

## Article

# Beauty and Dao: The Transcendental Expressions of Nature from Emerson's Prose and the *Zhuangzi*

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**Abstract:** As an aesthetic resource in ancient China, the *Zhuangzi*'s description of Dao is similar to the American philosopher Emerson's experience of beauty, and both reveal that the essence of beauty lies in its inherent vitality, spiritual transcendence, and the unity of multidimensional connotations. Emerson defines beauty as the constitution of all things in the world and believes it to be an expression of the universe. The *Zhuangzi* proposes the thought of tiandi damei 天地大美 (lit. Great Beauty of heaven and earth) as a manifestation of the function of the wordless Dao. Nature, intact from any human interference, becomes the common intermediary for Emerson and the *Zhuangzi* to elaborate on the connotations of beauty. The Emersonian definition of beauty originates from the philosophical implication of the world in ancient Greek, whereas the meaning of Great Beauty in the *Zhuangzi*, which embodies the worship of heaven in primitive religion, is very close to Emerson's definition of beauty. The pattern of mei 美 consisting of da 大 (lit. great, equivalent to Dao) and yang 羊 (lit. auspice) signifies the natural celestial phenomena predicting good or bad luck and can be seen as synonymous with Dao illuminated by Daoism. By describing such natural imagery as forest, time sequence, dawn, and wilderness, Emerson reveals the vastness, harmony, brightness, and tranquility of beauty, which not only delights the spirit but also brings the human soul back to its natural state and improves personality. Emerson's illumination of beauty conforms to those of Dao unraveled by the *Zhuangzi*. Despite the difference between the former's poetic linguistic feature and the latter's application of allegorical fables, both resort to visualized language to express internal aesthetic perceptions of the physical nature. Using the approaches of word tracing, textual comparison, and logical analysis, this article identifies the consistency in the original meanings of beauty in both Emerson's essays and the *Zhuangzi* first and then goes on to analyze the similarities between their descriptions of natural imagery, so as to hint at the commonality in their understanding of natural beauty and verify the significance of literary language in cross-cultural comparative research.

**Keywords:** beauty and Dao; *Zhuangzi*; Emerson; original meaning of words; imagery expression; perception of nature; thoughts interweaving; poetic language; essence of beauty



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## 1. Introduction

All beauty lies in perception and imagination (see Bernard Bosanquet 1985). Using natural scenery and phenomena as objects of observation to express the fleeting transcendent experience of the soul when facing nature is called natural aesthetics. On the platform of cross-cultural comparison, the classic works of Chinese Daoism and the essays of the American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson are objects of comparison that should never be ignored, thanks to their common focus on natural aesthetics.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), the American nineteenth-century thinker, writer and poet, stands in awe of nature, whose attitude is quite different from the Western scientific approach to transform and conquer nature. In 1836, his “little azure-coloured *Nature*” (Emerson 1983, p. 1128) was published, followed by his address *the Method of Nature*, and his essay *Nature*. Sailing home from Europe in 1833, he wrote the following words: “I

like my book about nature & wish I knew where & how I ought to live.” (Emerson 1983, p. 1127). From Emerson’s perspective, nature abounds in sacred enlightenment; therefore, human beings should communicate with nature face to face. Such an attitude to adore and respect nature is much in tune with the Chinese Daoist thoughts to advocate nature<sup>1</sup>.

The *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi*<sup>2</sup> 庄子 are the representative Chinese Daoist classics. The *Laozi* proposes that “man follows the earth, earth follows the heaven, and heaven follows Dao 道, Dao should take its models from the nature<sup>3</sup> (*ziran* 自然 see The *Laozi*, Chapter 25)”, while the *Zhuangzi* visualizes that a carefree person “could ride into the orbit of heaven and earth, and harness the changes of the six Qi<sup>4</sup> 气 to roam in the infinite without any obstacles” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 9). In this sentence, heaven and earth and the six Qi are synonymous with nature. The verb “ride” means that the person entering the carefree realm has completely integrated with the nature being ridden. Nature, as a core Daoist category, is both a description and the representative outcome or intermediary of the functioning and transforming Dao of “purposeless behavior” (*wuwei* 无为). It is the Dao of nature elaborated on repeatedly by the Daoist school.

