou, 2009, p. 100). In the Daoist perspective, *truth* refers to the non-artificial; *kindness* means good behaviours or kind intentions, and *beauty* is specified as nature’s beauty. However, among the various teachings of Laozi’s *Dao*, *wu* (indeterminacy無) seems a more useful idea for a study of aesthetics.

Regarding *wu* (indeterminacy無) (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2), Laozi (551 BCE/2011) writes “the Way is always “not-doing”, yet there is nothing it does not do.” (*Dao chang wuwei er wu bu wei* 道常無為而無不為) (Chapter 37). This *not-doing* is Laozi’s *wuwei* (“non-assertive activity” 無為) (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 167). It means *something* will be realised in a state of doing (or being or thinking of) nothing (無為*wuwei*). Although this sounds contradictory, Laozi means something will be “done” even when nothing is done *purposefully* because by being in the state of *nothingness*, humans will be situated in a state of *going with the flow of nature* (順應自然*shunying ziran*), which is *wuwei* (non-assertive activity 無為). It achieves the essence of the status of *Dao*: a human is in unity with nature (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一) (Laozi, 551 BCE/2011). This unity is essential because Laozi believes that when a human being can have freedom of mind, body and soul and attain the status of unifying with nature, this person will then be freed from desire and get into the state of *wuyu* (“objectless desiring” 無欲) (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 167), meaning the thoughts and behaviours of this person will no longer be intended for self-advantages (e.g., richness, fame or authority). According to the main idea of Daoism, not seeking personal gain is contradictory to the short-sighted practice of seeking instant benefits. Humans can achieve *wuwei* (non-assertive activity 無為) and *wuyu* (objectless desiring 無欲) (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 167) through constant self-reflexivity. According to Hall and Ames (1998), when humans are in the status of *wuwei* and *wuyu*, they will be “dissolving the dichotomy of self and others to integrate fully into the continuity of existence” (p. 167). The Way of Daoism fulfils cohesion and harmony with nature, individuals and society aesthetically (Chen & Hou, 2009).

### *Shared nature in Dao and Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizomatic becoming*

Way-making (*Dao*) gives rise to continuity, continuity gives rise to difference, difference gives rise to plurality. And plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (*wanwu* [萬物]). (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 142)

According to the interpretation of Ames and Hall, achieving *Dao* (the Way 道) is not a “one-off deal” but a continuous process. To Laozi, it is a life-long process for an individual to fulfil the status of *Dao*, so a person who pursuits the spirit of *Dao* has to practice *wuwei* (non-assertive activity 無為) and *wuyu* (objectless desiring 無欲) daily. This process to fulfil *Dao* constitutes a life-long process of *becoming*. Wong (2014), who has gained insights into Daoism through her intensive research on Chinese paintings, regards “[t]his emanative nature of *Dao* as “materiality” on a continuum of becomings” (p. 93). Her claim connects Daoism to the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of rhizome through the concept of *becoming*.

### **Four postmodern characteristics shared between the aesthetic concept of Daoism and the concept of rhizome**

The aesthetics of *Dao* in Daoism advocates “the enjoyment of nature” (Lin, 1967, p. 33). It consists of philosophical concepts such as *decentralism* (Laozi, 551 BCE/2011, Chapter 34; Zhuangzi, 369 BCE/1996, Chapter *Autumn floods*), *self-reflexivity* (Laozi, 551 BCE/2011, Chapter 33), “interthing inter-subjectivity” (transcendental subjectivity) (Pang-White, 2009, p. 71), and *anti-scientific politics* (Laozi, 551 BCE/2011, Chapter 18, 65). Surprisingly, these characteristics of Daoist aesthetics relate to the aesthetics of postmodernism more than the traditional realm of Plato’s or Aristotle’s philosophy. Four characteristics bridge the postmodern perspective of Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and the aesthetic concept of Daoism, i.e. *intuition*, *self-reflexivity*, *inter-subjectivity* and *multiplicities* (about de-authorship).

