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# Beauty (*Mei*, 美) in the *Zhuangzi* and Contemporary Theories of Beauty

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PENG FENG

**Abstract.** *In this article, I outline a reading of Mei in the Zhuangzi, taken to mean “beauty” or “the beautiful.” There is a possible anachronism involved in such an approach because mei is not central to Zhuangzi’s thinking. Nonetheless, I will argue that interesting points of relevance between Zhuangzi’s comments on mei and contemporary theories of beauty can be found and that an intercultural interpretation of mei and the beautiful can shed light on aspects of both traditional Chinese aesthetics and contemporary Western aesthetics by placing the two in conversation with one another. Zhuangzi seems to support neither relativism nor universalism in his understanding of beauty, though he touches on both relativist and universalist ideas. I argue there are certain superficial similarities between Zhuangzi’s aesthetics and positive aesthetics. But, on a deeper level, Zhuangzi advocates a form of negative aesthetics that is not dissimilar from those already prominent in contemporary Continental aesthetics, such as Christoph Menke, Gernot Böhme, and François Jullien. In this way, I highlight points for dialogue between Zhuangzi’s theory of beauty and contemporary discourse, as well as the ramifications of these ideas for thinking about the future of aesthetic education.*

*Mei* in Chinese is normally translated into English as “beauty” or “the beautiful.” The nature of *mei* is not a central theme in *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy; neither is it a concept of particular importance in traditional Chinese aesthetics.

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The core concepts of Chinese aesthetics, according to historians of Chinese aesthetics, are *dao*, *qi*, and *xiang*, but *mei* is not one of them.<sup>1</sup> In Chinese aesthetic history, we see different points of emphasis in contrast to the prevailing concern with beauty in Western aesthetics. “The nature of beauty,” as Crispin Sartwell points out, “is one of the most enduring and controversial themes in Western philosophy, and is—with the nature of art—one of the two fundamental issues in philosophical aesthetics.”<sup>2</sup> However, *mei* is interesting because it is arguably the only concept that is shared between Zhuangzi and contemporary aesthetic discourse, even though the concept of beauty itself is notoriously ambiguous in meaning and multifarious in its philosophical theorization. One justification for the relevance of *mei* for contemporary conversation is that its basic meaning is almost the same in the classical Chinese of the *Zhuangzi* as it is in the contemporary language and it also fits well with its English counterpart. In contrast, the notions of *dao*, *qi*, and *xiang* are different now from their earlier usage and do not have readily available English counterparts. Therefore, although *mei* is not as important as *dao*, *qi*, and *xiang* in traditional Chinese aesthetics, because its meaning has not changed since ancient times and it more easily fits with a comparable Western concept of beauty, it is a more appropriate concept with which we can compare Zhuangzi’s thought and contemporary aesthetics.

### 1. The Beauty of Xishi

In both modern and classical Chinese, *mei* is commonly used to refer to beautiful women. In this sense, the translation of the Chinese *mei* into the English “beauty” or “the beautiful” (or vice versa) is not a mistranslation. “The English word ‘beauty,’” as Crispin Sartwell points out, “derives from Old French ‘bealte’ and eventually from the Latin ‘bellum.’ In its earliest uses in written English, dating from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, it refers almost exclusively to women, and that is still probably the word’s most common application, certainly when the term is used as a noun.”<sup>3</sup> We are, therefore, not different from Zhuangzi in regarding Xishi as “a beauty.” The story recorded in the *Zhuangzi*, told by Music Master Jin, is as follows:

The beautiful Xishi, troubled with heartburn, frowned at her neighbors. An ugly woman of the neighborhood, seeing that Xishi was beautiful, went home and likewise pounded her breast and frowned at her neighbors. But at the sight of her, the rich men of the neighborhood shut tight their gates and would not venture out, while the poor men grabbed their wives and children by the hand and scampered off. The woman understood that someone frowning could be beautiful, but she did not understand where the beauty of the frown came from.<sup>4</sup>

In this story, Zhuangzi does not deny that Xishi is beautiful. Certain standards of women’s beauty seem to have been universally accepted in

Zhuangzi's time, and he does not necessarily depart from this. But what Zhuangzi rejected was the quasi-beauty of the ugly woman and her aping. Why does Zhuangzi criticize the ugly woman's imitating beautiful Xishi? Did she fail in her imitation? Did she mistake the frown that is the symptom of heartburn for beauty? Are there any substantive differences between the "beauty" of the ugly woman, that is an imitation of beautiful Xishi, and the beauty of Xishi herself? The story does not give us enough information to answer these questions. However, even if the ugly woman can make a perfect imitation, her behavior will be criticized. It has nothing to do with whether her imitation of the frown is a failure or a success. The ugly woman could make her imitation so successful that she cannot be separated from the beautiful Xishi just by looking. But the ontological difference between them cannot be neglected because Xishi's beauty is presentational beauty, while the beauty of the ugly woman is representational. Here we have the idea that presentational beauty is natural beauty, while representational beauty is artificial beauty. What Zhuangzi denies here is the value of representational beauty; in this sense, Zhuangzi's view of beauty is diametrically opposed to that of Hegel, who is famous for preferring artistic beauty to natural beauty, claiming with great confidence that "the beauty of art is *higher* than nature."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Case of Yangzi

