

Article

Nature, Spirituality, and Place: Comparative Studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi

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Abstract: Very rich scholarly works have been produced to perform a comparative study between Emerson and Zhuang Zi. Many scholars in their comparative research have tried to find how Emerson and the transcendentalists such as Thoreau borrow ideas from Daoism. In this article, I will take a different approach. I aim to find how Emerson and Zhuang Zi's pursuit of spirituality in nature shapes different types of sense of place. The concept of spirituality is related to the pursuit of meaning in life and self-transcendence. This concept has gradually gained attention from the branches of religion, philosophy, geography, and psychology since, currently, due to the fast urbanization process, more people are separated from their land and move into cities. I will make a comparison between Emerson and Zhuang Zi from the concepts of spirituality, nature, and place. This perspective will shed light on the question of the conservation of various places due to their value and meaning, although I will not discuss conservation issues in this paper. In this article, I will first give a brief introduction to the meaning of spirituality by focusing on the three dimensions of this concept, which include meaning, self-transcendence, and spiritual practices. Then, I will discuss how the concept of nature in Emerson and Zhuang Zi's works is related to these three dimensions. Finally, I will examine why Emerson and Zhuang Zi treat wilderness and agricultural land, respectively, as a place.

Keywords: spirituality; nature; place; ultimate reality; self-transcendence



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1. Introduction

Rich scholarly research works in the comparative research on Emerson and Chinese religions have been produced in the past 50 years. These works include *Versluis' American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (Arthur Versluis 1993), Zhichao Xie's Research on American Transcendentalism's Acceptance of Confucianism (Zhichao Xie 2012), and Mansu Qian's *Emerson and China: Reflection on Individualism* (Mansu Qian 1996). In these works, comparative studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi have been addressed by many scholars. Scholars who conduct these comparative studies between American transcendentalism and Chinese religions take a similar approach: they try to find how Emerson borrows ideas from Chinese religions and integrates them into his thoughts. I argue that due to the lack of access to Chinese religious texts and the lack of understanding of the Chinese language, Emerson sometimes just used these ideas to support his positions. but this is not based on his deep understanding of these ideas. However, in this paper, I will not discuss this; rather, I will take an alternative approach to the comparative studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi by using the concepts of nature, spirituality, and place. In recent years, a similar approach as the one I will use to conduct comparative studies has emerged. Scholars such as Matthew Crippen (2023), Wang and Xiao (2023), and Thompson and Xu (2023) have taken a similar approach in their recent research articles in the Special Issue titled "Nature, Spirituality and Place". However, little research has been conducted in terms of the comparative studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi from the perspective of nature, spirituality, and place. Peter D. Hershock and Roger T. Ames (Hershock

and Ames 2019) published a book titled *Philosophy of Place: An Intercultural Conversation*. They used the concept of place to perform cross-cultural comparative studies. However, many research articles in this book, such as Steven Burik's article on *Heidegger and Daoism*, neglect the important point that their sense of place is mostly shaped via their different metaphysical understandings of nature and pursuit of spirituality with nature. In this article, I aim to explore why Emerson and Zhuang Zi's pursuit of spirituality in nature shapes their different kinds of sense of place. Wilderness is particularly important in the former's conceptualization of place, whereas the latter's understanding revolves around cultivated land and especially agricultural settings. In the first part of this paper, I will discuss the concept of spirituality in terms of two dimensions, which are the pursuit of meaning and the achievement of self-transcendence. In the second part of my paper, I will make a comparison between Emerson and Zhuang Zi in their different metaphysical interpretations of nature from two aspects: spiritual power versus bio-spiritual power, and purposeful action versus purposiveness without purposeful action. In the third part of this paper, I will focus on the logical relationship between the metaphysical interpretation of the nature of Emerson and Zhuang Zi and their relationship with the pursuit of meaning of life via self-transcendence. I will focus on two aspects: their understanding of the self and self-transcendence toward nature. Lastly, I will discuss how their pursuit of the meaning of life via nature shapes different kinds of sense of place. In my discussion, I point out that there are both similarities and differences between Emerson and Zhuang Zi in their understanding of nature, spirituality, and place. The similarities lie in the fact that their interpretations of nature both encourage the direct experience of material nature and aesthetic appreciation so that material nature becomes a place. The differences lie in the fact that Emerson's interpretation of nature encourages the appreciation of wilderness more than cultivated places such as agricultural land. By comparison, Zhuang Zi's interpretation of nature encourages more appreciation of cultivated land such as agricultural land.

1.1. Spirituality

In the past 50 years, extensive research has been conducted on the philosophical and religious interpretations of the concept of spirituality. One of the reasons is that due to the fast development of science, technology, and urbanization, societies are becoming more secular. When belief in traditional deities is no longer strong, many people start to find spirituality in different areas of life. Various disciplines that interpret life in different ways also focus on research on the concept of spirituality and its relationship with their areas. Many scholars in the field of philosophy and religion have written books or articles explaining this concept such as Irving Singer (2010), John Cottingham (2005), David McPherson (2017), and Robert C. Solomon (2002). In this article, I will not focus on the definitions and interpretations of the concept of spirituality; rather, I will focus on the two essential inter-related aspects of spirituality: (1) the pursuit of meaning in life, and (2) self-transcendence toward objects that are regarded as being meaningful.