#### **Intuition and self-reflexivity (or self-consciousness)**

He [Deleuze] conceives intuition as a deliberate reflective awareness or willed self-consciousness, a concentrated and direct attention to the operations of consciousness (in contrast with mediated ‘observations of’ consciousness by consciousness in a quest for transparency of thought to itself). (Stagoll, 2010, p. 136, emphasis in original)

Stagoll (2010) explains that Deleuzian *intuition* is not a basic instinct but rather a deliberate act of constant *self-reflexivity and self-consciousness*. This understanding of intuition is tied closely to the Daoist interpretation of *wu* and *wuyu*. In Daoism, through continuous practice of *wuwei* (non-assertive activity 無為) with self-consciousness, a human can achieve the status of *wu* (nothingness 無), also known as *Dao* (the Way 道). According to Chen and Hou (2009), *wuyu* (objectless desiring 無欲) is intuitive thinking that refers to a self-conscious mind which is non-calculative for self-benefits. When people will to be freed from desire, they are in the state of *wuyu*, so that everything they do is *wuwei*, a status where they will be open to their feelings and surroundings. Then they can engage with the beautiful surroundings and enjoy the peace of mind – this is a fulfilment of *Dao*. However, the status of *Dao* cannot be achieved by a one-off enactment but a life-long process of practising *wuwei* and *wuyu*. This Daoist practice of *Dao* links to the concept of *becoming* in the Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizome, given that they both involve a perpetual (continuous) process (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in non-linear time and space. Similarly, Geertz (1983) claims that “The sense of beauty ... [is] brought into actual existence by the experience of living in the midst of certain sorts of things to look at, listen to, handle, think about, cope with, and react to” (p. 118). He suggests that aesthetic experiences are accompanied by self-awareness and are cognitive, sensory and emotional by nature.

#### **Inter-subjectivity**

Regarding inter-subjectivity, Deleuze claims that subjectivity “is not given; it is always under construction” (Boundas, 2010, p. 274). This notion of inter-subjectivity relates to the “interthing inter-subjectivity” (transcendental subjectivity) (Pang-White, 2009, p. 71) of Daoism. According to the idea of *unity with nature* (being as one 天人合一 *tian ren he yi*), a human (*ren* 人) is encouraged to *go with the flow of nature* (*shunying ziran* 順應自然), which includes the “heavens” (*tian* 天),

“earth” (*de* 地), and “numinous” (*wu* 物) for the achievement of *Dao* (the Way 道) (Laozi, 551 BCE/2011, Chapter 39). Daoism thus advocates a state of mind where humans are capable of being reflexive when they are living in the inter- and intra-related environments of multiplicities.

### Multiplicities

The philosophical concept of rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) is the best for illuminating the idea of multiplicities. This reinterpretation of rhizomatic plant roots pertains to the complex idea of multiple entrances and exits regarding things, time and space. In *The Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain that things, knowledge and power do not develop in linearity but rhizomatically and contextually. Within the postmodern perspective where there is not only one universal truth, multiple realities are visualised through the image of rhizomes that also signifies the characteristics of decentredness (e.g., de-authorship). Similarly, the concept of *wu* in Daoism goes along with the rhizomatic idea of non-linearity and decentredness (Ran, 2008). Chen and Hou (2009) provide a helpful Chinese translation for the multiplicities between the concept of *the oneness* (or being as one 合一 *he yi*) and the concept of rhizomes, where “heavens”, “earth”, “numinous”, “river valleys”, “lords and kings” can be perceived as one root, namely *the oneness* (Ames & Hall, 2003 - Laozi's *Daodejing* Chapter 39).