This does not mean that an ugly woman cannot become beautiful, be perceived as beautiful, or somehow remove her ugliness. There is an element of relativity to Zhuangzi's account. Indeed, there is a story recorded in the *Zhuangzi* in which we see a beautiful woman become nonbeautiful and an ugly woman become nonugly:

Yangzi on his way to Song, stopped for the night at an inn. The innkeeper had two concubines, one beautiful, the other ugly. But the ugly one was treated as a lady of rank, while the beautiful one was treated as a menial. When Yangzi asked the reason, a young boy of the inn replied, "The beautiful one is only too aware of her beauty, so we don't think of her as beautiful. The ugly one is only too aware of her ugliness, so we don't think of her as ugly."<sup>6</sup>

Since beauty in that time period seems to have been universally acknowledged and appreciated as valuable, we assume the beautiful should normally be treated well and the ugly be treated badly. However, the innkeeper's manner seems to be somehow unusual. His beautiful concubine is treated badly, while the ugly one is treated well. The reason for this unusual approach is that the beautiful is not regarded, in this instance, as beauty and the ugliness is not regarded as ugly. This reversal of the beautiful and the ugly relate to the degree and position of self-awareness in the women

themselves. At least, this is the answer that Yangzi receives from the young boy at the inn. There is an immediate explanation as to why self-awareness can transform the beautiful into the nonbeautiful and the ugly into the non-ugly. Let me try to explain it.

In Xishi's case, the ugly woman aping beautiful Xishi was criticized, indicating, as mentioned above, that Zhuangzi criticizes representational beauty. Here, the self-awareness of one's beauty is also a kind of representation, that is, representation of one's beauty in one's own consciousness. It is therefore this aspect of self-representation, or in other words the element of artifice, that transforms presentational beauty into representational beauty and the beautiful into the nonbeautiful.

In the above quotation of the *Zhuangzi*, "aware of her beauty" and "aware of her ugliness" are the English translation of Chinese *zimei* and *ziwu*, respectively. *Zimei* and *ziwu* seem to be equivalent but are in fact very different in their results and mode of action. *Zimei* can be interpreted not only as self-awareness of one's own beauty but also as self-gratification and even self-aggrandizement based on one's degree of beauty. The beautiful can thus be transformed by self-gratification and ego. Both self-gratification and self-aggrandizement change the beautiful more than does a mere self-awareness of beauty. *Zimei*, that is, the self-awareness, self-gratification, and self-aggrandizement in one's own beauty, can be named as self-beautifying one's own beauty, a corruption of what is beautiful. This self-beautifying changes beauty into nonbeauty.

But *ziwu* is different from *zimei*. *Ziwu*, in the case of the ugly woman, cannot be interpreted as self-gratification and self-aggrandizement on the basis of one's ugliness, since the ugly is not worth gratifying and nobody has the inclination to make her ugliness uglier or more potent, whereas everyone is inclined to make her beauty more beautiful. The self-awareness of the ugly is not a self-representation of one's ugliness since the ugly is not worth representing. The self-awareness of the ugly does not mean self-representation of one's ugliness even in one's consciousness but instead means admitting and accepting one's ugliness. In other words, the self-awareness of one's ugliness does not change the nature of the ugly. *Ziwu* cannot be interpreted as self-uglifying one's ugliness since *ziwu* does not make one's ugliness uglier, but just allows one's ugliness to be merely ugly. It is a form of honesty rather than corruption.

### 3. Blind Universalism and Awakened Relativism

Zhuangzi rejected the ugly woman's behavior of imitating Xishi's beauty, but he did not deny Xishi's beauty directly or literally. This seems to indicate that, to a degree, beauty can be universally acknowledged. However, Zhuangzi is normally interpreted as a relativist.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the question

of the basis for Zhuangzi's universal view of beauty arises. Wing-tsit Chan writes:

In this unceasing transfiguration, things appear and disappear. . . . They seem to be different, some large and some small, some beautiful and some ugly, but Tao equalizes them as one. This is Zhuangzi's famous doctrine of the "equality of all things." According to it, reality and unreality, right and wrong, life and death, beauty and ugliness, and all conceivable opposites are reduced to an underlying unity.<sup>8</sup>

I would argue that Chan's interpretation is only partially correct. There is no doubt that many statements and implications can be found in the *Zhuangzi* to support relativism, but there are also plenty of statements and implications that can be found to support nonrelativism. At least, we cannot derive a relativism of beauty from the case of Xishi. In the text, Xishi's beauty is not doubted by the people of her neighborhood. But it does not mean that Zhuangzi supported a true universalism of standards of beauty. The following paragraph from the *Zhuangzi* is often interpreted to support that Zhuangzi holds a relativism of beauty:

Men claim that Maoqiang and Lady Li were beautiful; but if fish saw them, they would dive to the bottom of the stream; if birds saw them, they would fly away; and if deer saw them, they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world?<sup>9</sup>

