

Global Challenges, Local Narratives: Contemporary Chinese Environmental Art and Cross-Cultural Eco-Aesthetics

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol13n14963>

Published January 26, 2025

Citation: Ji Y. and Idris M.Z.B. (2025) Global Challenges, Local Narratives: Contemporary Chinese Environmental Art and Cross-Cultural Eco-Aesthetics, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.13, No.1, pp.49-63

Abstract: *Chinese environmental art, influenced by Daoism and Confucianism, focussing on the balance between man and nature. Chinese environmental art differs from its Western counterpart in two ways: unlike the former, which emerged towards the end of the 20th century in response to ecological crises, the latter combines ancient traditions with modern strategies for tackling local and planetary environmental problems. Well-known artists such as Cai Guo-Qiang, Wang Jiuliang, Yao Lu and Yang Yongliang use innovative approaches such as photomontages and explosive installations to address urbanisation, pollution and the loss of biodiversity. This convergence is also referred to as the pursuit of a cross-cultural eco-aesthetic, which has its roots deep in the history of the synthesis of traditional Chinese aesthetics with modern Western art forms such as Land Art and Conceptualism. Using selected works, the article illustrates how Chinese eco-art functions as an instrument of environmental activism and has an impact on international co-operation and environmental awareness. The discussion also explores how digital media can further promote the engagement and reach of eco-art.*

Keywords: eco-aesthetics, Chinese environmental art, cross-cultural influences, Daoism and Confucianism, urbanization and environmental degradation

INTRODUCTION

Environmental art in China has its origins historically and culturally from the philosophies of Daoism as well as Confucianism. These philosophies share a common principle of harmony of the human race with the environment. This is different from the western environmental art which emerged from the modern ecological crisis. Ecological art in China comprises age old cultural beliefs and aesthetics that highlight balance and interdependence within the landscape possibilities (James, 2023). After the 20th century, due to rapid industrialization and urbanization, the physical, cultural and ecological landscapes of China changed and new sets

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of ecological interpretations of the traditional values came into paintings air pollutants, water toxins, and loss of biodiversity. Today, through their distinctive works, Chinese artists synthesize traditional content with contemporary ideas; they combine Land Art and Conceptual Art with responding to ecological challenges at the national and international levels (Meiqin, 2019).

This article investigates different ways in which Chinese environmental artists adopt environmental awareness in a localized context while simultaneously integrating the eco aesthetic into a global context, with the aid of art. The analysis also investigates how some artists including Cai Guo-Qiang, Wang Jiuliang, and Yang Yongliang construct visual images that integrate east and west and use art as an instrument of change, protest against irresponsible behaviors and garner international unity. The Chinese eco art still grows and develops in its own manner, yet it captures the widespread call for environmental awareness and sustainability quite well (Peacock, 2021).

The Evolution of Environmental Art in China

The evolution of eco art in the China context is influenced by the socio historical traditions of the nation, to which Daoism and Confucianism were predominantly a part. Whereas the onset of eco art in other parts of the world was a solution employed to address ecological problems, the Chinese worldview of eco art is based on centuries old philosophical dogmas of balance between men and nature (James, 2023). In particular, landscapes painted in ink are a common art sub-genre in Chinese cultures where people are depicted on a smaller scale as part of nature reflecting the great power of nature and the unity of all beings (Jinhua, 2022).

Using a more simplistic approach, nature and the relationship between humans, holds predominance in Chinese culture which adheres to the two schools of thought, Daoism and Confucianism. For Daoism, there exists the concept of Dao or 'the Way' which is described as a universal principle that encourages the unity of humans and world. As such, harmony with nature is something that Japanese art displays whereby shapes and ideas are represented as flowing forms of unity. By and large, one of the most fundamental characteristics of Confucianism is ethical relationships including one's relationship towards the environment. Respect and responsibility towards mother nature is a concept that encompasses eco art and it is integrated into contemporary works of Chinese art (James, 2023).