As Chinese traditional values and ideologies are deeply rooted, Chinese aesthetics has a close relation with Chinese philosophies (e.g., Confucianism, Daoism). However, in this study, based on the shared humanistic notions and postmodern aspects, Chinese aesthetics is considered in connection with the postmodern perspective on western aesthetics. The relationship of art with aesthetics cannot be defined or limited by theories (Dissanayake, 1988; Greene, 1971). Thus, by adopting a postmodern perspective on intuition, inter-subjectivity, self-reflexivity and multiplicity, the study can contribute to the reconceptualisation of the aesthetic functions of education.

### Functions of aesthetics

There are different thoughts about the functions of aesthetics. In the West, an aesthetic experience refers to either a process of catharsis (Aristotle, 335 BCE/1992) that occurs through emotions of pity and fear aroused by a Greek tragedy or just the acquisition of personal pleasure (Kant, 1987) as an emotional response towards an artwork. After three centuries, such aesthetic notion of pleasure is still valued, particularly in the latest nationwide aesthetic education advocacy in Taiwan. In order to revive education with creativity, Taiwanese educators and researchers determine *pleasure* as the learning goal of aesthetic education in the recent education curriculum reform (Lin, 2014). The Taiwanese government has been running a 15-year programme to implement aesthetic education with the concept of pleasure throughout all levels of education since 2011, from preschool to university levels, including pre- and in-service teaching training. Besides, Dewey (1934) proposes that aesthetic education is an education of empathy as well as creativity. These two are internationally accepted goals for aesthetic education (Amadio et al., 2006; Benavot, 2004; Curriculum Development Council, 2006).



Meanwhile, this article proposes the inclusion of the Chinese perspectives as one of the goals.

From a Confucian perspective, both arts and aesthetics are educational. Confucius argues that education is a process of “making the culture of rites and music self-conscious” (Li, 2010, p. 39) and also serves as a way of passing the culture on to the younger generation. According to

Xúnzi (荀子), the core mission of art is to achieve aesthetic education, so that “*li*” (rites 禮儀 *liyí*, rituals of propriety 禮節 *lijie*) (Li, 2007) and “*yi*” (righteousness 義) can be passed down the generations (Chen & Hou, 2009, p. 88). In Confucius’ *Analects* 12.1 (*Lunyu* 論語, 500 BCE/1979), *li* is an integral part in the idea of *ren* (benevolence 仁). Similarly, Zhuangzi (369 BCE/1996) of Daoism proposes (p. 16) the idea to “love one another” (Chen & Hou, 2009, p. 118). Thus, Chinese aesthetics serves the aim of fostering people of *ren* (benevolence 仁) by cultivating courtesy and righteousness. Modern Chinese aesthetic educators (i.e., like Wang Guowei 王國維, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 and Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛) applied the Daoist perspective of *wuwei* (non-assertive activity 無為) to aesthetic education in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ran, 2008). Moreover, Zhu believed that aesthetic education could rebuild the human mindset through “perceptual knowledge” (Ran, 2008, p. 23) so as to help people reconstruct their world vision and national values. Therefore, aesthetics in Chinese perspectives is always education-based with a function of teaching people to live by the virtue of benevolence in the hope of building a better society.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow shares similar thought about the Chinese perspectives on aesthetic functions. In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Maslow (1971) claims that “the concept of creativeness and the concept of the healthy, self-actualising, fully human person seems to become closer and closer together, and may perhaps turn out to be the same thing. ... Education through art may be especially important not so much for turning out artists or art products, as turning out better people” (p. 57). Furthermore, UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education (Amadio et al., 2006) also reports that aesthetics is beneficial for not only overall personal development but also socio-economic progress.

In recent years, international organisations, ministries of education and curriculum developers across the world have increasingly emphasised the potential social benefits of aesthetic education. They also have an understanding of its expected contribution towards socio-economic development and various other aspects. Those aspects are the fight against poverty, the promotion of universal values and cultural understanding, or the fostering of local cultural values and identities. Hence, certain forms of aesthetic learning are therefore expected to positively transfer to other learning areas. This will be beneficial for the overall development of individuals and also for the well-being of society. (Amadio et al., 2006, p. 19)

UNESCO reports that aesthetic education can become an intervention to social problems related to poverty and social cohesion, if the humanistic aspects of aesthetics, such as emotional engagements and self-consciousness ethics, are involved. In other words, aesthetic education is essential in education because it does not only stimulate children’s creative and imaginative power, aesthetic experiences also facilitate the exercise of emotional engagements and self-consciousness, which may contribute to character building.