However, this paragraph should not be taken to support Chan's claim that Zhuangzi is a relativist regarding beauty, one who asserts (in any simple sense) that beauty cannot be separated from ugliness, or that an object can be seen as both beautiful and ugly. We find this kind of relativism in Hume's account of beauty:

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others.<sup>10</sup>

Zhuangzi did not propose Hume's form of relativism regarding beauty. Maoqiang and Lady Li were not perceived as ugly women by one person and beautiful by another; rather, everyone perceived them as beautiful women. Here differences in judgments of beauty do not arise between humans but between humans and animals. For Zhuangzi, this means that, from the human perspective, they were (truly) beautiful, while they were ugly in animals' eyes. If animals are read here as metaphors for different humans or different kinds or groups of humans, then Zhuangzi is close to Hume's relativism. But if the animals are just considered as animals, Zhuangzi's view of

beauty is quite different from Hume's. The latter reading would suggest that beauty can be shared among humans but not between humans and animals. Therefore, if a person limits herself to a human perspective, she will not be led to a relativism of beauty; instead, she will accept a universalism of beauty, based on commonly accepted principles. But the point for Zhuangzi is that this universalism of beauty, which is based on the neglect of other possible perspectives, such as those of animals, is blind. Zhuangzi criticizes this blind universalism and instead puts forward an awakened relativism that accommodates a variety of perspectives while never questioning the legitimacy of each perspective in relation to its own set of standards. Based on this awakened relativism, one can insist that the beauty from one's perspective is orthodox and admit that the beauties from others' perspectives are also orthodox, acknowledging that there are differing orthodoxies of the beautiful. This awakened relativism of beauty is similar to the theory of beauty conceived by Alexander Nehamas:

Aesthetic judgment, I believe, never commands universal agreement, and neither a beautiful object nor a work of art ever engages a catholic community. Beauty creates smaller societies, no less important or serious because they are partial, and, from the point of view of its members, each one is orthodox—orthodox, however, without thinking of all others as heresies. . . . What is involved is less a matter of understanding and more a matter of hope, of establishing a community that centers around it—a community, to be sure, whose boundaries are constantly shifting and whose edges are never stable.<sup>11</sup>

Nehamas is right when he proposes a smaller but open community that centers on a consensus or even an ideal: the "hope" of beauty. But that is not enough. The critical issue is how to deal with the relationship between different communities that center on different views of beauty. Despite understanding that different standards exist, no one can stop us from asking such questions as: Is there a higher beauty that transcends all different views of beauty? Is there a larger perspective that covers all different perspectives of beauty? Or, is there a bigger community based on consensus of one higher standard of beauty that includes, or might include, all different communities based on a consensus regarding different lower beauties?

#### 4. Arbitrary Awakened Universalism

Some statements and implications in the *Zhuangzi* inform us that divergent perspectives can be divided into different levels, such as small ones, big ones, and even, seemingly, an ultimate or widest one. For example, when the Lord of the River limited himself within the Yellow River, his perspective was small. When he reached the North Sea, his perspective expanded. Then

Ruo of the North Sea, whom the Lord of the River met when he reached the North Sea, spoke to him:

You can't discuss the ocean with a well frog—he's limited by the space he lives in. You can't discuss ice with a summer insect—he's bound to a single season. You can't discuss the *dao* with a cramped scholar—he's shackled by his doctrines. Now you have come out beyond your banks and borders and have seen the great sea—so you realize your own pettiness. From now on, it will be possible to talk to you about the Great Principle.<sup>12</sup>

It is not clear whether the North Sea simply refers to a *big* world or actually implies *the biggest* world. Nevertheless, between the smallest world and the biggest world, there are countless worlds that can be small or big depending on their frames of reference. Zhuangzi's views on the biggest world are somehow ambiguous. In some parts of the text, we are informed that we cannot imagine the biggest or the smallest world since both the big and the small are infinitely relative. But in other parts, we are convinced that the biggest world, the largest perspective, and highest beauty do exist as a standard of judgment. In short, if one takes the point of view of the *dao*, one can reach the highest state, where the distinction between true and false, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, and so on vanishes. This first interpretation can be classified as an awakened relativism, which I have discussed above. The second one is a kind of universalism, where, in seeing from the perspective of the *dao*, one achieves a higher viewpoint, both negating and transcending the "this" and "that" of ordinary forms of judgment. It is not a blind universalism but a universalism after awakening and so can be called an awakened universalism. As Zhuangzi claims,

For this reason, whether you point to a little stalk or a great pillar, a leper or the beautiful Xishi, things ribald and shady, or things grotesque and strange, the *dao* makes them all into one. Their dividedness is their completeness; their completeness is their impairment. No thing is either complete or impaired, but all are made into one again. Only the man of far-reaching vision knows how to make them into one. So he has no use [for categories] but relegates all to the constant. The constant is the useful; the useful is the passable; the passable is the successful; and with success, all is accomplished. He relies on this alone, relies on it and does not know he is doing so. This is called the *dao*.<sup>13</sup>

