

Beyond Life and Death: Humanistic Care of Eco-Arts in China

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Abstract The ecosophy and the cosmology of the unity and coexistence between human and nature, as well as the aesthetic view of natural beauty in ancient Chinese philosophy, all reflect the deep love for nature and all creatures. One of these representative themes related to ecological view is the reflection on life and death, which represents as the eternal issue of art expression. This ecological aesthetic consciousness that was embodied in countless works including poems, music, dance and paintings has been inherited by contemporary artists in China. Some artists represent the desire for life and the fear of death in the artworks, arousing empathized experience and feelings of the audience during the appreciation. Others focus on the transcendence of life and death, discussing the representation of rebirth. The artworks of Shen Shaomin, Xu Bing, Song Dong and Jin Lipeng are introduced as representatives in this paper. In the practice of artistic creation, any reflection and expression on life and death ultimately serves the aesthetic education of eco-literacy. In order to make greater contribution to an ecological aesthetic education, eco-artists are supposed to take the love for both life and earth as the inner spirit. To form a new paradigm of eco-friendly living is the main goal of ecological aesthetic education.

Keywords Life. Death. Rebirth. Humanistic care. Eco-art. Chinese Contemporary Art.

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1 Introduction

Throughout the ages, life and death are the eternal motifs of art. Numerous works of art have revealed profound thought of the ancestors on the issue of life and death. The expressions of this theme in ancient Chinese literatures and artworks were influenced by traditional philosophy, which has a distinct color of Chinese civilization, especially with the views of cosmos and ecological connection among creatures. There is a statement in *Book of Changes* saying that, “as begetter of all begetting, it is called change” (Wilhelm, Baynes 1977, 590), which means the alteration during creating life is the origin of life, namely to create life and continue it endlessly is to keep changing and sustain without ceasing. In its Chinese version *Sheng sheng zhi wei yi* 生生之谓易 (“as begetter of all begetting, it is called change”), the first character 生 means the creation of life, which needs the communication, transformation and reproduction of all creatures living between heaven (天) and earth (地) during an endless process of *Yi* 易 (changes). Therefore, *sheng sheng* 生生 means ‘creating life’. The statement *Tian di zhi da de yue sheng* 天地之大德曰生 means “It is the great virtue of heaven and earth to bestow life” (629). For ancient Chinese philosophers, the concept and vision on the relation between life and death could be interpreted as transformation and circulation, the most common natural phenomenon in ecosystem.

In the book *Ecoaesthetics and Ecosophy in China*, Cheng Xiangzhan takes “Creating life” as the key expression of Ecosophy C. He claims that, “it can be transformed into a free translation philosophically to connote the meaning of continuous reproduction breed in an endless succession” (Cheng 2023, 13), and the ecoaesthetics that have influenced eco-art in China could be regarded as “the aesthetics of eternal engendering of the whole bio-community on earth” (13). This ecological view is about the relationship between mankind and other creatures, which also shows the ancient Chinese philosophers’ humanistic care for *Wanwu* 万物 (all things in the universe). It generates love for *Wanwu*, particularly the deep connection with all things in nature, as the basis of ecoaesthetic experience.

It is no exaggeration to say that man and *Wanwu* are kin in one family in the universe. According to the famous philosopher Chuang Tzu, “Heaven, Earth and I were produced together, and all things and I are one” (Legge 2016, 27). His best friend Hui Shih also claimed that we should “love all things equally. Heaven and Earth are one body” (Feng 2007, 182). Emperor Jianwen, an emperor in ancient China, said to the accompany around him when he entered the Hualin Garden:

You do not have to be far away to pursue the beauty of nature and empathize with all the creatures. In the forest and spring here, I

can feel mammals, birds and fish come to me and get close to me.
(Liu 2022, 63)

In the history of Chinese traditional aesthetic culture, there were numerous examples of taking human and creatures as relatives that sincerely expressed their love for nature and all lives. Such kind of humanistic care can be seen in Chinese ancient music, sculpture, dance, meticulous paintings that depict flowers, birds and insects enjoying their habitat and coexistence, as well as garden designing aiming at creating a suitable environment for residents and other creatures.