## Aesthetic experiences and aesthetic environments

In discussing how humans experience and respond to aesthetic experiences, the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Levinson, 2003) states that ways to distinguish aesthetic states of mind from others are:

... disinterestedness, or detachment from desires, needs and practical concerns; non-instrumentality, or being undertaken or sustained for their own sake; contemplative or absorbed character, with consequent effacement of the subject; focus on an object's form; focus on the relation between an object's form and its content or character; focus on the aesthetic features of an object; and figuring centrally in the appreciation of works of arts. (p. 6–7)

### Aesthetic experiences

According to Winston (2010), the perspective of Kant highlights that humans could experience nature's beauty through "a set of necessary, inter-related conditions or 'moments', all of which happen in the human mind" (p. 20). These experiences of beauty are the results of "harmonious free play" concerning "our capacity for understanding and our capacity for imagination" (p. 20). To summarise the aesthetic state of mind or how humans undergo and respond to aesthetic experiences, some refer to this as a perceptual focus on experience under certain conditions (Smith, 1970), while others suggest this is an activity of the nervous system (Langer, 1962). However, Hutcheson (1738) stated that aesthetic responses were sensory, not rational, while Burke (1757) reassessed Hutcheson's statement by associating aesthetic responses with emotional engagements rather than merely with perception. Burke's argument affirms the importance of emotional engagements in aesthetic experiences, lending support to the claim that imitation-oriented arts activities cannot be counted as aesthetic experiences.

The shift in the debate over the nature of aesthetic experiences towards the education contexts accounts for the increase in child-orientedness in Western notions of aesthetic experiences. Heid (2005) portrays aesthetic experiences as "a-ha" moments (p. 50) in which children learn about concentration, mind and body connections, and critique with others. Lim (2005) furthers the idea by identifying three dimensions in children's aesthetic experiences: a sense of awareness, art materials, and convergence of ideas and feelings. Contrary to the similar description of children's aesthetic experiences given by Heid (2005) and Lim (2005), Bundy (2003) has explicitly characterised aesthetic experiences as "the experience of intimacy" (p. 173) rather than "aesthetic encounters" that only remain "at a gut level" (p. 172), identifying three categories of aesthetic encounters: "animation, connection and heightened awareness" (p. 176). People who experience *animation* feel "more alive, more alert" (p. 180); *connection* refers to a time "when the percipient (via senses and feelings) experiences a connection to an idea stimulated by the work but not necessarily directly contained in it" (p. 180) while *heightened awareness* is "a product of the simultaneous experience of animation and connection" (p. 180). These educators define aesthetic experiences in terms of emotions and feelings but not merely cognitive experiences. Therefore, while aesthetics can be "a subject of inquiry" (Smith, 1970, p. x), an inquiry into aesthetic experiences should involve cognition, sensory perceptions and feelings.

In Chinese perspectives of aesthetics, the Daoist aesthetic perspective distinguishes itself with its well-rounded concept of aesthetic experiences. Chen and Hou (2009) identifies four themes of Daoist aesthetics about emotional engagements and self-consciousness, in which three relate to aesthetic experiences, while the other to the aesthetic environment.