From the point of view of the *dao*, Xishi's beauty and the leper's ugliness can be seen as the same. Indeed, everything that can be separated into such distinctions, from a limited perspective, including beauty and ugliness, can ultimately be rendered into the indistinguishable one. The indistinguishable one is itself beautiful. In the case of the Lord of the River, he realized his own



pettiness when he had come out beyond his banks and borders and had seen the great sea. Here the Chinese word translated into English by Watson as “pettiness” is *chou*, normally translated as “ugly” or “ugliness.” It means that the Lord of the River was himself petty and ugly when he was limited within his banks and borders, but, by breaking the boundaries, he could become wide and beautiful. In this sense, to be bigger or more encompassing is to be more beautiful. Therefore, the indistinguishable, widest perspective cannot be ugly but only beautiful. Zhuangzi called this “great beauty” (*damei*). This great beauty is beneath and hidden by all minor beauties. This great beauty is also characterized as unspeakable. Only the sage or “the man of far-reaching vision” can see it:

Heaven and earth have their great beauty but do not speak of it; the four seasons have their clear-marked regularity but do not discuss it; the ten thousand things have their principle of growth but do not expound it. The sage seeks out the beauty of Heaven and earth and masters the principle of the ten thousand things.<sup>14</sup>

How should we conceive of this great beauty? Perhaps it can be best understood from the point of view of universal theories of beauty that have attracted more and more theoretical interest recently. Where previously it had been an important subject for aesthetics and a primary concern for the arts, after a long period of decline from the beginning of the twentieth century, beauty seemed to stage something of a comeback by that century’s end. In 1993, Dave Hickey firmly claimed, “The issue of the nineties will be *beauty!*”<sup>15</sup> For Hickey, “beauty” or “beautiful” is not a profound word. People use it all the time. “In this vernacular usage,” he writes, “the word ‘beautiful’ bears no metaphysical burden. It signifies the pleasure we take in something that transcends the appropriate.”<sup>16</sup> In short, beauty or beautiful in Hickey’s vernacular usage, in a way, is not different from the way that *mei* is used in the *Zhuangzi*.

Beauty in contemporary aesthetics also tends to be used in a manner that is close to its vernacular usage and not elusive. Based on evolutionary psychology, Wolfgang Welsch claims that a universal appreciation of beauty can be found not only within human society but also within the animal kingdom: “There are indeed universal patterns of appreciation of beauty—esthetic preferences valid for humans in every culture. All humans evaluate objects that correspond to these patterns as beautiful.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he claims, “The aesthetic attitude might be not a uniquely human invention but have already originated before man appeared on earth, in the course of prehuman evolution, in the animal kingdom. Maybe human aesthetics developed from animal aesthetics.”<sup>18</sup>

According to Welsch, beauty can be universally appreciated by both humans and animals. The beauty of male animals can attract both animals

and humans. Some environmental aestheticians claim that the preference for beauty in the animal kingdom and the human world seems to be governed by some basic laws, such as biological ones. As Steven Bourassa points out, "An environment appearing to offer satisfaction of biological needs is one that will elicit a spontaneous positive response in man that parallels similar instinctual responses in animals."<sup>19</sup> Can the great beauty in the *Zhuangzi* be interpreted as similar to this universal preference for beauty? Obviously, this hypothesis contradicts Zhuangzi's view. As discussed above, Zhuangzi explicitly asserts that animals do not appreciate the beauty of women and that human and animal perspectives are mutually exclusive. Zhuangzi could not imagine the idea of universal beauty as conceived by contemporary aestheticians based on evolutionary psychology, and such a universalism of beauty cannot be supported by the *Zhuangzi*. Furthermore, there is a problem with reducing Zhuangzi's assessment of beauty to a mere biological determination.

It is true that there is a form of aesthetic universalism in the *Zhuangzi*, advanced both literally and metaphorically. The point of view of the *dao* might be interpreted as the perspective without perspectives. Based on this perspectiveless viewpoint, an awakened universalism could be envisaged. But, as Graham Parkes points out, "Zhuangzi does not believe that we could ever attain a kind of 'perspectiveless seeing.' What we wake up to is the realization that we are always bound by *some* perspective: this awakening is itself a perspective."<sup>20</sup> We seem, therefore, to be capable of *imagining* the perspectiveless viewpoint and the highest universalism but incapable of realizing or directly perceiving them. "That there is an awakening is granted," Robert Allinson writes, "but its penultimacy is final."<sup>21</sup> This awakened universalism of beauty is thus "only a promise of happiness," as Nehamas argues in his book. Zhuangzi would say that Welsch goes astray when he tries to turn the promise into reality. The universalism of beauty conceived by Welsch and others cannot be supported by Zhuangzi. For Zhuangzi, the ultimate is a thing that we perpetually strive toward but never fully attain. Therefore, it has its meaning for us as an aim or ideal and as a promise or hope that lies beyond our limited capacities but ever pushing us to transcend them.