The negative impacts on the environment, which progressed significantly as China went through a very fast network of changes in the twentieth century, created an intricate setting for the development of the environmental art in its midst which as Wang (2012) states was any sustainable economy in that region. As this necessary transformation of rethinking the aspects of culture through a chronological framework of the modern world took place, this focus and attempt to do so came as a worrying force. Toward the end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first, the environmental art movement started gaining more traction due to the ability of artists to draw from history to address modern day challenges like air and water pollution and the detrimental effect of urban overgrowth on the society.

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Chinese environmental art is influenced by indigenous philosophies but it has also borrowed western elements such as the Land Art of the 1960 and 70 which has however been described as site specific work utilizing the natural landscape as canvas of studio. This new form of working in Chinese art allows the artists to use the natural landscape in context of the work of arts. Artists such as Cai Guo-Qiang and Yang Yongliang developed spectacular visual languages combining western approaches with Eastern philosophy focusing on local and global environmental problems at the same time (Meiqin, 2019).

Cai Guo-Qiang's artworks for instance, explosive installations for which he is famous, are reflectors of the social and physical aspects of environmental harm. He is the artist behind *The Last Carnival* (Figure 1) a gunpowder drawing work criticizing the transience of animal and eventually human life, due to environmental degradation. Likewise, Yang Yongliang assists in placing the serene outlook of the country into a greater perspective through temporal and conventional art forms. Such tensions are reflected in the socio-environmental conflicts of the country (Peacock, 2021).

Another of Yang Yongliang's most representative creations, now part of the Phantom Landscape series (Figure 2), best illustrates this tendency. Yang's works visually transport viewers to the modern and busy world whilst of building a picture such as classical Shan Shui paintings. Initially, the work appears to be a serene and beautiful mountain range whose individual elements are structures relating to industrialization. At its most basic, it is a criticism for rapid movement towards urban landscapes. The work integrates industrialization and westernization to critique and preserve such cultures. This contemporary concern permeates through the work showing effective blending of genres while paying respect to tradition.



Figure 1: *Last Carnival* (detail), Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957), 2017, Gunpowder on canvas, 280 x 750 cm, The Akatsu Collection, Tokyo



Figure 2: Phantom Landscapes III, Yang Yongliang, 2007, inkjet print on paper, Image: 17 11/16 x 17 11/16 in. (45 x 45 cm), Overall: 26 15/16 x 20 in. (68.5 x 50.8 cm)

Chinese environmental art places considerable emphasis on environmental issues while its context draws from the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation. Musicians and artists turn to traditional materials, like bamboo and rice paper, which express the message ‘sustainable living’ and ecological harmony. Besides, the art may also act as a link between traditional Chinese perceptions of nature and contemporary issues, thus allowing the artist to be engaged in the dialogism between the relevant philosophy and existing reality (Zhiyu, 2023).

Now Chinese environmental art exhibits the specific ecological lore and culture of the nation, and it’s also much more takes part in global environmental discussion. Such combination of

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integrity of knowledge of the history and critical contemporaneity fulfills the diversity of eco-art on global scale by providing specific environmental and philosophic scenarios of China.

In China, the development of environmental art is defined by a unity of history, philosophy and aesthetics which have been infused with the need to solve global ecological problems. Such view not only reinforces the need for humans to coexist in harmony with nature but places Chinese environmental art within the context of global progress towards ecological consciousness and sustainability.

Localized Ecological Concerns in Artistic Expression

In regard to their specific geographic location, the ecological challenges driven by urbanization, pollution, and biodiversity loss, are central in the artistic practice of the local Chinese environmentalists. The concern for the local environment enables the artists to focus on the effects of these problems on the environment in China and how their problems can be addressed in the global context. The situation in China is characterized by uncontrolled industrialization and rapid urbanization, which has led to large-scale urban encroachment and infrastructural development on forests, wetlands, and rural areas. To note, overlays with the development of modern cities and machines, for example, Yang Yongliang, emphasized these topics creating digital landscapes where traditional Chinese Shan Shui painting style is combined with images of modern industrial development. Cranes, concrete, and skyscrapers in these works are uncoupled from the mountains and visually merge with them, showing how fast urbanization is and how much culture is lost because of environmental pollution. The constant urban development transforms the imagery of nature, helping to understand cultural alienation from the current environmental issues created by ultramodernization societies.