1.2. Spirituality and Meaning

The concept of spirituality is closely related to meaning. It contains human beings' innate desire for the pursuit of meaning in life. In the past 60 years, there have been many theories of meaning including supernaturalism, objective naturalism, subjective naturalism, and hybrid naturalism. Supernaturalism claims that life will be meaningful if we orient our life toward God, soul, or spiritual beings, which are regarded as the ultimate reality, and we must believe in them to live a meaningful life. Objective naturalism claims that our life is meaningful if we are connected with objective values that are independent of divine consciousness and human beings' judgment. The representative for this school is Thaddeus Metz. (Thaddeus Metz 2013). His "fundamentality theory" claims that human beings' lives will be meaningful if they use their reason to orient their life rationality toward the fundamental conditions of human existence. For him, there are objective values in the world. If human beings contribute to the values, whether they enjoy doing it or not,

their actions and lives are meaningful. Subjective naturalism claims that the meaning of life lies in achieving what one wants or enjoys, and it does not matter whether what he or she enjoys has value for its own sake. Hybrid naturalism is something between objective naturalism and subjective naturalism. Susan Wolf gave this form of hybrid naturalism a very concise definition: “Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets object attractiveness.” (Susan Wolf 2010, p. 9). Although Emerson and Zhuang Zi never put forward the theory on the meaning of life, we can use these theories to analyze their pursuit of spirituality in nature. Emerson and Zhuang Zi’s pursuit of spirituality in nature can be categorized as something between supernaturalism and hybrid naturalism. For them, there is a transcendental reality, which is God and *Dao*, and there are objective values in God and *Dao*. Our lives will be meaningful if we form a relationship with the ultimate reality. However, they both pay much attention to our everyday life since God and *Dao* are both immanent in all things in nature. We can form a relationship with the ultimate reality through establishing a close relationship with the world we live in.

1.3. Spirituality and Self-Transcendence

Spirituality also contains the idea that human beings have an innate desire to achieve self-transcendence. What, then, is the meaning of self-transcendence? For the purpose of this article, I borrow John Nolt’s definition of self-transcendence since he pays much attention to this concept’s relationship with nature. In the article titled “Hope, Self-Transcendence and Environmental Ethics”, he defines this term: “self-transcendence is to be understood as follows: a person (*subject*) is self-transcendent toward an object if and only if that object is distinct from her and she values its good as an end.” (John Nolt 2010, p. 163). He points out that the object can either be another person or nature. However, after a discussion of different forms of self-transcendence to persons, he argues that human beings must self-transcend to nature rather than other human beings. No matter the form of self-transcendence, we can discover a thinking paradigm in this dimension of spirituality. (1) The self we experience in everyday life is usually the false self or narrow self, which is motivated by the pursuit of external good such as wealth, fame, or health. (2) There is a true self that is related to ultimate reality, but we tend to ignore it. (3) We need to cultivate moral power to transcend the false self and achieve the authentic self. Although Emerson and Zhuang Zi give us very different interpretations of self-transcendence, their ways of thinking follow the same thinking paradigm as that mentioned above. They both think that the self we experience in everyday life tends to be false or narrow. For Emerson, we tend to be so attached to the surface while ignoring the final cause of all things. In contrast, for Zhuang Zi, we tend to devote our life to the purposeful pursuit of fame, reputation, knowledge, virtue, and so on, and we ignore our true self which is derived from the ultimate reality, *Dao*, which is the self without any purpose. Emerson and Zhuang Zi both point out that we should overcome the false self and become united with the ultimate reality to achieve the true self via continuous effort.

2. Metaphysical Dimension of Nature and Meaning

The Chinese translation of Emerson’s concept of nature is *ziran*, which is the same as Zhuang Zi’s concept of nature. Although the translation is the same, their metaphysical meaning of nature differs greatly. In fact, there is no corresponding word for Emerson’s concept of nature in the Chinese vocabulary. Z. Wang (2018, p. 18) has provided us with very authoritative research and he points out that the translation of the Western concept of nature into the Chinese characters of *ziran* is derived from Japan. When the Japanese translate the Western concept of nature in the contemporary world into *ziran*, their understanding of *ziran* is related to natural objects, science, naturalism, and so on. In the early English–Chinese dictionary, which was compiled by Robert Morrison, the Western concept of nature is usually translated into “those properties which men and things have originally”; “principles of nature”; and so on. In this article, I will not deeply investigate the translation. Rather, I will discuss how their different metaphysical interpretations of

nature are connected with values. After giving a deep metaphysical analysis of Emerson and Zhuang Zi's metaphysical interpretation of nature, we can better understand why their concept of nature differs on a very deep level. In this part, I will make a comparison between Emerson and Zhuang Zi in their different metaphysical interpretations of nature and then discuss why their metaphysical interpretations of nature are related to meaning from two perspectives: (1) spiritual power versus psychophysical power; (2) purpose versus purposiveness without purpose. Before I go deeper into the metaphysical interpretation of nature, I think it is necessary to briefly address the logical relationship among power, purpose, value, and meaning. By meaning, I refer to meaning in life. It is deeply related to purpose. Purpose refers to ultimate destinations for human beings which lie not in physical places but rather in ultimate values. The values mainly include truth, beauty, and good.

2.1. Nature and Power

Through their conceptions of nature and spiritual power and ziran (self-so) and psychophysical power, respectively, Emerson and Zhuang Zi both hold the view that there exists an ultimate reality that contains power to generate and maintain the material world. "This is the ultimate fact which we so quickly reach on this as on every topic, the resolution of all into the ever blessed One." (Emerson 1983, p. 272). For Emerson, the ever-blessed One is the ultimate reality. He often uses other equivalent terms to express the idea of the blessed One. These terms include God, reason, spirit, oversoul, final cause, efficient nature, and so on. For Zhuang Zi, the ultimate reality is Dao. "That Course has its own tendency and consistency, but without any deliberate activity or definite form." (Zhuang 2009, p. 42). The Course is an alternative translation of Dao. In this sentence, tendency and consistency refer to the idea that Dao really exists. It is not an illusion. However, their interpretation of power differs greatly. The former stresses spiritual power while the latter stresses bio-spiritual power. For Emerson, the ultimate reality is spiritual, and it creates the material world without relying on any material substances. In contrast, Zhuang Zi thinks that the material world, which is made up of vital energy, is not created but a given reality. In order to better understand these two concepts, it is necessary to locate the two important concepts that are often used by Emerson and Zhuang Zi to express ultimate reality: efficient nature and the Dao. Emerson wrote two essays titled "Nature". The first essay was written in 1836 and the second was in 1844. It was in his second essay titled "Nature" in which he put forward the concept of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* (Branch and Mohs 2017, pp. 153–54). The former refers to the production of efficient nature, which is also termed as passive nature. The latter refers to the cause of passive nature. From this, we can find that Emerson's concept of nature includes two aspects: efficient nature and material nature. For efficient nature, Emerson also used many other terms to express this concept. These terms include "supreme Cause," "spirit and God", "reason", "thought", "transparent law", and so on (Emerson 1983, pp. 28, 40, 47, 272, 403). It is the spiritual metaphysical power that creates the material world and directs the changing process of the material world. For the effects of efficient nature, Emerson used many metaphors to express it. A list of these metaphors can help us better understand Emerson's concept of Nature. These metaphors include "incarnation of thought", "God's book", "exhibition of God's benevolence", "symbol", and "metaphor or image of human mind" (Emerson 1983, p. 555). In terms of the relationship between efficient nature and material nature, the terms of cause and effect can help us better understand it. Emerson states that "Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end preexists in the means, the fruit in the seeds." (Emerson 1983, p. 200). Then, what is efficient nature? Emerson explains this concept as follows: "But taking timely warning, and leaving many things unsaid on this topic, let us no longer omit our homage to the Efficient Nature, *natura naturans*, the quick cause, before which all forms flee as the driven snows, itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes, (as the ancient represented nature by proteus, a shepherd), and in undescribable variety. It pub-