- (1) “大音希聲” (*da yin xi sheng*) (Chen & Hou, 2009, p. 102) [The greatest sound is ever so faint (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 41)] – In Chapter 41 of *Dao de jing* (Book of Dao 道德經), Laozi explains that aesthetic experiences, like the sound of *Dao* (the Way道), are not easily audible to the ear but perceptible if listened with “personal association [to the past], imagination, emotional engagements and thinking” (Chen & Hou, 2009, p. 103). Such interpretation leads to an understanding of aesthetic experiences as not only those of one’s cognition but also of emotions and self-consciousness (or self-awareness), suggesting that feelings and emotional engagements are indispensable in exploring aesthetic experiences.
- (2) “美言不信” (*mei yan buxin*) (Chen & Hou, 2009, p. 105) [Eloquent words are not credible (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 81)] – In Chapter 81 of *Dao de jing* (Book of Dao 道德經), Laozi says “Credible words are not eloquent, eloquent words are not credible” (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2), a critical claim against hypocritical behaviour to mean that virtuous and ethical people do not like to speak with fancy words. Thus, in Chen and Hou’s (2009) view, Laozi sees *intuitive presentation* as a kind of *truthfulness*. This implies that aesthetic experiences hinge on the truthful experiences with one’s surroundings through the mind, body and soul.
- (3) “正反相成” (*zheng fan xiang cheng*) (Chen & Hou, 2009, p. 107) [“Positive and negative bring about each other” (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2)] – This theme comes from “difficult and easy complement each other” (*nanyi zhi xiang cheng ye* 難易之相成也) (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2) in Chapter 2 of *Dao de jing* (Book of Dao 道德經). The phrase means that everything has two opposite sides, such as the difficult and easy, as well as the positive and negative.
- (4) “有無相生” (*you wu xiangsheng*) (Chen & Hou, 2009, p. 111) [“determinacy and indeterminacy give rise to each other” (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2)]. In relation to the third theme, this one comes from the idea that “determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) give rise to each other” [*you wu zhi xiangsheng ye* 有無之相生也] (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2) in Chapter 2 of *Dao de jing* (Book of Dao 道德經). According to Ames and Hall, Laozi argues though determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) are non-ontological categories, they are “conventional distinctions that have explanatory force in giving an account of how things hang together” (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2).

Based on the Laozi’s idea that two opposite sides bring about each other, Chen and Hou. (2009) suggest that the “[v]irtual and reality bring about each other [*xushi xiangzi* 虛實相資]” (p.107), which is the third characteristic of Daoist aesthetic experiences. Taking the Chinese landscape painting (*Shanshuihua* 山水畫) as an example, Chen and Hou explain that the first brushstroke of the ink breaks through the *void of thought* on

the white paper, meaning that once the black ink makes contact with the white paper, the different shades of the ink determine the space between the black (the ink) and the white (the paper). The marks of the ink (e.g., drawing or words) become a reality (the form, line, or shape) while the blank space on the white paper denotes the virtual. In Chinese painting, the oppositional colour of black and white sketches an artwork, and allows the *yixiang* (imaginary environment 意象) to emerge. The first three themes of Daoist aesthetics outline the core elements of aesthetic experiences in the Daoist view: imagination, emotions, thinking, truthful expressions, and the coexistence of the real and virtual.

### Aesthetic environments

First of all, the aesthetic environment is different from *environmental aesthetics*; the former is the *space* that facilitates aesthetic experiences (Ho, 2019) while the latter a study on how to appreciate the beauty of nature (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). In Western education, aesthetic environments, particularly in early childhood education, generally refer to the physical environment (Nutbrown, 2013). The physical environment refers typically to a safe space as an “aesthetically rich and diversified environment” (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p. 20). Therefore, it is common for kindergarten classrooms to be decorated with children’s artworks and colourful learning aids. However, if educators have insufficient knowledge of aesthetics, these physical environments can only reflect the “mass marketing and craft-store culture” that “does not challenge children aesthetically to respond deeply to the natural world, their cultural heritage, or their inner worlds” (Tarr, 2001, p. 3). It indicates that the natural world can be a physical and outer world while the inner worlds can be interpreted as intangible worlds. Similarly, the aesthetic environment in the perspective of Daoism is twofold: the physical space and intangible space.