Besides, the ecological view advocated by ancient Chinese philosophers is also reflected in the adaptation and respect to the laws of nature. Chuang Tzu said,

Death and life are ordained, just as we have the constant succession of night and day; - in both cases from Heaven. Men have no power to do anything in reference to them; - such is the constitution of things. (Legge 2016, 49)

Life and death are natural laws. In order to ensure the normal order of the natural world, people should not arbitrarily violate the laws of nature, but merely accept it and comply with it.

As regard to 'humanistic care' in this paper, it refers to a kind of special ecological care for all creatures, which comes from humankind, especially on the mental and spiritual aspects. The love and kinship between humans and other creatures are the basis of the concept 'humanistic care'. Humanistic care here is a term of humanities, instead of the medical care that is more commonly used in daily life. However, as discussed in the fifth part, eco-art with humanistic care would be applied as the method of education, which is helpful to heal mental trauma or cultivate eco-literacy in an aesthetic way (Inwood 2007; 2008; 2013). Thus, the meaning of humanistic care mentioned here could be much broader.

The statements above contain an ecological view of circulation, sustainability and ecosystem thinking, which has been inherited by ecological arts in China and has become the inner spirit, manifesting as the artistic expression of the connection between nature and human. Based on the following case studies, the life and death issues in ecological arts in China can be discussed on three dimensions. The first one is about the empathy between human and all creatures, including the desire for life and the fear of death. The second one is the metaphor of nirvana, specifically the narration of 'rebirth' in the world of art. And the last one is the observation on symbiosis views in ecological arts, such as the flow of energy during the journey of recycle, sustainability and transformation.

2 Empathy: The Desire for Life and the Fear of Death

As to Chinese contemporary eco-art, it is full of humanistic care and love for all things, which is particularly reflected in the consciousness of empathy between human and nature, or in Chinese *Wu Wo Wei Yi* 物我为一 (all things and I are one) instead of the dichotomy in subject-object mode. Just as Wilhelm elaborated in the translation of *Book of Changes*, “strictly speaking there is no real dualism here, because there is a clearly defined hierarchic relationship between the two principles” (Wilhelm, Baynes 1977, 110), and one must be activated and led by the other. So is the dynamic connection between life and death.

The dialectic view on life and death is the inner spirit in artworks of Chinese contemporary artist Shen Shaomin. His installation *Bonsai*,¹ which was composed around 2007, criticized the process and techniques of abusing plants during making the mini-landscapes. He took banyan trees as a sample and presented this process to the public. Being pulled, fixed and bound by metal appliances, the branches and leaves of plants tolerate the distortion and deformation that is difficult to achieve under the natural state of growth. The audience can see the cold, silver and shining metal color and the external force on the trunk of the plants, which scream silently out the unspeakable pain. From the horrifying visual effect to the silent sense of depression, the uncomfortable feeling of the audience is unable to be expressed, which is consequently enlarged and enhanced. The body of the banyan tree, in Shen Shaomin’s narration, was actually referred to the body of human. As the curator Wu Hung recorded in the preface of the exhibition, Shen was enlightened by an introduction of *Bonsai* to realize the resonance between the “abuse of limbs” and “abuse of plants”.² Audiences could empathize with the plants and feel pain both in body and mind. At the other side of the exhibition, the artist placed some metal tools that would be needed to distort the branches and fix its form according to the aesthetic taste of human, like surgical instruments, flashing cold light. Feng Youlan wrote in his book, when what is natural and spontaneous is changed into something artificial, which is called by Chuang Tzu “overcoming what is of nature by what is of man”, the result can only be misery and unhappiness (Feng 2007, 172). Human have feelings, so do plants. Human yearn for life, so do all creatures.