lishes itself in creatures, reading from particles and spicula, through transformation on transformation to the highest symmetries, arriving at consummate results without a shock or a leap." (Emerson 1983, p. 546). The concept of efficient nature in Emerson's works is often used interchangeably with other concepts including God, Reason, Thought, Oversoul, Spirit, Supreme Nature, and so on. Efficient nature contains two forms of power: creative power and transformative power. Creative power refers to the idea that efficient nature is forever in the process of creating new forms and this power will never be exhausted. By transformative power, Emerson means the metamorphosis of forms. The term metamorphosis is synonymous with the terms of transition or transformation. It means that within the form of each creature, there is a force that impels this creature to higher forms (Emerson 1971–2013, vol. 3, p. 12). The creative power and transformative power are different expressions of the same spiritual power which emanates from efficient nature. The power is purely spiritual and not blended with any material elements. For Emerson, it is the thought (spiritual power) that creates the body and things, as he states that "Everything was first a thought, only thinking makes things." (Urbas 2021, p. 47).

The concept of *ziran* (nature) appears in Zhuang Zi's works many times, but the meaning of nature is very different from Emerson's concept of efficient nature. The Chinese characters for nature are made up of two words: *zi* (自) *ran* (然). The meaning of *ziran* is spontaneity or self-so. This concept is often used together with two other concepts which are *Dao* and *Qi* (vital energy). They are all expressions of the ultimate reality. *Ziran* refers to the way that the ultimate reality *Dao* moves. In terms of the meaning of *Dao*, Zhuang Zi describes *Dao* as follows: "That Course has its own tendency and consistency, but without any deliberate activity or definite form. It can be transmitted but not received, attained but not shown. Being its own root and its own foundation, it exists firmly even when heaven and earth are not yet there. It makes the spirits and the Lord-on-High divine, generates both Heaven and earth. It is above the summit without being high, beneath the nadir without being deep. It precedes heaven and earth without being of long duration. It is elder to the earliest antiquity without being old." (Zhuang 2009, p. 43). For Zhuang Zi, *Dao* exists, and the existence of *Dao* is beyond doubt, and it is the ultimate reality. The self-generating power of *Dao* is also called *ziran*. This concept is also closely related to *qi*, the vital energy of which everything is made. There are two opposing forces within vital energy: *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are opposing energies but are also mutually supportive. There is a very rich relationship between them. In this aspect, Wang Robin R. gave a very insightful interpretation. She points out that the *yin* and *yang* relationship includes the following types: contradiction and opposition, independence, mutual inclusion, interaction, complementary, and transformation. The interaction of *yin* and *yang* is spontaneous without any external forces. Zhuang Zi calls this interaction *ziran*.

2.2. Nature, Power, and Meaning: Purpose versus Purposiveness without Purpose

In the above, I examined Emerson and Zhuang Zi's concept of nature and its relationship with power. The former stresses spiritual power and the latter bio-spiritual power. In this section, I will discuss the interrelationship between power, meaning, and purpose. For both Emerson and Zhuang Zi, nature has meaning. The meaning in nature lies in the key concept which is purpose. Emerson stresses efficient nature's purpose which lies in ultimate values. In contrast, Zhuang Zi stresses purposiveness without purpose, which also contains ultimate values. I will discuss this in detail as follows. For Emerson, the spiritual power in efficient nature has direction. It moves up in the sense that it is directed by purpose which is related to ultimate values. Those values can be summarized in three essential elements which are good, beauty, and truth. "The world thus exists to the soul to stratify the desire of beauty. Extend this element to the uttermost, and I call it an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same." (Branch and Mohs 2017, p. 83). When these values combine together, Emerson sometimes uses the word ecstasy to express this

idea. Emerson says, “And because ecstasy is the law and cause of nature, therefore you cannot interpret it in too high and deep a sense. Nature represents the best meaning of the wisest man.” (Branch and Mohs 2017, p. 103). This is the deeper metaphysical reason why Emerson tries to pursue spirituality in nature. For Emerson, nature represents the best meaning for human beings. In the following, I will address in detail the spiritual power in Emerson and how this concept is related to values.