Since the late 1980s, the affinity of thoughts between Chinese Daoism and Emerson has drawn the attention of scholars from China and abroad. However, most of the current research focuses on the comparison between Emerson and the *Laozi* 老子, for example, the relationship between Emerson’s Transcendentalism and Daoist philosophy, the similarities and differences between Dao and the Oversoul, with just a few papers touching on a philosophical exploration of their views on nature, aesthetics, and ecology (Yang and Yang 2014). There are scarce papers that conducted research by connecting the *Zhuangzi* with Emerson, and they mainly illuminate such issues as the pursuit of life (Wang 2009; Wang 2023), ecological ethics (Li 2014), the state of solitude (Coles 2023), imagery differentiation (Bai 2021), and the concept of nature (Jia 2022). What is indicated from these results is that scholars seem to have formed a clear consensus, i.e., Emerson was influenced by Laozi (Yang and Yang 2014), either absorbing Laozi’s views or expanding Laozi’s theory<sup>5</sup>. Emerson indeed expressed a certain degree of recognition of the oriental culture in 1844 when his meditations about nature were published, but he only mentioned Confucianism without referring to Daoism<sup>6</sup>. However, some scholars, such as Matthew Crippen, believe that Emerson may have read the French version of *Daodejing* 道德经 (see Crippen 2023). Therefore, it still must be further testified as to whether Emerson obtained access to the Chinese Daoist classics in his lifetime.

The 5000-character *Daodejing*, which “extends from cosmology to life, and from life to politics” (Chen 1992), uses short aphorisms to construct a theory of Dao with the aim of “governing the world” (Sima 1982, p. 3292) and is called by a historian of the Han Dynasty “the king’s strategy to rule the country by sitting on the throne of the emperor, facing the south and giving orders to the ministers” (*junren nanmian zhishu* 君人南面之术)<sup>7</sup>. Despite Emerson’s concerns about politics, he is more inclined toward spiritual experience in his essays on nature. The *Zhuangzi*, also a classic of Daoism, takes the elucidation of Laozi’s Dao as the starting point (Sima 1982, p. 2143), elevates the human spirit from the real world to a high artistic level, and is closer to Emerson’s idea of the “Oversoul”. Even in the choice of expression, they seem to coincide. In Emerson’s poetic prose work *Nature*, “Beauty” is the title of the third chapter, while in “Knowinghood Journeyed North” (*zhibeiyou* 知北游) of the *Zhuangzi*, “the great beauty of heaven and earth” (*tiandi damei* 天地大美) is put forth. In *Wanderings on the Dao and Zen* (*manshu zhuangchan* 漫述庄禅), the aesthetician Li Zehou 李泽厚 asserts: “the thinking of the *Zhuangzi* is oriented toward aesthetics” (see Li 1985).

The beauty of nature is the focal point of both Emerson’s philosophical contemplation and the *Zhuangzi*’s wisdom, thereby becoming the entry point for conducting research on the commonalities of both cultures. This article is firstly aimed at revealing similar directions in the original connotations of both Emerson’s beauty and the Chinese character *mei* (美 lit. beauty), so as to dig out the etymological foundations of such a phenomenon of spiritual commonality using the approaches of tracing and discriminating words’ meanings. The third part of this article goes into the depth of the text and seeks out similar descrip-

tions of the experience of nature in both classics, thereby summarizing their commonalities in the perceptions of nature. The fourth part rises to a theoretical level to elaborate on the closeness of the aesthetic concepts in both texts.

## 2. The Common Starting Point for Discussion: The Original Meaning of Beauty

In the Introduction of *Nature*, Emerson asks “why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (Emerson 1983, p. 7). This principle also runs through his choice of terminology to illuminate his thoughts. He divides the composition of the world into four categories: commodity, beauty, language, and discipline. Beauty, as the expression of a “useless thing” opposite to a commodity, or a “useful thing”, has multiple meanings in English. To clarify whether the meaning of beauty in Emerson’s thoughts is the same as that of the “Great Beauty” (*damei* 大美) in the *Zhuangzi*, it is necessary to trace the original meaning of this word in both Emerson’s works and the Chinese language.