Shen’s eco-art works also let people see animals’ desire for life and their fear of death. In his installation *Chinese Carp*³ exhibited in 2018,

1 See more information about the artwork on <https://www.designboom.com/art/shen-shaomin-bonsai-series/>.

2 See more information on https://m-news.artron.net/20140925/n657622_7.html.

3 See more information on <https://www.artsy.net/artist/shen-shaomin>

He made 2,000 extremely realistic carp out of silicone, installed electronic pacing devices inside each fish, and lay them on the white salt beach. Few people would notice the dying moment since the carp die soon after being caught ashore. Yet people pay attention to the suffocating state of dying when they stand in front of Shen's installation, watching the silicone carp's gill flapping and breathing in a difficult way. With the help of pacemakers, the artist infinitely magnified this special point between life and death, in order to make it approach eternity. We can easily imagine according to the exhibition pictures and videos that tens of thousands of carps flapping their gills together, making the depressed feeling of struggle immediately permeate the whole exhibition venue, full of desperation and fear of death.

The work contains a multi-dimensional level of connotations, one of which focuses on the role of carp in the ecosystem. With a dual identity in the ecological chain, Chinese carp is good at eating microbes and phytoplankton, once being used as the guard of environmental protection and introduced to other countries to purify water. However, because of its strong adaptability and reproductive ability, they cause local ecological imbalance. The American residents start to round up Chinese carp. The artist tries to draw attention and enlighten audiences on the natural law of the ecosystem from a unique perspective, warning and reminding the public to respect life and take other creature's life seriously. This intention is exactly in line with the ancient Chinese Taoism and Confucianism that human and nature ought to coexist harmoniously. Therefore, *Chinese Carp* carries Shen Shaomin's thinking about life and death, especially the innovative expression of ecological imbalance, which should be regarded as one part of his ecological humanistic care.

Ecological art provides an aesthetic field for viewers to empathize with the entire ecosystem, and finally realize that lives of animals and plants are worth caring just as life of themselves. Human race and other life forms have close kinship. Just as Donna Haraway pointed out,

all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages... all critters share a common 'flesh', laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. (2015, 162)

The lives of people and all things are equally precious. What's more important is, to experience the life and death of all creatures would be helpful for audience to understand and respect life. At the moment seeing animals and plants on the verge of death, audiences' hearts would be full of sorrow and pity. Through the ecological and humanistic care of Chinese contemporary art, we can see the ecological wisdom inherited from ancestors thousands of years ago.

3 The Metaphor of Phoenix: Recreation and Rebirth in Artworld

During appreciating Chinese contemporary eco-artworks, appreciators find a tribute to the vitality of all lives and the pity for the dead. In *Hong Lou Meng* 红楼梦 (a novel named *A Dream of Red Mansions*), one of the four greatest classics in ancient China, there is a story about Daiyu burying flowers in the garden. The famous writer Cao Xueqin wrote this story in Qing Dynasty. A young girl named Daiyu sympathized with the flowers when she saw the petals falling into the river. She gathered the petals in a bag, crying sadly. And then, she dug a hole as a tomb, and buried them in the ground. This intended behavior reveals the ecological humanistic care. Cao Xueqin wrote a beautiful poem in the narration, to illustrate the scenario and emotion of Daiyu burying flowers, started with “Flowers fall and fly in the sky, but who pities the faded red?” (Cao 2022, 389). Daiyu cared for the flowers, relating her own miserable destiny to the short life of them, and imagining herself as one little flower. She pitied the flowers as she pitied herself.

But the renowned poet of Qing Dynasty named Gong Zizhen showed another attitude on the life and death issue of flowers. He wrote in the fifth poem of *Ji Hai Za Shi* 己亥杂诗·其五 (*Poems Written in Jihai Year*), “Falling red is not a heartless thing, but into spring mud to protect flowers” (Gong 2019, 5). Although being withered and faded, the falling petals can still become the fertilizer that nourishes the soil. The energy of life returns to the roots and will bloom on the branches again in the next year. Obviously, the original meaning of this poem is not about ecosophy, but the value of sacrifice and patriotism. However, the readers can figure out one connotation that death is not the end of life in the energy circle of nature, but the beginning of a new life.