## 5. Ugliness and Disgust

Zhuangzi does not deny the beauty of the beautiful women such as Xishi, Maoqiang, and Lady Li. But at the same time he does not see them as objects of desire. On the contrary, Zhuangzi warns us that the pursuit of attaining beauty, whether imitating the beauty of others or improving our own beauty, is harmful. Instead of pursuing beauty, he encourages us to admit and, indeed, to celebrate our ugliness. A number of physically handicapped

people, whether they were born thus or as a result of being punished by heaven or governors, are respected and appreciated by Zhuangzi, since they accepted their ugliness; in fact, in their ugliness, they find certain undervalued advantages. The case of the innkeeper's ugly concubine, analyzed above, shows us why the handicapped are worth appreciating.

Parkes thinks that the plethora of deformed characters in the *Zhuangzi* serves two purposes:

The presence of ugliness, deformity, or disease is what alone gives to beauty, integrity, and health their meaning—and these, as with all opposites, are harmoniously embraced by the *dao*. And just as the beautiful is seen to be beautiful only from a more or less arbitrarily fixed perspective, so being deformed is not necessarily the drawback that it appears to be.<sup>22</sup>

We can be persuaded to appreciate the virtues of ugly and handicapped people. But it seems to be very difficult for us to be taught to appreciate the “piss and shit” that are the most disgusting things mentioned in the *Zhuangzi*:

Master Dongguo asked Zhuangzi, “This thing called the *dao*—where does it exist?”

Zhuangzi said, “There's no place it doesn't exist.”

“Come,” said Master Dongguo, “you must be more specific!”

“It is in the ant.”

“As low a thing as that?”

“It is in the panic grass.”

“But that's lower still!”

“It is in the tiles and shards.”

“How can it be so low?”

“It is in the piss and shit!”

Master Dongguo made no reply.

Zhuangzi said, “Sir, your questions simply don't get at the substance of the matter. When Inspector Huo asked the superintendent of the market how to test the fatness of a pig by pressing it with the foot, he was told that the lower down on the pig you press, the nearer you come to the truth. But you must not expect to find the *dao* in any particular place—there is no thing that escapes its presence! Such is the Perfect *dao*, and so too are the truly great words. ‘Complete,’ ‘universal,’ ‘all-inclusive’—these three are different words with the same meaning. All point to a single reality.”<sup>23</sup>

The value of grotesque and disgusting things has been employed not only by Zhuangzi to exemplify the universal presencing of the *dao*, but also by artists and aestheticians to underscore the important distinctions between beauty and artistic value or artistic excellence.

In contrast to Hickey, who observed the return of beauty in contemporary art, Arthur Danto saw that the art circle was still dominated by ugliness, at least in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He claims that we have been experiencing a shift from traditional taste to disgust in the art world.<sup>24</sup> Danto announces: “Good art may not be beautiful.”<sup>25</sup> “Good art can be ugly.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, not only apparent beauty but also deferred beauty and difficult beauty cannot be relevant to artistic value. For example, according to Roger Fry, the ugliness of seemingly ugly art is only on the surface: its deeper beauty can be found if an appropriate seeing is undertaken. In this sense, arguably, the ideal of beauty remains pertinent even within superficially ugly art works. Aesthetic education can, therefore, be valued as a way to help people adopt such an appropriate seeing. Danto does not agree with Fry on identifying artistic excellence with beauty, even in this sense of deep, difficult, deferred, or profound beauty:

Fry was unquestionably right to defend the works as artistically excellent, but wrong to say that they would be seen as beautiful when one comes to understand the principles on which they were made. . . . And my thought has been that it is important to recognize that the works might still be perceived as ugly even when we have come to see their “artistic excellence.” The recognition of excellence need not entail a transformation in aesthetic perception. They don’t change before one’s eyes, like frogs into princes.<sup>27</sup>

As it happens, Danto also takes an artwork with urine as part of its content to show that art can be both excellent and disgusting. The artwork he refers to is one of Andres Serrano’s photographs in a series named *A History of Sex*. “It shows a man lying down, his mouth opened to receive a stream of urine from a pretty woman standing over him.”<sup>28</sup> Here there is a clear sense that the work retains a reference to transgressive forms of desire, despite—and, in fact, because of—the baseness of its content. But one might want to ask whether the work in question is, along Fry’s lines, appealing to the idea that what is typically conceived as disgusting, can, from a different perspective, be or become an object of beauty, or at least, one of desire. In any case, for somewhat different reasons, disgusting things such as urine and the grotesque were not excluded by Danto and Zhuangzi in explaining the presencing of *dao* or artistic value, respectively. We might well wish to dig deeper in asking the same question as Master Dongguo: “How can it be so low?”

For Danto, art can arouse a wide range of feelings. It should not be limited to pleasure aroused by beauty: “If the aim of a painting is to arouse desire, it is appropriate that it be beautiful. If it is to arouse loathing, it is perhaps more appropriate that it be disgusting.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, artistic value or artistic excellence doesn’t depend on beauty but on the success of the work at fulfilling its aims. A painting has artistic excellence if it successfully

arouses desire by being beautiful. By the same token, a painting also has artistic excellence if it successfully arouses loathing by being disgusting. We might even suggest that a work can also be considered excellent if it calls into question our traditional conceptions of the beautiful and the desirable, by use of grotesque content. Noël Carroll calls such artistic goodness “success value,” “connected with what the artist has achieved by means of her work.”<sup>30</sup>