### 2.1. The “Constitution of World” and the Meaning of Beauty in Emerson’s “Nature”

At the beginning of the third chapter of *Nature*, Emerson wrote: “The ancient Greeks called the world κόσμος, beauty. Such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye” (Emerson 1983, p. 14). In Emerson’s view, “beauty” is related to the essence of the world, on the one hand, and human sensory experience on the other hand. The relationship between the Greek “κόσμος” and the English “beauty” is not the correspondence of linguistic meaning, but it is the ideological connection in the understanding of “world ontology”. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (circa 544B.C.–483B.C.) once explained: “The real world exists in the balance adjustment of the tendency of confrontation. Behind the hostile struggle, there is harmony or coordination according to various scales. This is the world” (Russell 1992). For the ancient Greeks, the constant aggression among various forms of material is due to a lack of balance and is attributed to the category of “injustice”. Therefore, it becomes a universal mission for them to find stable order from a chaotic or accidental series of things, which serves as the very starting point of ancient Greek philosophy and science. Harmony or coordination within the opposed forces is the constitution of all things from which the world is born and to which it ultimately belongs. Emerson’s “beauty” is exactly this universal principle of the unity of opposites. He said: “beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe”, while “philosophically considered, the universe is composed of nature and soul” (Emerson 1983, pp. 8, 19). The so-called “plastic power of human eye” is the discovery of the existence and exhibition of beauty, which is inseparable from the participation of human spirit and wisdom. In the third chapter of *Nature*, Emerson defines the features of beauty in three levels from low to high: “First, the simple perception of natural forms is a delight”. “Second, the presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection”. “Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue”. Third, beauty “becomes an object of the intellect”. It works through the involvement of human will (Emerson 1983, pp. 14–19). That is to say, in the procedure of appreciating nature, the human spirit undergoes a gradual elevation from a simple feeling of pleasure to the highest domain of beauty where mind integrates with natural beauty and presents beauty without any thinking activity. This is what Emerson calls “artistic creation”, corresponding to “obtaining Dao” (*dedao* 得道) in the *Zhuangzi*.

### 2.2. The Religious Connotation of “Beauty” as a Celestial Phenomenon

Because of the pictographic origins of Chinese characters, the initial meaning of a character is often determined by its pattern. Therefore, to explore the original meaning of *mei* 美, we trace it back to the dictionary *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* 说文解字, which explains characters based on their patterns, written by Xu Shen 许慎 (circa 58/30AC.–circa 147/121AC.), who was known as the “word-saint” in the Eastern Han Dynasty. *Mei* 美 is assigned to the “yang-bu” 羊部<sup>8</sup> (羊 lit. ram) of Volume IV: “‘Mei’ means ‘gan’ 甘 (lit. delicious), consisting of ‘yang’ 羊 and ‘da’ 大 (lit. great). Ram belongs to one of the six kinds of livestock that

provide food. The meaning of *mei* is the same with that of ‘shan’ 善 (lit. good)” (Xu 1963, p. 78). Xu Shen’s explanation of *mei* 美 as being delicious is not yet universally accepted by modern people. Some paleographers dismiss the seal characters (*zhuantu* 篆体) that Xu Shen based his studies on as having deviated from their original patterns, thereby turning to the oracle bone inscription of *mei* and explaining it as “a great personage (*daren* 大人) or dancer with a feather-decorated headwear” (Kang 1979; Li 2005). The “great personage” is interpreted by Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Liu Gangji 刘纲纪 from the culturology perspective as “the authoritative wizard or chieftain in charge of all the witchcraft activities in the primitive society” (Li and Liu 1984). This is actually a materialist interpretation of *mei*’s original meaning from a physical point of view. The witchard (*wu* 巫), in essence, serves as the intermediary between the deity and humanity and can therefore be seen as the incarnation of the deity in the mundane world, whose image fundamentally symbolizes the imagery of the deity. Xu Shen’s annotation obviously bears the ambiguous color of ancient Chinese thinking, which is far from a scientific conceptual definition. But he provided three approaches to understanding “*mei*” 美: first, “*mei*” 美 is related to “*gan*” 甘; second, “*yang*” 羊 and “*da*” 大 are the constituents of “*mei*” 美; and third, “*mei*” 美 and “*shan*” 善 are synonymous. All these indicate that the meanings of the five characters “*mei*” 美, “*gan*” 甘, “*yang*” 羊, “*da*” 大, and “*shan*” 善 are related to each other in a certain way.