Enlightened by the ancestors, artists attempt to find a way to interpret their statements beyond life and death, namely to recreate and let the wastes continue living as another existing form in the artworld. In Chinese contemporary art, there are many examples of recreation with garbage waste on ecological themes.⁴ Taking Xu Bing and his large installation *Phoenix*⁵ as instance, the artist used a number of abandoned building materials such as light-emitting diode, steel strip, excavator mechanical arm, safety helmet, fence and cloth of the construction site, and finally welded into the image of

⁴ Such as *Invisible Man* by Liu Bolin; *Illusion* by Du Hongyu; *Masai Mara* by Liang Mingyu; *Disappeared House* by Hu Quanchun; *Waste Not* by Song Dong; *Homeland* by Ge Pingwei; etc.

⁵ See more information about the artwork on <https://www.xubing.com/en/work/department/174?year=2010&type=year#174>.

phoenix, which can even shine at night. It finally ‘soared’ in front of Today Art Museum in March 2010. During the daytime, what the audience can see is a phoenix installation full of wastes. When the night falls, this work is shining and shocking. The abandoned components regain a new life in this artwork, and the responsibility of ecological protection is revealed as well.

Using discarded materials to create new works is one of Xu Bing’s common artistic languages. For another example, in the installation *Background Story*,⁶ Xu Bing continued this creative concept. With the help of the projection on the curtain, he used the garbage such as broken wood chips, plastic strips and cotton wool to present several famous landscape paintings on the other side. The artist tries to tell audiences that there is no waste in nature. The garbage for now could transform into something useful, just like the statement of Gong Zizhen’s poem. This installation shows us another view that transcends life and death, as well as being useful and useless. When the audiences enter the exhibition hall, the first thing they see is the beautiful painting. Only after going around the back, will they find the ‘background story’ about the recycle and reuse of waste materials.

Besides, there are some other works that reflect and discuss on the subject of rebirth. Except the metaphorically transformation between life and death, Xu Bing showed us the way how energy flows from one living creature to another in his early work *American Silkworm Series 3: The Opening*.⁷ Every summer from 1994 to 1999, he raised silkworms in the United States and completed some works together with these little creatures. Those works were named *American Silkworm Series*. The artist inserted the mulberry branches that the silkworm loves to eat in the vase. After eating the mulberry leaves, the silkworms spit silk to make cocoons, which look like several white or yellow buds from a distance. The green mulberry leaves gradually turned into dead branches in the exhibition space, while the silkworm babies turned into cocoons and then moths. This magical process presents the energy transportation in ecosystem in an intuitive and vivid style. The ecological relation between mulberry leaves and silkworms reminds us of the deep connection between people and all things that nourish and coexist with each other.

⁶ See more information about the artwork on <https://www.xubing.com/en/work/de-tails/711?year=2024&type=year#711>.

⁷ See more information about the artwork on <https://www.xubing.com/en/work/de-tails/202?year=1998&type=year#202>.

4 **Coexistence: The Journey of Energy in Recycle and Transformation**

Before the perspectives on nature proposed by Confucianism and Taoism, there has already been points of view on the relation between human beings and nature in ancient myths and legends, especially in the genesis mythology. The goddess *Nv Wa* 女娲 created human by the riverside. She made several muddy figures according to her own image, and then waved a branch in her hand with the earth and water, which became persons alive when dropped on the ground. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, *Xu Zheng* 徐整 wrote *Wu Yun Li Nian Ji* 五运历年纪 (*The Chronicle of Five Elements Calendar*), which narrated the legend of *Pangu* 盘古 who created the world:

Long long ago, in the very beginning of the universe, heaven and earth were chaotic like an egg. Pangu was born inside of it. After eighteen thousand years, heaven and earth opened up. The light air rose up while the heavy one fell onto the ground. Pangu was living between them, growing taller and bigger with heaven and earth. After Pangu died, every part of his body became different elements and substances in nature. His breath became the wind and clouds. His sound turned into the thunder. The left eye became sun and the right eye became moon. His body and limbs grew as four poles and five mountains. His blood flew like a river while tendons and muscles turned into ground and soil. The stars were transformed from his hair and vegetation was actually his skin. His tooth and bone became gold, stone, pearl and jade. (Xie 1935, 26-7)

Therefore, human beings are originally parts of the whole ecosystem and kin to all creatures. After the end of life, energy inside one's flesh will gather again in some other forms and return to the earth, namely to continue living in other creature's body. It is the reason why *Chuang Tzu* took human and nature as one. The figure of *Pangu* is just like *Gaia* in the western culture. Similar statements can also be found in *Betsy Damon's* book. She said:

An aerial view of a river system closely resembles the veins and arteries of the human body... Like our blood, rivers nourish and feed living systems. They cleanse and discharge unwanted substances. Like our veins and arteries, they don't work if they are overloaded with pollution, dammed too much, or transferred elsewhere. (Damon 2022, 12-13)

In a word, to share fate with nature is to breath and metabolize with the whole eco-system.

In Chinese contemporary ecological art, there are many works⁸ that take the harmonious coexistence of man and nature as the theme of artistic expression, especially those works embedded the ecological wisdom of ordinary daily life in the creative compositions. To take Song Dong's installation *Coexisting with a Tree*⁹ as an example, this work presents a detailed scene of the life in Beijing quadrangle courtyard. In a small room, a tree ran through the bed. This kind of construction not only preserves the life of a tree, but also expands the living space of the residents. It records the cunning and cleverness in daily life in a humorous way, which also tells people that it is not necessary to seize the life of natural things and arbitrarily interrupt other creatures due to human desires. We should find a way to achieve a harmonious coexistence between people and all things, which means to find an optimal balance point, so that the lifeline of residents and the tree can continue together. This is also an ironic warning to people who cut down trees or excavate mountains and blast rocks in order to build houses and apartments.

Jin Lipeng and his eco-art action could be taken as another case. As a teacher of Sichuan Fine Art Institute, he made several compost bins with college students and placed them around the campus, which had already converted tons of raw food waste from the school cafeteria. He keeps applying the sustainable concept in the energy conversion recycle and combines the permaculture principle with artwork composition, such as helping woods in the campus regenerate and restore the ecological environment. During the eco-art action project started from 2012, he raised academic lectures on ecological knowledge and aesthetic healing, group meditations and regional walking activities, eco-art workshops, and community sharing activities such as breakfast meetings and parent-child days. These community-wide eco-art aesthetic events provide opportunities for more frequent dialogues among participants, thereby re-establishing connections among community members. Jin Lipeng's *Healing Garden*¹⁰ is such a local program of eco-art action, revitalizing an abandoned garden. Through the design, construction and daily maintenance of edible landscape, production of seed balls and pocket gardens, beekeeping program, compost bin, earthworm tower and papermaking workshop, volunteers and community residents participate in hand work and labor activities. Via these socially engaged eco-art activities, Jin

⁸ Such as *Who is the Intruder* and *Liuyin Garbage Research* by Jin Lipeng; *The HK FARMers' Almanac* in Hong Kong; *The Naming of A River* by Cheng Xinhao; etc.

⁹ See more information about the artwork on https://m-news.artron.net/20151030/n789105_2.html.

¹⁰ See more information about the artwork on https://ecoartasia.net/JLP/JLP_chi.html.

reconstructs the sense of 'community' from an ecological perspective among students, college faculty and practitioners in the nearby communities around Huxi Campus of Sichuan Fine Art Institute.