Emerson’s understanding of spiritual power includes two aspects: creative power and transformative power. Both kinds of power follow the values of good, truth, and beauty. Among these values, the value of good is very important. Emerson also terms good as a moral force. He sometimes uses moral force (power) to express creative and transformative power. He says, “To a true scholar the attraction of the aspects of nature, the departments of life, and the passages of his experience, is simply the information they yield him of this supreme nature which lurks within all That reality, that causing force is moral. The Moral Sentiment is but its other name.” (Urbas 2021, p. 100). By moral sentiment, Emerson refers to the ultimate causing force, efficient nature. From this word, we can find that the creative power or force of efficient nature is value-laden. It is an alternative expression of spiritual law, which is a combination of truth, goodness, and beauty. For Emerson, creative power and transformative power are not only good but also beautiful. The beauty is based on necessity or truth. He says, “All departments of life at the present day,—Trade, Politics, Letters, Science, or Religion,—seem to feel, and to labor to express, the identity of their law. They are rays of one sun; they translate each into a new language the sense of the other. They are sublime when seen as emanations of a Necessity contradistinguished from the vulgar Fate, emanations of a Necessity contradistinguished from the vulgar Fate, by being instant and alive, and dissolving man as well as his works, in its flowing beneficence This influence is conspicuously visible in the principles and history of art.” (Urbas 2021, p. 146). For Emerson, all departments of life are expressions of the spiritual law or principles. When this law emanates from the necessity which refers to the truth or knowledge of God, it is sublime. This law is not fixed or dull; rather, it is very lively and beautiful and is based on the truth.

Zhuang Zi’s concept of *ziran* (self-so) is made up of two Chinese words: self (自) and so (然). Self-so refers to the idea that Dao creates everything without deliberate activity or following any spiritual laws of divine consciousness. It is a self-generating process without any guidance. It has the meaning of purposiveness without purpose. In speaking of purposiveness without purpose, I borrow the concept from Kant. Kant explained this concept in his critique of judgment. For him, beauty belongs to purposiveness without purpose. I use the term not in the Kantian sense but as an analogy. Life itself is the final purpose. In terms of the concept of *ziran*, many traditional views on it stress the value of freedom. However, recent scholarship has given this concept more attention. Professor Wang Bo provides us with an insightful viewpoint suggesting that the concept of *self-so* is not value-neutral but value-laden (B. Wang 2018, pp. 43–53, 128–29). Based on his extensive linguistic studies of the term self-so, he argues that the concept of nature (*self-so*) demonstrates that everything, that is, self-so, has value for its own sake. However, he does not tell us what the value is. I argue that the value of self-so combines three elements, which are truth, good, and beauty. Although Zhuang Zi does not define the three elements, we can obtain the general idea of them from his works. For Zhuang Zi, truth is not related to any spiritual principles as Emerson claims; rather, it refers to the spontaneous process of vital energy. This process is self-so, which means that it is not directed by any supernatural power or consciousness. Zhuang Zi’s term for the concept of good is virtue. Virtue refers to power, which comes from being self-so without any deliberative activities or predetermined plans. Additionally, beauty is also related to self-so. Zhuang Zi has the expression of beauty in his work. He says, “Heaven and earth possess vast beauties, but they do not speak of them. The four seasons have their unconcealed regularities, but they do not discuss them. Each of the ten thousand things makes its own perfect sense but does not explain it.” (Zhuang 2009, p. 86). Beauty for Zhuang Zi is not related to any spiritual principles as Emerson understands;

rather, it is related to the spontaneous activity of nature. From the above, we can find that the combination of truth, good, and beauty in Zhuang Zi all centers on spontaneity. Zhuang Zi's understanding of truth is not related to spiritual principles which direct the change as Emerson understands. Rather, it is related to the process of change. Zhuang Zi's understanding of truth is not based on scientific knowledge since, in his lifetime, modern science had not yet developed. His understanding of truth refers to the process of change which is caused by *yin* and *yang*. In terms of *yin* and *yang*, he does not challenge it but accepts it as the precondition of his understanding of *Dao*. *Yin* and *yang*'s action is spontaneous, which is the foundation for the virtue of *Dao*. The virtue of *Dao* refers to its vitality, and it will never perish and degrade. This power will always be in the action. Zhuang Zi's concept of Great Beauty is also related to truth. "Heaven and earth possess vast beauties, but they do not speak of them. The four seasons have their unconcealed regularities, but they do not discuss them. Each of the ten thousand things makes its own perfect sense but does not explain it." (Zhuang 2009, p. 86). The great beauty transcends all perspectives or standards. It is also not based on the necessity of nature as Emerson argues. For Zhuang Zi, we can never know the truth of nature since it is always in the process of changing. "For our understanding can be in the right only by virtue of a relation of dependence on something, and what it depends on is always peculiarly unfixed. So how could I know whether what I call the Heavenly is not really the Human? How could I know whether what I call the Human is not really the Heavenly?" (Zhuang 2009, pp. 40–41). Zhuang Zi's understanding of the good of *Dao* is termed virtue.

3. Self-Transcendence towards Nature

I have discussed why Emerson and Zhuang Zi's metaphysical interpretation of nature is full of meaning and ultimate values. This is also the deeper reason why they both pursue spirituality in nature. In terms of the relationship between the metaphysical interpretation of nature and self-transcendence, many scholars have given attention to the theoretical issue: What is more important? Scholars such as Martine Buber and Joseph Urbas both discuss this issue by focusing attention on Daoism and Emerson, respectively. Martine Buber (Martine Buber 1991) gives the earlier interpretation of Daoism and argues that ethics and personal character play an important role in Daoism. Joseph Urbas (Urbas 2021) discussed Richard Rorty's research on the distinction between pre- and post-Kantian ethics and his claim that philosophy's primary subject is life and the quest for wisdom. Then, he argues that Emerson's metaphysics is only the guarantee for living a good life. In this part, I will examine the difference between Emerson and Zhuang Zi in this pursuit of self-transcendence towards nature. I will focus on two questions: (1) How do Emerson and Zhuang Zi's metaphysical interpretation of nature influence their understanding of the self? (2) Why should we transcend ourselves to nature?

3.1. True Self: Soul and Xing

The metaphysical interpretation of the concept of nature by Emerson and Zhuang Zi has a direct influence on their understanding of the self. They both think that our self is derived from the ultimate reality, so they are all related to nature. The two concepts that can better help us understand their conception of the self are soul and xing. In the following, I will examine these two concepts from the two key concepts I use when I discuss their interpretation of nature: power and purpose.