Polluted image, a sad picture, is another urgent issue concerning Chinese environmental art, poisons air, water and soil. A large number of them employ distinctive strategies in order to depict the extent of pollution in the society and the often attended consequences. Taking for instance, Yao Lu, surfaces his photomontages of traditional Chinese Landscapes by replacing mountains and rivers with materials like waste, plastic and industrial rubbish. The original picture that comes through though is a familiar one but dismaying as the viewer has to come to terms with how industrialisation has distorted China's picturesque scenery into a filthy panorama. Such devices perform a dual role of honoring classical art as well as attacking environmentally irresponsible environmentalism by exposing the more subtle results of industrial advancement. This explains why soundness comes alive as pollution is not depicted as just another data point, but offensively as an aggressor that upsets the equilibrium between humans and nature and tarnishes landscapes that once were all-embracing and serene. Such works of art renders viewers reconsider the consequences of pollution and how the pollution of the Chinese landscapes resonates with their ways of consumption and social values.

The photomontage "The Roaring Tigers in the Mist" by Yao Lu (Figure 3) is—in the author's opinion—the perfect balance between the classical Chinese landscape and ecological issues juxtaposed to contemporary realistic painting. The artwork illustrates an enthralling picture of

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two tigers enjoying their nap in the misty dense undergrowth deep in the mountains. Reflecting on the classic Shan Shui painting, this ideally calm and almost meditative image invokes peaceful thoughts. Other such things—hints of man's hand and complex industrial patterns—do create a rather disturbing sort of a development that lurks over untouched blossoms. Incorporating all these features, Yao is able to present narratives that deal with ideas of cultural and environmental conservation, the relationship of nature and industry as seen in the urban context of the region, while bringing to the mind of the viewers images related to the concept of nature in the modern context. In order to integrate this photomontage into a text, I adjusted the photomontage's position and orientation to horizontal that the viewers have a crystal-clear view of the details of the artwork.



Figure 3: The Roaring Tigers in the Mist (云隐长啸), 2010, Chromogenic Print

Der Verlust der Biodiversität ist ebenfalls ein häufig behandeltes Thema, denn viele der noch vorhandenen Naturgebiete Chinas sind durch Abholzung, Zersiedelung und Umweltverschmutzung gefährdet. Dass das Leben in diesen Ökosystemen vergänglich ist, kommt den Künstlern zugute, die mit Papyrus oder Bambus als traditionellen Betonungen arbeiten. So führen Künstler auch die amerikanische Tieflandredkronenkrähe und den Großen Pandabär vor, deren Lebensräume sich Menschen ohne Innereien anstecken. In einigen Fällen используются для фокусировки на природе традиционные техники вырезания бумаги крена с изображением этих временных животных, чтобы напомнить людям о жестокой реальности природы. The subject matter, which becomes weaker thanks to previous illustrations, complements the image of the work that the viewer is confronted with: the fine

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balance of nature is not only volatile but also threatens the mortality of the related beings. This is certainly the case along the increasing waves of ecological destruction that inevitably leads to an anticipated loss of both biological diversity and cultures that depend upon a multiplicity of normalized people.

As they tackle these geographically situated ecological issues, Chinese art's animating, or rather, impacting concerns the socioeconomic and political aspects underlying socio-ecological destruction. Many of the works criticize in one form or another the policies or industrial practices that harm the environment where there are such issues as lack of enforcement of existing environmental guidelines, rapid industrialization, and lack of governmental responsibility in safeguarding natural reserves. These attempts at exploring the roots and the effects of ecological violence contest the linear and 'progressive' understanding of environmental degradation as an unintended consequence of development, but rather focus on the underlying decisions and activities that worsen the situation. Using this paradigm, artists provide a platform for critical engagement, challenging the audience to re-evaluate the meaning of economic growth and its repercussions on the people and nature.