Art can transcend the boundary and limitation between life and death, indicating a path of rebirth. The energy of life would be transferred among diverse forms instead of disappearing. Here we can take a story of Chuang Tzu as a quotation. When Chuang Tzu mentioned the death of his wife to Hui Shih, he explained her transformation of life energy as follows.

During the intermingling of the waste and dark chaos, there ensued a change, and there was breath; another change, and there was the bodily form; another change, and there came birth and life. There is now a change again, and she is dead. The relation between these things is like the procession of the four seasons from spring to autumn, from winter to summer. (Legge 2016, 137)

To Chuang Tzu, the transformation between life and death are just like day and night. It's the naturalist things in the universe. Human comes from nature when being alive, as a part of nature, and return to nature when being dead, still as a part of nature. After that, the body without any heartbeat and breath becomes other forms of life as if the death never came. Deep inside this traditional ecosophy, there is the wisdom of transformation, as the term *Hua* 化 (transformation), which can be extracted from *Book of Changes* and classics of Taoism. And now, Chinese contemporary artists use this traditional ecological wisdom to create ecological artworks.

4.1 Towards an Ecological Aesthetic Education on Life and Homeland

In the practice of artistic creation, any reflection and expression on life and death ultimately serves the aesthetic education. In order to make greater contribution to an ecological aesthetic education, eco-artists are supposed to take the love for life and the love for Wanwu as the core spirit.

With the help of eco-aesthetic education, we can see the sense of responsibility in the eco-arts created by the generation younger than artists mentioned above. This tendency is obvious in the exchange and creative support program *Towards the Mountain Seminars* organized by China Academy of Art and supported by CHANEL in 2023, which is an integral part of the *Seeds Project: Education Program for*

a *Sustainable Future*.¹¹ 16 groups of young artists who participated in the project submitted creative art proposals on the theme of ecological issues. Among them, several groups of artists focused on issues of life and death in ecosystems.

Chen Ruicheng is a young artist from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. He collected oyster reef materials and ocean sound samples in his eco-artwork *Floating Realm*.¹² Oyster reefs could be regarded as a microecosystem. Oyster reefs are aggregates of live oysters, the shells of dead oysters, and other organisms. Although some oysters die, the shells still provide a habitat for the rest of the life energy in this microecosystem. By creating oyster reefs with different shapes, and then embedding sound samples into them, Chen made oyster reefs a sound conduction device, conveying information about life and death.

Another example is *Whale Fall*¹³ by Li Yuxuan from Tsinghua University, which focuses on the phenomenon of whale fall in marine biosphere. Through the perspective of whales, the artist helps the audience immerse into the process of ecological pollution in the ocean. Via strong visual impact, the experience of whales stimulates people's empathetic feeling so that the public could focus on the pollution and restoration of marine ecological environment.

Renewed Soil by Dong Yuhao and Zhao Fan from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts is another case that deserves attention. The artists collected records of planting, daily maintenance and pruning of three candlenut trees, one alive, one dead and one sick. They hope that the public would think about the relation between people and plants in the urban environment, and cultivate ecological humanistic concern for all creatures. The artists said:

We wish to add reflections on life, death and regeneration into the art creation, in order to awaken people's respect and care for plants. (*The Art Newspaper* 2023, 25)¹⁴

In addition, there are plenty of other art proposals on life and death in ecosystem.¹⁵ All these proposals indicate the attention, investi-

11 See more information about the project on <https://www.caa.edu.cn/gm-rx/2023/8/202308/63350.html>.

12 See more information about the artwork in *The Art Newspaper* 2023, 25.

13 See more information about the artwork in *The Art Newspaper* 2023, 31.

14 See more information about the artwork in *The Art Newspaper* 2023, 27.

15 Artists and works include Xu Xinhua's *Museum of Life*; Zhuge Ruijing's *Implant*; Weng Zheyang's *New Relationship between the City and Nature*; Sheng Chengcheng's *Zarafa: Fable about the Continuation of Species*; *Paddy Ideal* by Chen Yulin and her team; Jian Guorong's *The Memory of Eucalyptus*; Chen Qiheng's *How Orchids Think*; Zhang Tianyi's *Interspecies Symbiosis Plan*; Gu Weiran's *Everything Grows Rewilding, You and*