For Emerson, the soul can better represent our true self. Our soul is derived from Oversoul. "This Universal Soul, he calls Reason: it is not mind, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men." (Emerson 1983, p. 21). By Universal Soul, Emerson refers to the efficient nature (God, Reason, Spiritual Law, and Supreme Nature). Emerson's account of the soul is well expressed in the following passage: "All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but is a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the

intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie,—an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed..... When it breathes through his intellect it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through affection, it is love.” (Emerson 1983, pp. 386–87). From the above, we can find that Emerson’s concept of soul includes three parts. (1) Intellect. By intellect, Emerson refers to scientific cognition which can help us better find the intrinsic likeness between remote things and discover the spiritual principles that ground the likeness. It is void of any affection. (2) Will. Emerson’s concept of will is related to choice and virtue. For him, when we choose to surrender to God and let God guide our everyday life, we will have virtue. For Emerson, virtue represents the true self of men. “In a virtuous action, I properly am; in a virtuous act, I add to the world.” (Urbas 2021, p. 109). (3) Affections of Love. The love is not directed to concrete persons or places but rather to spiritual principles. All the three abovementioned elements of the soul are interrelated with power. For the intellect, the power lies in transformation. When our intellect grows, it will transform into other states which can help us better detect the truth. Will is related to virtue in the sense that when we surrender ourselves to the truth of God, we will develop power. However, if we stick to our willful choice without worshipping God, then our power will be weakened. For Emerson, our understanding and virtue are directed by the ultimate purpose which lies in God. Since our soul is from God, we are already equipped with values from God. These values, as the ultimate purpose, will direct our cognition and action. What is, then, the relationship between the soul and the faculties of the mind (intellect, will, and love)? For Emerson, our soul can ignite all the faculties of the mind. It is not the Kantian sense of understanding, but it is the “the first thought” of human beings. It is the love of beauty and goodness.

In contrast, for Zhuang Zi, our true self is derived from the *Dao*. One dialogue in Zhuang Zi can better address this derivative relationship. This dialogue happens between Zhuang Zi and Huizi. Zhuang Zi argues that “The Course gives him this appearance, Heaven gives him this physical form, and he doesn’t allow likes and dislikes to damage him internally.” (Zhuang 2009, p. 38). From this passage, we can find that for Zhuang Zi, the ultimate reality of *Dao* gives us physical form, and when we have physical form, we are already human beings. Zhuang Zi often uses *xing* (inborn nature) to express our true self. *Xing* includes three elements, which are embodied cognition, virtue, and tranquility. (1) Embodied cognition. Zhuang Zi’s understanding of cognition is different from Emerson’s, but also shares similarities with him. For Zhuang Zi, our cognition is deeply dependent on the body. “The consciousness of living creatures depends on their breath. It is not Heaven’s fault if it becomes depleted. Heaven blows through them day and night without cease, but human beings see to it that all their openings are blocked off. Only when you reopen yourself all the way back down to the placenta can your mind wander in the Heavenly.” (Zhuang 2009, p. 113). For Zhuang Zi, our body is made up of vital energy. Within vital energy, there are two opposing parts: *yin* and *yang*. When the interaction of *yin* and *yang* goes smoothly, we will develop intuition, which can better help us connect with the ultimate reality, *Dao*. However, for Emerson, our intellect is derived from the metaphysical sense of intellect which is also termed as God. Although our intellect needs the interaction of the mind with material nature to gain knowledge of God, it is not dependent on the bodily power of human beings, which is triggered by the interaction of *Yin* and *Yang* as Zhuang Zi understands. (2) Virtue. By virtue, Zhuang Zi refers to the power from our embodied cognition. Emerson stresses that when we surrender ourselves to God, we will develop virtue. For Zhuang Zi, we will develop power when we do not allow the purposeful pursuit of any kinds of values to influence our minds. We do not need to choose to surrender ourselves to God since choice itself contains purpose. Zhuang Zi stresses forgetting all kinds of purposeful pursuits. (3) Tranquility. Zhuang Zi does not mention the love of *Dao*; rather, he points out that when we unite with *Dao*, we will achieve a state of tranquility.

What is, then, the relationship among *self-so* (nature), *xing*, and power? The following two passages from Zhuang Zi can help us better answer the question. “The Course is the

full array of Virtuosities. The life process is Virtuosity shining forth. The inborn nature is the concrete material of the life process. The motion of inborn nature is a kind of activity, but when activity becomes deliberate and artificial, it can be called the loss of inborn nature." (Zhuang 2009, p. 102); "They unify their inborn nature, nourish their vital energy, and merge their virtuosities, thereby opening into the place from which all beings are created. Someone like this keeps the Heavenly in him intact and the spirit in him free of gaps, so there is nowhere through which mere beings can get at him." For Zhuang Zi, when we follow the *Dao's* way, which is self-so without deliberative schemes, plans, or artificial actions, we will keep our *xing* (inborn nature). When we maintain our inborn nature, our psychophysical energy will be active, which will ignite our power of the mind.