## 6. Positive Aesthetics

Can we always call an art with artistic excellence or success beautiful, in the broad sense of beauty? Danto thinks we cannot. But he cannot stop us from doing so. In environmental aesthetics, people are not afraid to call ugly things beautiful, and perhaps this comes closer to some of Zhuangzi’s references to the relativity of standards of beauty. Allen Carlson admits that he does not find any natural thing ugly, provided one takes an appropriate point of view. He names his theory “positive aesthetics.”<sup>31</sup> Carlson writes:

The natural environment, insofar as it is untouched by man, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is, for example, graceful, delicate, intense, unified, and orderly, rather than bland, dull, insipid, incoherent, and chaotic. All virgin nature, in short, is essentially aesthetically good. The appropriate or correct aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is basically positive and negative aesthetic judgments have little or no place.<sup>32</sup>

Carlson’s positive aesthetics is inspired by Kendall Walton, who claims that the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of works of art is to perceive them according to their correct categories.<sup>33</sup> Carlson insists that the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of natural things should follow Walton’s model, since art has been normally accepted as an aesthetic object and because there are several similarities between the aesthetic appreciation of works of art and of natural objects:

The analogous account holds that there are different ways to perceive natural objects and landscapes. This is to claim that they, like works of art, can be perceived in different categories—not, of course, in different categories of art, but rather in different “categories of nature.” Analogous to the way *The Starry Night* might be perceived either as a post-impressionist or as an expressionist painting, a whale might be perceived either as a fish or as mammal. . . . Further, for natural objects or landscapes some categories are correct and others not. As it is correct to perceive the Van Gogh as a post-impressionist painting, it is likewise correct to perceive the whale as a mammal. . . . Lastly, analogous to the way certain facts about works and their origins in part determine the correct categories of art for them, certain facts about

natural objects or landscapes and their origins in part determine the correct categories of nature for them. As certain facts about the Van Gogh and its history in part determine it to be a post-impressionist painting, so certain facts about the whale and its natural history in part determine it to be a mammal.<sup>34</sup>

Categories of art are given by artists, connoisseurs, art historians, philosophers of art, art critics, and such, while categories of nature are taught by natural sciences, such as geography, geology, ecology, and biology. Even though the aesthetic appreciation of natural things and works of art may share the same model of aesthetic experience, their results are very different. With this model of appreciation, Carlson arrives at a positive aesthetics of nature. However, works of art are not all considered to be excellent only when they are perceived in their correct categories, so a positive aesthetics of art is impossible. There are great differences between natural things and works of art. Works of art are created by artists, while natural things are discovered as already existing. When artists create their works, their categories already exist; they create their works according to, or in relation to, pre-existing categories. If there is any meaning to an artwork in relation to art more generally, the artists cannot create their own private categories. Their works could successfully satisfy the requirement of pertinent categories and be good; they could also fail to and be bad. Scientists work differently. Scientists do not create natural things: they just discover them. They also attempt to discover or create categories so that natural things can be perfectly manifested to, or understood by, us. Therefore, natural things always satisfy the requirement of pertinent categories and are aesthetically good.<sup>35</sup>

Carlson's positive aesthetics is different from Welsch's universal appreciation of beauty. Carlson does not posit a universal law of beauty. The beauty in Carlson's text is very close to Danto's "artistic excellence" or Carroll's "success value." Nature is a great artist; it never creates unsuccessful works. Whatever we see in nature, whether it is beautiful, sublime, ugly, disgusting, and so on, we can say that it is beautiful in this wide sense of the word, since it perfectly fits the categories within which we recognize it and that are always immediately appropriate to the natural context in which such natural things exist. In this sense, there is no gap or ambiguity between natural things and their categories, so we can say that natural things are always aesthetically good. They do not need to vie for a position within a category that has been created by humans.

Carlson's positive aesthetics seems to resonate with Zhuangzi's concept of great beauty, but they are actually very different. Zhuangzi remains vigilant to the negative perspectives of knowledge per se, yet Carlson accepts science and its value in understanding the world and things in it without reservation. For Zhuangzi, the distinction of beauty and ugliness exists simply because we have categories, such that, had we not been given or

synthetically produced such categories, especially the categorization of beauty and ugliness, everything would be equally beautiful. This is Zhuangzi's notion of great beauty.

## 7. Negative Aesthetics

How then should we conceive of Zhuangzi's great beauty? Since Zhuangzi's aesthetics, that denies categorical perception, contradicts Carlson's positive aesthetics that affirms categorical perception, perhaps we can call it a form of negative aesthetics, following from the idea of "negative ethics" as conceived and advocated by Hans-Georg Moeller and others based on Zhuangzi's Daoism.<sup>36</sup> As Moeller points out, "One of the criticisms of ethics brought forward by the Daoist can, from a contemporary perspective, be called an aesthetic objection."<sup>37</sup> It seems to me that Moeller's aesthetic objection is close to a conception of negative aesthetics.