gation and reflection of young artists on ecological issues, which are representative achievements in the new practice of ecological art and eco-aesthetic education. It is worth noting that these cases show the ecological thinking of young artists, who pay attention to the evolution and constitution of life in nature, and gradually return to the original meaning of the word 'nature' proposed by ancient philosophers, not merely in Chinese ancient ecosophy, but in all nations. Just as Latour pointed out, the concept of nature originally includes the whole dynamic process in nature. The word 'nature' in Latin or Greek could be translated into "origin, engendering, process, the course of things", which indicates "a whole range of transformations: genesis, birth, growth, life, death, decay, metamorphoses" (Latour 2018, 68). However, the meaning of 'nature' has been narrowed, which is mainly recognized as the object of epistemological activities.

In the broader space of community and primary schools, the concepts of ecological environmental protection and sustainable development have been brought to public by eco-aesthetic education and eco-art actions as socially engaged arts. A new paradigm of living that is ecofriendly to all creatures and full of humanistic care has been gradually established. *Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu)* art action was initiated and held by American artist Betsy Damon in 1995, who also designed and built the *Living Water Garden* in 1998 in China (Damon 2022, 73-5). It is still a landmark of Chengdu, including multiple forms of public art, installation and performing art. At present, *Living Water Garden* is still a good place for citizens in Chengdu to enjoy the natural environment for leisure activities. It is an important place for the daily ecological aesthetic life of citizens. *Living Water Garden* in Chengdu and several other ecological parks designed and built by Damon in the United States are ecological works of art with both environmental values and aesthetic values. To form a new paradigm of living is the main goal of ecological aesthetic education, which might not be merely inside schools, but also in everyday life. People who sincerely take nature as homeland are potential to become ecological citizens.

Zhang Zhimin, the famous Chinese artist, once wrote a poem on his painting *Home*, which can be translated as below:

Human beings have homelands, and animals have their habitats too. There is only one earth. If there is a competition to occupy the environment of earth, it's obvious that humans would be the

I Share Its Sadness; Han Zhitong's *Disperser*; *Community Activity Tower and Walk System for Raghunathpur* by Wu Haoyue and his team; *Going Ashore* by Zhang Jiazhen and Cui Jiakuan; as well as Xie Rui's *State of Exception*. See more information about the artwork in *The Art Newspaper* 2023.

loser in the end. Imagine that we can create a new earth, to give all the animals freedom and a new home, just like in ancient times, so that they can fight, play and live a happy life. Maybe this is just a dream, but at least it is the wish of people who love all the creatures. (Tan, Zhang 2014, 97)

All things are equal members of the whole ecosystem family. Man is related to nature, rather than occupying the center of nature, or being the dominator of animals. Therefore, based on the traditional philosophical cosmology and modern knowledge of ecology, the concepts of recycle, sustainability and systematic thinking emphasized by ecological artists in China are embodied in the works as a kind of dynamics and dialectics that transcend the dichotomy between life and death.

5 Conclusion

Influenced by ancient philosophy, Chinese contemporary artists have expressed ecological concern and humanistic care in their artworks on the theme of life and death. They advocate the harmonious co-existence between man and nature, and emphasize the equal relationship between all living things. Life and death are not binary opposites, since after the living organisms die, the energy flows and transfers to other creatures in the ecosystem, maintaining the basic functioning of nature. Therefore, respecting life while not grieving over death too much, and following the law of nature are the main principles. The artists use the dialectical transformation relation between life and death to create works of art, which is the main characteristic of ecological art in China, reflecting the ecosophy inherited from ancestors. In the process of cultivating ecological literacy in elementary schools and in public, aesthetic education related to ecological art can be used to shape the ecological consciousness and a new ecological civilization.

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