In the end, by addressing localized environmental issues with such creativity, Chinese environmental artists also make a significant impact on global environmental discussions. The context may be distinctly Chinese, but the issues of pollution, urbanization, and loss of biodiversity are common global concerns, thus emphasizing the global nature of these problems. To the extent that these artists highlight the particularities of the Chinese state's – and society's – ecological crisis, they put local lived experience in conversation with the global narrative, promoting a collective vision of humanity that is conducive to international unity and cooperation. In such a context, Chinese environmental art is not merely an aesthetic of art; it has a deeper connotation of seeking unity in diversity and respect for nature across geographical borders through a strong message of working together as one.

Bridging East and West: Cross-Cultural Influences in Chinese Eco-Art

Chinese environmental artists have begun to fabricate their own unique brand of cross-cultural art, incorporating western ideas of environmental art with traditional Chinese aesthetics philosophy. For this reason, such intertwining does not represent mere hybridization of East and West but originates as an innovative integration that has meaning in both the global and local scale. Chinese artists have also channeled concepts from Western artistic movements such as Land Art, Abstract Expressionism and Conceptualism to interrogate and engage with ecological concerns. The focus of this movement on the production of massive and context-specific pieces appeals to Chinese artists who reinterpret the concept in accordance with their cultural orientation using raw materials such as bamboo and rice paper. This unique application of traditional materials makes it possible for artists to produce ecological installations that serve to praise and protect nature while also complaining about the environmental issue.

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The western influence goes beyond technique with its focus on activism and ecological consciousness which is equally motivating. And such artists as Agnes Denes and Joseph Beuys using art for environmental purposes provided a mode which Chinese artists have embraced and modified for their culture. For example, Cai Guo-Qiang's conception of gunpowder explosion counterpoises its use in war, stressing the destructive influence of industrial forces to the ecological system. His art addresses the topics of devastation and regeneration of nature and consternates how humanity treats nature. The adoption and adaptation of western activism into forms of Chinese creation is only the rediscovering of the universal concerns of eco-art against a specific cultural background.

Chinese eco-artists, in turn, appreciate the Western paradigms of art with concepts such as the critical point of Conceptual Art being idea rather than form (Brunner, 2017). This appeals to the Chinese artists who are focused on the significance and the purpose of art as a means of presenting eco messages. Zhang Hongtu, in particular, explores traditional Chinese themes and Western stylistic forms in order to illustrate global environmental concerns from a Chinese perspective. His works such as that of the series of Shanshui (fig.4) exhibit modern industrial aspects superimposed over the Chinese classical landscape forms which embody the consequences of city development and pollution. Zhang here in such images presents an issues relevant to the international society, concerning, in this case, the environmental sustainability of the Planet, inspiring in the same time the people to consider their own cultural and philosophical views of the nature.