Negative aesthetics here should not be conceived as an aesthetics that admits negative aesthetic qualities such as the "brutal, clumsy, chaotic, dangerous, disgusting, destructive, grotesque, painful, putrid, spoiled, or terrifying,"<sup>38</sup> as Hettinger did. What negative aesthetics negates is not positive aesthetic qualities but rather the appropriateness of the rigid understanding of categorical perception that is an important precondition accepted by positive aesthetics. Positive aesthetics emphasizes perceiving objects under correct categories and assumes that such are meaningful in the context of the arts, by analogy with nature. The existence of correct categories are, therefore, considered key for appropriate aesthetic appreciation. On the contrary, negative aesthetics does not assume any categories. Zhuangzi's great beauty is a beauty without categories, not only lacking the categories of beauty and ugliness but also calling into question the other various categories under which we perceive things, such as those in the cognitive aesthetics supported by Walton and Carlson. This differs greatly from Danto's artistic excellence or Carroll's success value. There is nothing positive, excellent, and successful in it. Preferring deformed characters to beautiful ones in the *Zhuangzi* helps us move beyond the limitations of categories, especially those categories that are valued by convention. In short, according to positive aesthetics, natural things are beautiful since we perceive them under the correct category. Our categorical perception transforms natural things into beautiful things. The conception of negative aesthetics is just the opposite. Natural things are beautiful precisely because they cannot be caught by categorical perception and because categorical perception is decidedly inappropriate in the task of aesthetic appreciation.

Is this negative aesthetics reasonable? Is the conception of a perception without categories or, otherwise put, an innocent eye, naïve? Zhuangzi's thoughts can be both naïve and sophisticated depending on how we interpret them.

Some resonances of negative aesthetics can be found in contemporary aesthetics. In his book, *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, Christoph Menke tries to use the notion of force to interpret the beautiful and the aesthetic. He asserts, "The history of aesthetics begins with an act of repudiation: a repudiation of the notion that there can be a theory about or a positive knowledge of the beautiful."<sup>39</sup> The aesthetics of force, conceived by Menke, "encompasses the aesthetic, understood as the operation of an 'obscure' force, as a performance without generality, divorced from all norm, law, and purpose—a play."<sup>40</sup> The main idea of the aesthetics of force—that is, the beautiful without definition and the aesthetic without generality—seems to be closest to the negative aesthetics that we develop from consideration of Zhuangzi's comments on *mei*.

The reputation of positive knowledge in aesthetics is likely due to the uncertainty and the ambiguous status of the aesthetic object (as an object). The aesthetic object, according to Gernot Böhme, is something between the subject and the object, that is, an atmosphere:

Atmospheres are indeterminate, above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the object or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze.<sup>41</sup>

Based on his studies of Chinese aesthetics, especially the theory of Chinese literati painting, François Jullien goes so far as to suggest that the aesthetic object is the nonobject:

This nonobject sinks into the undifferentiated and, as a result, cannot be fixed or represented, cannot have the consistency of an in-itself, cannot be composed of "being." It cannot be sharply delineated as a *Gegenstand* that "stands before" the Eye or Mind. It is [something] we constantly experience, leading us back to the indefiniteness of the foundational, but which science and philosophy left behind early on in their haste to treat things logically, to constitute a "this" that could be manipulated by thought, with the aim of replying to the question: "What is it?"<sup>42</sup>

The indeterminate ontological status of the aesthetic object recognized by Continental aestheticians is somewhat echoed in analytic aesthetics, especially in the ontology of artworks. In both cases, it seems not easy, or indeed problematic, to ascertain the ontological status of artworks. The standard divisions between subjects and objects made by Western metaphysics leaves no room for such entities as artworks, where artworks can neither be simply identified as mind-independent physical objects nor treated as merely imaginary or entirely subjective objects of experience. The entity of an artwork, therefore, seems to fall between these standard categories, in that it is materially constituted by a physical substance but also exists only in and



through forms of human intentionality and subjective experience. As Amie Thomasson summarizes,

We are now in a position to explain why an adequate ontology of art has proven so elusive: there has been a conflict between the demands of the problem and the materials available for a solution. For the central criterion of success for theories about the ontology of art is their coherence with the ordinary beliefs and practices that determine the kinds of entities works of art are. But although different philosophers have tried placing works of art in just about all of the categories laid out by standard metaphysical systems—categories like those of imaginary objects, purely physical objects, or abstract kinds of various sorts—none of those fits common-sense beliefs and practices regarding works of art. This explains both the diversity of solutions (as theorists turned from one category to another in search of an adequate solution) and the failure to find a completely satisfactory solution despite these diverse efforts.<sup>43</sup>

My conclusion to this issue is that the problematic ontological status of the beautiful, the aesthetic, and of art works in general, demands a negative aesthetics, one that aims at enhancing aesthetic experience rather than producing positive knowledge of the aesthetic where it is treated as objective and clearly discernable according to specific categories.