3.2. Self-Transcendence: Romantic Triad and Unity

Emerson and Zhuang Zi both stress self-transcendence to achieve unity with the highest reality. The reason is that we have a false self which is opposed to the true self. The false self tends to weaken our power and degrade human beings. We become strong when we establish the unity with the highest reality. For Emerson, the unity lies in the relationship among human beings, nature, and God, which can be termed as the romantic triad. This is a term I borrow from Samantha C. Harvey's expression in characterizing the relationship among spirit, humanity, and nature in her book titled *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson and Nature* (Harvey 2013). "The romantic triad" is a better term for the expression of the new trinity, which is against the traditional trinity in Christianity. Spirit refers to the ultimate reality, which is often termed as God. But for Emerson, God is not a Christian sense of God. He gave a strong criticism towards Christianity and its defenders. For him, "They magnify inspiration, miracles, mediatorship, the trinity, baptism, the eucharist." (Cabot 1887, p. 306). Emerson gives us a new interpretation of the Christian God after making detailed comments on the traditional understanding of the Christian God in James Elliot Cabot's *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. I will quote the passages below. "I deny personality to God because it is too little, not too much. Life, personal life, is faint and cold to the energy of God. For Reason and Love and Beauty, or that which is all these, it is the life of life, the reason of reason, the love of love."; "Here is the truth. They do not and will not perceive that it is to distrust the deity of truth, its invincible beauty, to do God a high dishonor, so to depict Him." (Cabot 1887, p. 341). From the above three passages, we can find that for Emerson, the traditional understanding of God by believers is characterized by the following features of God: (1) God has personality; (2) God provides miracles to show his truth; (3) God sends his messenger, Christ, to convey himself to human beings. Christ is a divine being. The new interpretation of God by Emerson has three features: (1) God is conscious in the sense that it is a combination of truth, goodness, and beauty. These values are eternal life-giving power; (2) God does not use miracles to show truth. Rather, God uses visible objects to demonstrate God's truth, which is also beautiful and good. (3) Christ is not divinity. The divinity lies in human beings' "infinite of man's nature". (Cabot 1887, p. 312). For Emerson, human beings can finally know the ultimate reality via the medium of material nature. Zhuang Zi stresses the unity between human beings and *Dao*. For Zhuang Zi, *Dao* can be known without the medium of material nature. We can have direct encounters with *Dao* when our mind is in a state of emptiness. In this part, I will discuss the difference between the trinity and unity from the following three perspectives: (1) Emerson and Zhuang Zi's understanding of the false self; (2) the status of material nature; and (3) the spiritual state of self-transcendence.

First, Emerson and Zhuang Zi hold the same view that there is a false self that needs to be transcended to achieve an authentic self. However, they differ in their understanding of the false self. For Emerson, the false self lies in the departure from efficient nature (God). The false self is characterized by other-reliance rather than a reliance on God. One type of false self which is related to other-reliance is imitation. Emerson strongly criticizes imitation and thinks it is "the vice of overcivilized communities" and "a servile copying of what is capricious as if it were permanent forms of nature." (Branch and Mohs 2017,

p. 63). For Emerson, there is no permanent standard for us to follow that is provided by human civilization. All of the standards are always changing. Nature can give us the standard. However, the process of understanding nature's standards is always evolving. The final purpose is towards the truth, good, and beauty. Good is very important compared with the other two elements. However, in terms of what constitutes good, our process of understanding will never end.

By other reliance, Emerson refers to reliance on traditional values, customs, or wealth to define oneself. In contrast, Zhuang Zi's conception of the false self mainly refers to the self which is shaped by the purposeful pursuit of external goods, which include traditional values, fame, wealth, and so on. For him, if we want to achieve self-transcendence, we must transcend the false self. He writes, "So the conduct of the Great man harms no one, but he places no special value on humanity and kindness. His actions are not motivated by profit, but he does not despise those who slavishly subordinate themselves to it. He does not fight over wealth, but he places no special value on yielding and refusing it....." (Zhuang 2009, p. 70). For Zhuang Zi, we should do things effortlessly in the sense that we are not motivated by any value which we judge to be good. Rather, we do things spontaneously without deliberate plans.

Second, for both Emerson and Zhuang Zi, material nature is very important. Although they interpret the importance differently, they both treat material nature as reality rather than as an illusion as Plato had envisioned. This is a very important point I would like to stress because it is the deeper reason why Emerson and Zhuang Zi pursue spirituality in nature rather than other objects which are related to persons. Emerson criticizes idealism's conception of nature. He says, "Idealism acquaints us with the total disparity between the evidence of our own being, and the evidence of the world's being. The one is perfect; the other, incapable of assurance; the mind is a part of the nature of things; the world is a divine dream, from which we may presently awake to the glories and certainties of day. Idealism is a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry" (Branch and Mohs 2017, p. 103).

For Emerson, nature is reality instead of illusion. There is no separation between God and material nature. Material nature is the incarnation and revelation of God. We can know God through knowing about material nature. Emerson thinks that we can use scientific knowledge to interpret nature, which can bring us to truth. If we make some comparisons with Socrates' pursuit of truth, we will gain a deeper understanding of the importance of treating material nature as reality. Socrates did not pay much attention to material nature, since for him, material nature could not guide him to find knowledge and truth. Knowledge and truth are gained via dialectical reasoning and contemplation of form for Socrates. Eugene C. Hargrove (Eugene C. Hargrove 1989, p. 27) discussed in detail why Plato and Socrates show contemplation towards physical nature in his *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*. His research can help us better understand why many Western scholars such as Plato and Descartes did not find spirituality in nature as Emerson and Zhuang Zi. For Zhuang Zi, material nature is treated as reality since the vital energy of which nature is made is permanent. He does not try to justify that vital energy exists, but rather takes it for granted. Although individual things will come and go, the vital energy will never disappear. It is always in a process of flow and transformation. One question may arise here: how do Emerson and Zhuang Zi prove that material nature really exists rather than it being an illusion? Emerson uses moral sentiment to justify his belief that the ultimate reality which is God exists. We can feel the power from them. Material nature is the effect of God, and so it must be reality. For Emerson, God "announces" its existence via material nature. Zhuang Zi does not use belief to prove that material nature exists. Instead, he takes it as a given reality.

Material nature in Zhuang Zi is not made up of vital energy and is always in a process of flowing. For him, we can never know what the material objects are since they are always changing. He expresses this point in the chapter of *The Great Source as Teacher*, "For our understanding can be in the right only by virtue of a relation of dependence on something,

and what it depends on is always peculiarly unfixed.” (Zhuang 2009, p. 39). For Zhuang Zi, we can never know the objective truth in material nature since it is always changing. Material nature is not the object of intellect as Emerson understands, but it is a lifeworld for human beings. It is a living place for human beings to experience the *Dao* through working on the land. For Zhuang Zi, our nature is related to working on the land to obtain food and clothes.