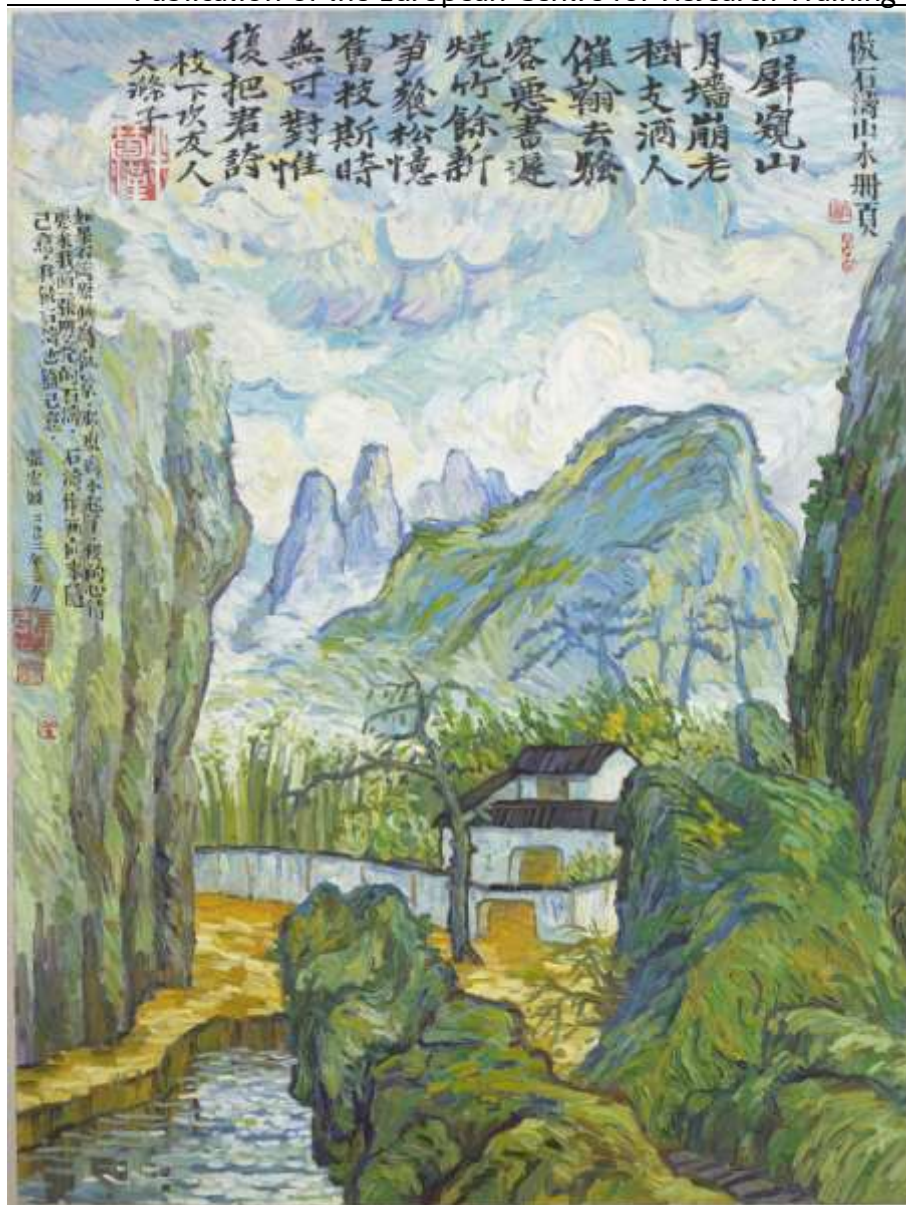


Figure 4: Zhang Hongtu, After Shitao's Landscape Album: Shitao–Van Gogh, from the series Ongoing Shan Shui, 2002, oil on canvas

The incorporation of Western influences is not limited to the forms and methods of representation but extends to the content that the Chinese artists wish to convey. Chinese practitioners of ecoart in the West focus on the ideal of harmony, the ideal of balance, which comes from Daoist and Confucian thought, which is often absent from Western movements (Zhou & Huang, 2017). This philosophical underpinning within Chinese eco-art has the strength to voice an alternate position within the global environmental debate, since it brings together the urgent critique inherent in Western eco-art with a traditional love of nature. In this respect, Chinese eco-artists do not only challenge the modern ‘progress’ rhetoric that has

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contributed to environmental degradation, they also put forth an alternative grounded on centuries of such an approach which focuses on living in harmony with nature.

The combination of western contemporary running practices with the traditional Chinese elements, however, has placed other difficulties on the Chinese Artists (Quan Zhang, 2021). The demand for certain aesthetics that arise due to the global art market can sometimes overshadow the culturally nuanced messages these works intend to convey. Thus, there is a certain perversion with the artists as they have to maintain the pillars of cultural and environmental dimensions of Chinese eco-art at the same time, presenting it to the global audiences. In order to achieve such a balance, artists and institutions are advised to be cautious while designing the exhibitions in order to reflect the essence of Chinese eco-art in the international setting while the art does not lose its voice in the global environmental discourse.

By virtue of their practice, Chinese eco-artists extend their local frameworks of reference to global environmental concerns, so they can engage in a global movement without losing their place in their local culture. It may be interesting to see how in this case Chinese environmental art goes beyond the local scope, showing how local tradition can enrich the global environmental narrative(Wah Man, 2020). The collaboration between contemporary and traditional, east and west makes this form of eco-art unique and attractive. It also reflects the complexity and interrelation of environmental problems across the globe.