## 8. Aesthetic Education without Education

Based on the negative aesthetics outlined in the previous section, a new version of aesthetic education can be conceived. Aesthetic education in modern China is normally understood as either knowledge-based education or competency-based education, due to the strong influence of the West in the development of Chinese aesthetic discourse. Currently, therefore, aesthetic education is equated with either philosophical aesthetics or artistic practice. However, according to traditional Chinese aesthetics, especially the aesthetics influenced by Daoism and Buddhism, aesthetic education should be conceived as attitude-based education.<sup>44</sup> Since the aesthetic attitude is an attitude without attitude or a so-called disinterested attitude, aesthetic education is, in some sense, an education without education or at least without aiming to impart substantive categorical content. For Zhuangzi, one of the most important things to cultivate is forgetting, especially the forgetting of concepts, categories, judgments, and knowledge. As a famous Daoist saying goes, "In the pursuit of learning, one does more each day; in the pursuit of the dao, one does less each day."<sup>45</sup> The things that are most difficult to forget are the categories valued by convention, including the beautiful. However, Zhuangzi would advise us that one cannot fully experience the beautiful unless she forgets the concept of beauty.

The idea of aesthetic education as attitude-based education is somewhat similar to Daoist and Buddhist cultivation. According to Feng Youlan's interpretation, "[T]he method of cultivation is also cultivation that is non-cultivation."<sup>46</sup> How should we imagine this cultivation without cultivation? Feng explains:

Thus cultivation through non-cultivation is itself a kind of cultivation, just as knowledge that is not knowledge is nevertheless still a form of knowledge. Such knowledge differs from original ignorance, and cultivation through non-cultivation likewise differs from original naturalness. For original ignorance and naturalness are gifts of nature, whereas knowledge that is not knowledge and cultivation through non-cultivation are both products of the spirit.<sup>47</sup>

Aesthetic education in traditional Chinese culture was heavily influenced by Daoism and Buddhism. It did not aim to increase positive knowledge or practical skills but to change our attitude toward life, as in the Sudden Enlightenment of Chan Buddhism. I suggest that we can learn a lot regarding the future of aesthetic education by retrieving valuable ideas drawn from these early Chinese traditions.

## Notes

1. Ye Lang, *A History of Chinese Aesthetics* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1985), 3–4.
2. Crispin Sartwell, "Beauty," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauty/>, accessed October 30, 2019.
3. Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.
4. Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 113.
5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1: 2.
6. Zhuangzi, *Complete Works*, 165.
7. Zhuangzi can be interpreted as different kinds of relativism. For the analysis of the different versions of Zhuangzi's relativism, see Robert E. Allinson, "On the Question of Relativism in the Chuang-tzu," *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 1 (1989): 13–26.
8. Wing-tsit Chan, "Chuang Tzu," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 2: 110.
9. Zhuangzi, *Complete Works*, 15.
10. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays Moral and Political* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1894), 136.
11. Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 80–81.
12. Zhuangzi, *Complete Works*, 126. I preserve the term *dao* in preference to Watson's translation as "the Way," the same hereafter.
13. Zhuangzi, *Complete Works*, 11.
14. Zhuangzi, *Complete Works*, 177. Here I have changed the translation to "beauty" and "principle" in the singular, in place of Watson's plural "great beauties" and "principles." The classical Chinese retains ambiguity between singular and plural in both cases.

15. Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1.
16. Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon*, 69.
17. Wolfgang Iser, "On the Universal Appreciation of Beauty," *International Yearbook of Aesthetics* 12 (2008): 7.
18. Wolfgang Iser, "Animal Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 2 (2004), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/ca/7523862.0002.015?view=text;rgn=main>, accessed October 30, 2019.
19. Steven C. Bourassa, *The Aesthetics of Landscape* (London: Belhaven Press, 1991), 67.
20. Graham Parkes, "The Wandering Dance: Chuang Tzu and Zarathustra," *Philosophy East and West* 33, no. 3 (1983): 242–43.
21. Robert E. Allinson, "On the Question of Relativism in the Chuang-tzu," *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 1 (1989): 19.
22. Parkes, "The Wandering Dance," 245.
23. Zhuangzi, *Complete Works*, 182.
24. Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Peru, IL: open Court, 2003), 49–56.
25. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 33.
26. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 106.
27. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 107.
28. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 53.
29. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 120.
30. Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.
31. For a critical analysis of different versions of positive aesthetics, see Ned Hettinger, "Evaluating Positive Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51, no. 3 (2017): 26–41.
32. Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 72.
33. Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 79, no. 3 (1970): 334–67.
34. Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 89.
35. Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 92–93.
36. Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Moral Fool* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 29–39.
37. Moeller, *The Moral Fool*, 64.
38. Hettinger, "Evaluating Positive Aesthetics," 32.
39. Christoph Menke, *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, trans. Gerrit Jackson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 1.
40. Menke, *Force*, xi.
41. Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (London: Routledge, 2017), 11–12.
42. François Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form: On the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), xv.
43. Amie L. Thomasson, "The Ontology of Art," In *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 88.
44. The aesthetics that evolved through a fusion of Daoism and Buddhism is normally regarded as Oriental Aesthetics. See, for example, Kenneth K. Inada, "A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics: A Prolegomenon," *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 2 (1997): 117.
45. Laozi, *The Daodejing of Laozi*, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing), 54.
46. Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 265. I change the Wade-Giles "Fung Yu-Lan" into the pinyin "Feng Youlan." Similarly hereafter.
47. Fung, *A Short History*, 261.