The “*gan-bu*” 甘部 (甘 lit. delicious) of Volume V in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* states that “‘*gan*’ 甘, means ‘*mei*’ 美. Its pattern looks like having ‘*yi*’ 一 (lit. ‘one’) in the ‘*kou*’ 口 (lit. mouth), while ‘*yi*’ 一 means Dao 道. The meanings of all words with the ‘*gan-bu*’ 甘部 are related to meaning of ‘*gan*’ 甘” (Xu 1963, p. 100). Xu Shen believes that “*mei*” 美 and “*gan*” 甘 are synonymous. The “*yi*” 一 in the “*kou*” 口, represented by the pattern of “*gan*” 甘, is a symbol of Dao 道. Xu Shen describes Dao 道, an important concept of Daoism, in his own words: “At the beginning of time and space, the Dao stood in Oneness, created and divided the heaven and the earth, then transformed into all things” (Xu 1963, p. 7). Xu Shen’s explanation of “*mei*” 美 borrows certain ideas from Daoism, i.e., anything bearing Dao 道 has the attribute of “*gan*” 甘 or “*mei*” 美. The invisible and traceless Dao 道 can only be tasted or experienced by individuals themselves, which thus suggests that “*mei*” 美 possesses psychological attributes. However, people rely on their common sense and regard what is in the mouth as edibles that can stimulate the palate, thus causing the meaning of “*mei*” 美 to deviate from the track of Dao 道 and embark on the road of “taste”. The meaning of “*mei*” as a delicacy belongs to the sensory dimension, which coincides with Emerson’s so-called “simple delight”.

The lower part of the Chinese character “*mei*” 美 is “*da*” 大 (lit. “great”). The explanation of “*da-bu*” 大部 in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* is: “The heaven is great (*da* 大), the earth is great (*da* 大), and the human is also great (*da* 大). The pattern of character ‘*da*’ 大 is like a human being whose limbs are all stretched out” (Xu 1963, p. 213). Xu Shen’s comment on “*da*” 大 comes from the *Laozi*. In Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* 道德经 (i.e., *Laozi*), edited by Fu Yi 傅奕 (555?–639) of the Tang Dynasty, it is said that: “There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. ... I do not know its infant name and I give it the designation of the Dao. Making a further effort to give it an adult name I would call it The Great. ... Therefore the Dao is great; Heaven is great; Earth is great; and the human too is great.” In some versions, “human” is converted into a “king” (Liu 2006, pp. 311–12). Both “*da*” 大 and Dao 道 refer to the same entity, i.e., the creator of all things, overlapping with what “*yi*” 一 is directed at.

The upper part of the Chinese character “*mei*” 美 is “*yang*” 羊 (lit. “ram”). The *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* interpretation is that “*yang* means auspice (*xiang* 祥). Its pattern ‘𦍋’, looks like an animal with horns on its head and feet like a tail. Confucius said: ‘The character patterns of both ‘*niu*’ 牛 (lit. cattle) and ‘*yang*’ 羊 (lit. ram) are the respective imitations of the shape of the animals. The meaning of all Chinese characters containing the component of ‘*yang*’ 羊 is related to its meaning” (Xu 1963, p. 78). The oracle bone inscription “*yang*” 羊 is considered to be “the delineation of the ram’s face” (Yu 1999). The pictographic character “*yang*” 羊 originally meant auspice (*xiang* 祥). The left half of “*xiang*” 祥, i.e., “𠂔”,