Art as Advocacy: Raising Environmental Awareness and Inspiring Change

Environmental artists from China have adopted art as an active weapon in their warfare as it helps them to articulate the necessity of addressing ecological crises within China and globally. In this regard, environmental artworks in China transcend mere aesthetic appeal, as they invoke reflection, community action, and even political discourse. This kind of creativity is, in fact, very crucial in a society where industrialization and urbanization are occurring so fast. It connects the theoretical aspects of environmental problems with the everyday life of people and transcends people's experiences into urgency.

Artistic advocacy is crucial for highlighting pressing environmental issues. Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China* highlights the stark reality of waste management issues, moving beyond statistics to depict the personal impact of plastic waste on communities. The families, which Wang focuses on in his art, live in toxic mountains of plastic waste that was contaminated by the global waste trade networks. Using such intensely personal and often disturbing imagery, *Plastic China* prompts a broader reflection on consumer habits and waste disposal practices. For Wang, *Plastic China* serves not merely as environmental documentation but as a call for action, accountability, and policy reform. Besides focal points in his work Wang shifts the focus of art to the people and those people in particular who suffer the effects of environmental destruction and politicizes his work.



Figure 4: A shot from the movie “Plastic China”, directed by: Jiu-Liang Wang, 2016

Similarly, the creative processes of other artists have enabled the community to engage with art and, by extension, environmental issues. Chiara Avola, through Xu Bing’s *Forest Project*, highlights both the tangible and economic contributions to reforestation efforts. Through her work of art, Xu does not only bring awareness to the menace of deforestation but also emphasizes the societal aspect of restoration as a collective responsibility. This shift allows for a more broad-based approach to environmental activism where artists are active participants in ecological destruction. Aiming for new and alternative ways of eco-art promotion, Xu’s method fosters and invites broader audience engagement.

In other artworks of a similar style, the emphasis is more political or critical of the policies prioritizing development and undermining environment in China. All in all, the above-mentioned imbalances actually call into question the reality of the policies promoted by the Chinese government and the realistic perception of the country as ‘leading’ the ecological civilization concept. Some art works can complement government-led green initiatives, on the other hand, some citizens felt that the scope covered by the policies and the ways of execution needed to be looked at in more detail. As a response, artist ask for more accountability from the governments and demand a more open conversation regarding the ecological issues. Art in this case is used as a tool to shape the narrative and drive the policies.

International collaborations and exhibitions have also enabled Chinese environmental art to gain a global influence. This interaction between cultures enables the artists to communicate

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China's interesting environmental perspective to a broader audience, often stressing that waste, pollution, and deforestation, among others, are interesting problems. Wang Jiuliang, for example, has helped in exposing the global environmental challenge through his works such as Plastic China that reveal the global nature of environmental problems. Such exhibitions and conversations make it possible for Chinese artists to be 'ecological ambassadors', explaining that ecological engagement is global. A Nation's Issue.

Chinese artists are not simply portraying ecological degradation; instead, they are actively engaging viewers, building a collective environmental consciousness and spurring change. These artists combine activism with art, demonstrating how central eco-art is to public discourse and advancing sustainable practices across multiple levels. Hence, they show that art is just not a means of contemplation only, it is also an active tool for change that can cross borders and create a unified voice to combat the relevant environmental issues being faced at present.

Looking Forward: The Future of Cross-Cultural Eco-Aesthetics in Chinese Art

In the emerging trends of contemporary cross-cultural eco -aesthetics in Chinese environmental art while engaging themselves in emerging ecological concerns, the artists would be looking in more integrated ways with international ecological initiatives. Given the intensifying global environmental crisis, it has become of paramount importance for the Chinese artists to solve the space between the local ecological concerns and the global concerns. This enables them to provide a distinctly Chinese viewpoint to the wider international eco art debate, which lends weight to the argument that caring for the environment is an integral part of everyone's role. In the ever evolving future, urban art's focus is expected to shift on analyzing the issues of environmentalism, often highlighting the many options for cultural and environmental sustainable methods that are effective on a global scale while being rooted within the local context توت.