Third, Emerson and Zhuang use a completely different term to describe our highest spiritual state of self-transcendence. Emerson stresses the sublime while Zhuang Zi focuses on tranquility. Emerson writes, “Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever, the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment.” (Emerson 1983, p. 388). From this quote, we find that Emerson stresses the feeling of awe when we become united with God. In contrast, Zhuang Zi focuses on the feeling of tranquility. This point can be seen in the following passage, “But the vital energy is an emptiness, a waiting for the presence of beings. The Course alone is what gathers in this emptiness. And it is this emptiness that is the fasting of the mind.” (Zhuang 2009, p. 27). For Zhuang Zi, when we become united with the *Dao*, the state of our mind is empty, which is accompanied by tranquility.

4. Place: Wilderness versus Agricultural Land

Wilderness and agricultural land are two types of physical landscapes, and their continuance of existence to a large degree depends on conservation, which is deeply influenced by policies and laws. Behind the conservation policies and laws, valuing these landscapes as places plays an important role. In this paper, I will not discuss conservation issues related to wilderness or agricultural land. I will focus on how wilderness and agricultural land are valued as places by Emerson and Zhuang Zi.

Philosophers and humanistic geographers have given a lot of attention to the concept of place. The geographer Yifu Duan stresses moral and aesthetic engagement with sites and locations. Jeff Malpas wrote a book on Heidegger and the Thinking of Place. He points out that the idea of place is the key to understanding human beings. Human beings live in a place, and it is a given reality that shapes who we are (Malpas 2012, pp. 3–4). Paul B. Thompson, in his book on agrarian culture and environmental ethics, also discusses the concept of place. He writes, “Place is thus dependent on the cognitive processes of subjects. Place exists only in the mind, in the experiences and practices of perceiving or discoursing subjects. It is the secondhand copy of actual spatial locations mediated by cognitive or linguistic processes.” (Paul B. Thompson 2010, p. 132) For Thompson, place is different from physical space as place has been re-created via our cognitive or linguistic processes. Although different scholars take a different approach to the study of place, they share a similar view on the interpretation of place: (1) Places are not the physical locations but are deeply interconnected with people’s aesthetic appreciation of place. (2) The concept of place contains the embodied experience of human beings. Before I talk about place, I must introduce the two important landscapes, which are wilderness and agricultural land, from the perspective of environmental history. Then, I will discuss their aesthetic appreciation of wilderness and agricultural land from two perspectives of place.

4.1. Landscapes: Wilderness and Agricultural Land

Wilderness and agricultural land are different landscapes of material nature. Wilderness is more aesthetically valued and conserved in America than in China. There is a deeper historical reason for it.

Nash’s book titled *Wilderness and the American mind* (Roderick Frazier Nash 2001) can give us a very comprehensive understanding of the concept of wilderness. He points out that wilderness is a cultural concept that is unique to American culture. Wilderness at first is not treated as a place, which is a combination of aesthetics and ethical concerns about it. People’s understanding of wilderness is deeply influenced by Christianity and Locke’s the-

ory of private property. Negative appreciation of wilderness is also influenced by the hardships that Americans experienced when first settling into the frontier. However, American transcendentalists, especially Emerson and Thoreau, transformed people's understanding and appreciation of wilderness. The 1964 American wilderness law is partly due to their contribution. The concept of wilderness has become a key concept in the conservation field. "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Wilderness is listed as category 1b of protected areas. IUCN defines a protected area as "a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values" and wilderness areas as "Usually large unmodified or slightly modified areas, retaining their natural character and influence, without permanent or significant human habitation, protected and managed to preserve their natural condition." Emerson, in his work, does not provide any definition of wilderness; however, his transcendentalism promotes wilderness appreciations, which would eventually lead to its conservation.

In Chinese culture, the concept of wilderness has a very negative meaning. It is made up of two Chinese characters, *huang* and *ye*. According to the very old Chinese dictionary called *Shuo wen Jie Zi*, *huang* means the deserted land which is full of grass and *ye* means that it is outside the city. The Chinese expression for the landscapes of material nature includes mountains and waters, rivers, oceans, and agricultural land. However, in American culture, mountains, waters, rivers, and oceans, as long as they are less influenced by human civilization, will all belong to the wilderness. In China, wilderness mainly refers to deserted agricultural land. Since China is characterized by thousands of years of agrarian civilization, the agricultural lifestyle to a large degree shapes people's everyday aesthetics including aesthetic appreciation of four seasons, directions, and food. Professor Liu Chengji's (Chengji Liu 2018, pp. 109–17) article titled "Tian Xia (All things under Heavens)" gives an insightful remark on the importance of agriculture in Chinese nature aesthetics. For him, Chinese civilization originated from the Yellow River, where the agricultural lifestyle is easily carried out. From that place, an aesthetic appreciation of nature based on agricultural practice started to develop. The reason why Zhuang Zi treats plowing on agricultural land as an inborn human nature is deeply influenced by agrarian civilization in China. Wilderness has mostly been historically devalued in China by mainstream culture that is shaped by agrarian civilization. However, in the past ten years, some scholars in the field of landscape research started to pay attention to the concept of wilderness since China is conducting a giant project to create more national parks in China. Many places will be conserved via a system of national parks. Scholars such as Yang Rui and Cao Ye first raised the conception of wilderness in Chinese culture from the perspective of landscapes and conservation. They wrote an article to advocate that we should try to use the construction of national parks to preserve the vast wilderness areas which appear mostly in the western part of China. From a cultural perspective, wilderness itself is not aesthetically appreciated and valued by Chinese Confucianism and Daoism, so it will be very difficult for the general public to participate in the conservation of wilderness. In terms of the agricultural land, it also meets a lot of challenges. Since more people are moving into the cities, and there is a lot of agricultural land which is deserted and which wilderness has taken over. There is a new landscape which is a combination of agricultural land and wilderness. Should we conserve the agricultural land where there is a rich agrarian legacy, or the new wilderness? I will not try to answer this question in this paper since it requires knowledge from various disciplines. I only try to focus on why the agricultural land is treated as place.