In *The Contemporary Development of Aesthetic Education*, Ran (2008) suggests that the achievement of aesthetic experiences occurs in various ways and methods, not limited to specific time and space. According to Chen and Hou. (2009), from the Daoist perspective, the physical space of aesthetic environments is known as “*you*” (determinacy 有) and the intangible space as “*wu*” (indeterminacy or nothingness 無) (p. 237), reflecting the idea that “determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) give rise to each other [*you wu zhi xiangsheng ye* 有無之相生也]” (Ames & Hall, 2003; Laozi, 551 BCE/2011, Chapter 2). Inspired by Chinese architecture, Chen and Hou. (2009) explain the idea that “determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) produce each other” (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2) in terms of the physical building and the interior space of a building. They see the physical building as the *determinacy* and the interior space the *indeterminacy*. For example, the furniture in the room is the *determinacy* while its intangible space comprising the length, width and height the *indeterminacy*.

*Indeterminacy* exists as long as *determinacy* does in space and they always co-exist. The concept links to the third characteristics of Daoist aesthetic experiences as aforementioned. As illustrated in the Chinese landscape painting (*Shanshuihua* 山水畫), the image shown in a painting relies on both the white paper and the ink (brush strokes) that coexist at the same time. The space of the whiteness (*indeterminacy*) accentuates the shapes in black (*determinacy*). At the same time, the shapes in black contrast with the whiteness of the paper. Together, the black and white unify as a picture. A painting

of Tangshixia's (唐石霞, 1904 – 1993) collection (Tang, 1993) is a good example. Although the painting dates back to the Qing Dynasty, with the white paper turned yellowish grey, it still clearly presents how the ink and the space of the white paper highlight each other to create a *yixiang* (imaginary environment 意象) portraying a temple in a quiet forest.

The idea that *determinacy* and *indeterminacy* coexist contributes to the study of the functions of the aesthetic environment. Architecture is a clear example of aesthetic environments because aesthetic experiences take place in a physical environment, which should also coexist with an *interior* or *intangible* space. Malaguzzi (1996) describes aesthetic experiences as “spaces for relations, options, and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security ... which reflects the ideas, ethics, attitudes and culture of the people who live in it.” (p. 40). According to prior research, the intangible aesthetic environment, particularly in an education context, refers to the opportunity to exercise decisiveness, introspectiveness and empathy (Ho, 2017), which leads to the power relationship among the stakeholders (Ho, 2019).

## Conclusion

The article has discussed the history of aesthetics in the Chinese and Western contexts. While both perspectives consist of humanistic notions of emotions and experiences of nature's beauty, Chinese aesthetics differs due to its social-educational basis. Furthermore, four common aspects are identified between the Chinese aesthetics of Daoism and the Deleuzian concept of rhizome in postmodernism, specifically concerning the educational context, including *becoming*, *intuition*, *self-consciousness*, *inter-subjectivity* and *multiplicities* (in relation to de-authorship). Such philosophical connection contributes to the reconceptualisation of aesthetic functions in education. By recognising both emotional engagements and self-consciousness as essential in aesthetic experiences, it is believed that the aesthetic environment can refer to both the physical and intangible spaces, with the latter leading to the reconceptualisation of aesthetic functions guided by the Chinese concept of *ren* (benevolence 仁). As such, instead of only focusing on creativity and imagination, aesthetic education in curricular worldwide can revive with a humanistic mission of *fostering better people for the community*.

## Note

1. According to Chapter 16 “The Great Preface” of the *Book of Songs*, some unknown scholars of the Han Dynasty (Columbia University, 2002/2020 Asia for Educators) state clearly that emotions are revealed through various Chinese art forms: The poem is the place to which one's preoccupations go. Within the mind it is a preoccupation; emerging in language it is a poem. The emotions are stirred and take form in words. If words are not enough, we speak them in sighs. If sighs are not enough, we sing them. If singing is not enough, then unconsciously our hands dance them and our feet tap them.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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