In the case of Chinese eco-art, one potential area worth pursuing is the use of advanced mediums like virtual or augmented reality to deepen people's emotional engagement with ecological issues. The use of digital technologies allows artists to situate the audience inside the virtual spaces that represent ecological problems of the real world, therefore, enhancing the level of emotional and rational involvement of the public (Eber et al., 2004). Taking viewers into active environments allows digital eco-art to take more general issues, such as air or deforestation, or other similar concerns, and provide them with specific images that viewers can easily relate to. This change in technologies heralds a new direction in the development of eco-aesthetics whereby the audience will look at environmental issues not only through the traditional book form but with the help of new media that immerses the user in the experience.

China's eco-artists will as well be likely to pursue cross-cultural interaction with western environmental art as this will build a synthesis of western activism and traditional Chinese culture that is rooted in harmony with nature (Parsons & Zhang, 2018). This blending gives the Chinese artists a chance to use different styles of engagement that may be of a collective and

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development -UK reflective nature instead of aggressive activism. Such cross-cultural projects present an ecological engagement that is constructive in not limiting itself to the needs of contemporary society while recognizing the distinctive character of Chinese attitudes toward nature. This combination offers a means for eco-art to be disseminated more widely and in both the Chinese and global contexts, calling for a renewed appreciation of the spiritual and practical role of nature in an integrating world.

In addition, the aspects of the cultural heritage in the Chinese eco-art are expected to become stronger as the artists struggle with the pressures of modernism as well as traditionalism (Rees, 2016). If the struggle between industrial development and culture protection persists, then the forthcoming Chinese eco-art might even draw greater attention to critiques of contemporary environmental philosophy and policy through the use of traditional art forms. People such as Yao Lu and Yang Yongliang are already developing this by merging modern urban symbols into Shan Shui painting techniques, and this trend may develop to combine the notions of the need to protect cultural and the natural landscapes. This trend of the Chinese eco-art, in the opinion of the authors, finds its embodiment in the interdependence of culture and ecology in the works and the search for the harmony of traditions and innovations in the present and future art.

Chinese eco-art is likely to take center stage during international exhibitions and partnerships, It will allow the locally-oriented environmental narrative to be shifted to an international stage. Accordingly, the global perspective empowers Chinese practitioners to become champions of eco-aesthetics, addressing environmental problems rendering an image of China as part of an interconnected world. As a result, together with other representatives of this eco-artist movement, the artists are central to a diverse global plot of ecological conservation, calling for universal collaboration. Consequently, the result is an art that not only speaks the language of Chinese environmental issues but also makes a statement on the need for consensus in tackling the environment problems worldwide.

Again, it's possible to conclude that the future of Chinese artwork in relation to cross-cultural eco-aesthetics is extremely promising. Owing to the development of digital technologies, further integration of culture, and increase of Sino foreign exchange, it can be said that all of these are opportunities for further advancement from Chinese eco-artists in eco-aesthetic discussions. Most probably, their art will be in the form of eco-art that is technologically advanced, culturally rooted, and globally resonant.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, nearly all modern Chinese environmental artwork seeks to combine ancient Chinese philosophies and contemporary elements to advocate for ecological consciousness that can be appreciated on all levels. Embedded in Daoist and Confucian traditions, Chinese eco-art aims for peaceful influence with nature, and is in a way not in competition but complements the fervency of environmental agenda in the West. It is through the works of Cai Guo-Qiang, Wang Jiuliang and Yang Yongliang that China's environmentalist art has appeared as an

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important tool in the fight against urbanization, pollution, and biodiversity destruction. Chinese artists incorporate local motives and traditional art styles in the works that deal with global issues and help to focus attention not only on the ecological problems of the region but also on its ecology in general.

And as these artists bring awareness and passion around environmental issues, they cross cultural barriers, making them essential spokespeople for the ecological cause globally. In the future, digital advancements and cross-cultures interactions are likely to continue rising up the impact of Chinese environmental art, creating deeper intimacy and ownership of the issues of ecological imbalance. Finally, this novel kind of art speaks to the interests of all people who care about the ecology of the planet and reminds that ecological issues go beyond borders and requires unity for the cause.

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