4.2. Aesthetic Appreciation: Living in Harmony with Wilderness versus Living in Harmony with Agriculture

Both Emerson and Zhuang Zi express aesthetic appreciation for nature. The object of aesthetic appreciation lies in harmony. Emerson stresses the harmony between soul and matter in wilderness while Zhuang Zi stresses living in harmony with agriculture. Emerson appreciates wilderness more than he appreciates agricultural land. His interpretation of nature has greatly influenced American landscape artists' aesthetic appreciation of wilderness. Nicholas Guardiano's research ([Guardiano 2016](#)) can provide us with deeper insights. In contrast, Zhuang Zi's aesthetic appreciation of nature focuses more on agricultural land. In this part, I will explain why they focus on different forms of landscape.

Emerson appreciates material nature. In terms of material nature, there are different types of them which include cultivated land, such as gardens and agricultural lands, and pristine nature, such as wilderness. Emerson's understanding of material nature includes all of the above forms of nature. He thinks that all types of nature are beautiful. However, the beauty of wilderness is ranked first in beauty, and cultivated nature as a form of art is ranked second. He states that "Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result." ([Emerson 1971–2013](#), 1:8). For Emerson, art refers to human beings' will to blend with original nature. However, they are a copy of the original nature, which is more beautiful. From this, we can find that many forms of cultivated nature which include houses, canals, or statues are still based on nature. They are beautiful only on a secondary level. He writes, "In the wilderness, I find something more clear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature." ([Emerson 1983](#), p. 10). "Nature kills egotism, and conceit; deals strictly with us; and gives sanity; so that it was the practice of the Orientals, especially of the Persians, to let insane persons wander at their own will out of the towns, into the desert, and, if they liked, to associate with wild animals. In their belief, wild beasts, especially gazelles, collect around an insane person, and live with him on a friendly footing. The patient found something curative in that intercourse, by which he was quieted, and sometimes restored." ([Branch and Mohs 2017](#), p. 202).

In contrast, Zhuang Zi's aesthetic appreciation of nature focuses not on harmony within material nature itself; rather, he focuses on the harmonious relationship between nature and human beings in agricultural land. In terms of harmony, I would like to explain it from three aspects. (1) It is the relationship between human beings and nature in life practices; (2) human beings follow nature in the sense that we do not use technologies to conquer nature, but rather carry out our inborn nature in everyday agricultural life practices. For Zhuang Zi, wilderness or agricultural land itself is not the object of aesthetic appreciation. If they do not form a relationship with human beings in everyday life, people tend to ignore them. For Zhuang Zi, if we follow the Dao's way, which is spontaneity, we will live in harmony with nature. "For the people too have their own constant inborn nature. To be clothed by their own weaving, fed by their own plowing-this is what is called their shared Virtuosity.... Thus, in the age of perfect Virtuosity their actions were solid and full but their gaze was distant and blank. For in those days, there were no paths or trails through the mountains, no boats or bridges over the ponds; all creatures lived together, merging their territory into one another. The birds and beasts clustered with each other, the grasses and trees grew unhampered. So one could tie a cord to a bird or beast and take a stroll with it or bend down a branch to peep into a bird's nest. Indeed, in those days of perfect virtuosity, the people lived together with the birds and beasts, bunched together with all things." ([Zhuang 2009](#), p. 61). From this passage, we can find that Zhuang Zi treats agricultural land as a place for people to carry out their inborn nature, which is to work on farmland to make a living. They will not use technology to improve the efficiency of working but use primitive ways to work on the farm. Wilderness is also part of the living

place. Therefore, people usually will not explore wilderness for their own sake if it is not related to everyday life.

4.3. Bodily Experience in Place: Global versus Local

Emerson and Zhuang Zi both stress bodily experience in place. Emerson stresses the direct experience of wilderness while Zhuang Zi stresses living practices in nature such as working on the land to obtain food and clothing materials. The big difference is that for Emerson, we should not attach ourselves to the wilderness in a particular area; rather, all kinds of wilderness are the same. To him, “all places are alike” for in all appear that law and order which certify him of co-nature with his own constitution more than do the lineaments which resemble his own, which he sees in his own house. Having found his home in that which affirms itself to the cause of all, all his knowledge and moral growth go to domesticate him in every fact and event that transpires in nature. All places are alike to him for that which is with him constitutes place. He is, himself, place, and whatever is not with him in spirit is abroad and vagabond (Urbas 2021, p. 89). For Emerson, he will not attach to a certain place, although he has bodily experience in it such as walking and working. His strong love is not the material place, but rather it is the spiritual laws. His love for the wilderness is founded on his love for the spiritual laws. That is the reason why his sense of place is global. No matter where he goes, he is the home in the sense that he is deeply attached to the laws which reside in God. In contrast, Zhuang Zi stresses working on the land to maintain livelihood and it is also the ideal way of life. When people live in a certain place, their nature is intertwined with the place. When working on agricultural land, Zhuang Zi strongly objects to using technology to improve the efficiency; rather, he sticks to the traditional way of farming since we can experience Dao in this natural way instead of using deliberative minds to improve the efficiency of farming. For Zhuang Zi, working on land is not only to maintain our livelihood, but also the art of life.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we can find the deeper reasons why Emerson and Zhuang Zi both pursue self-transcendence towards nature rather than human beings. The keys lie in their different metaphysical interpretations of the concept of nature. Nature, in their works, is deeply related to the ultimate values of truth, good, and beauty. It is with these values that self-transcendence towards nature becomes possible. Their pursuit of spirituality in nature has a direct influence on their aesthetic appreciation of the material kinds of nature, which is the key to treating the different kinds of material nature as places. Blended with historical reasons, wilderness, as one type of landscape within material nature, is aesthetically appreciated and loved so it no longer exists as material nature but as a place. In contrast, agricultural land in Chinese culture is treated not only as a material thing that maintains our lives, but also as a place that is aesthetically appreciated and loved.

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