is a variant of the Chinese character “shi” 示 (lit. Earth God), while “shi” 示 is “to show good or bad omens to people” (Xu 1963, p. 7). In this respect, “yang” 羊 has implications in relation to the natural “way of heaven” (*tiandao* 天道). However, Xu Shen also mentions “yang” 羊 elsewhere as one of the six kinds of livestock that provide food, so as to orient “yang” 羊 toward the direction of meaning taste. As a result, “yang” 羊 seems to have two layers of meaning, whose inner connection is difficult to sort out. An attempt to explain the inner connection finds the answer in the ancient Chinese ideology of “the way of heaven” (*tiandao* 天道), i.e., good or bad omens result from the mutual movement of two categories of Qi 气 between heaven and earth. There are sufficient statements on this issue in the *Zhuangzi*, e.g., “Knowinghood Journeyed North” (*zhibeiyou* 知北游) states that: “Everything in the world is attributed to the same ‘qi’ 气” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 422); in “Zeyang” 则阳, it is written: “‘Yin’ 阴 and ‘Yang’ 阳 are the greatest ‘Qi’ 气. ... Yin 阴 and Yang 阳 shine on each other, cover each other and regulate each other. The four seasons replace each other, give birth to each other and destroy each other ... Safety and danger replace each other, disaster and happiness depend on each other” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 515); “Wandering Far and Unfettered” (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥游) describes a bird named Peng 鹏 that “climbs ninety thousand miles in a spiraling ascent that twists like a ram’s horn” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 7). Peng 鹏 climbs ninety thousand miles by taking advantage of the extremely positive atmosphere (*yangqi* 阳气) in June of the Chinese lunar calendar, while “a spiraling ascent that twists like a ram’s horn” is a depiction of the image of the air intertwining and rising upward, circling intensely (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 7). As a scholar of the Confucianist classics in the Eastern Han Dynasty, Xu Shen compiled *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* for the purpose of interpreting the Confucianist classics “that should be applied to the practice of social government” (*jingshizhiyong* 经世致用). Considering this context, his explanation of the meanings of “yang” 羊 and “mei” 美 obviously follow double paths: a metaphysical path and a physical path. The interpretation of “mei” 美 as the natural way of heaven conforms with ancient Chinese ideology, whereas the association between “mei” 美 and the delicacy of mutton corresponds with the practices of the mundane ritual regulations. What is more, such an interpretation of “mei” 美 that resorts to intangible taste is undoubtedly closer to the essence of “mei” 美 than turning to a visible entity, while the metaphysical sense of “mei” 美 as good or bad omens cannot work without the involvement of human consciousness.

As for “shan” 善 (lit. good), as a token of virtue, it is also related to Dao 道. In “The Great Master” (*dazongshi* 大宗师), it is put in this way: “The huge block of earth bears my physical form, labors me with life, eases me with old age, rests me with death. Thus to make my life is something good and to make my death is also something good.” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 153). This statement tries to reveal that both naissance and the death of life are representatives of the goodness of the great Dao 道. The ancients predict good or bad luck so as to avoid bad luck. Therefore, it is always good to be told in advance, no matter whether the omen is good or bad. The dual connotations of good and evil in *xiang* 祥 overlap with those of “shan” 善 (Xu 1963, p. 7). The three characters “shan” 善, “mei” 美, “xiang” 祥 have in common the “yang” 羊 component symbolizing “celestial phenomena” (*tianxiang* 天象), thereby sharing the connotations of both beauty and goodness. In this respect, “mei” 美 entails the implications of virtue.

### 2.3. The Unity of Beauty and Dao

Emerson’s philosophical concept of “beauty” has its corresponding designations in the *Zhuangzi*, i.e., “the great beauty” (*damei* 大美, see *zhibeiyou* 知北游), “the ultimate beauty” (*zhimei* 至美, see *tianzifang* 田子方), or “the beauty of heaven and earth” (*tiandi zhimei* 天地之美, see *tianxia* 天下), all of which are directly related to the core category of Dao 道. Liu Shaojin 刘绍谨 makes the following comment in *Zhuangzi and Chinese Aesthetics*: “The aesthetic significance of the *Zhuangzi* does not lie in its theoretical summations focusing on beauty and art as targets, but in the fact that when it comes to elaborations on Dao 道, its experience and realm of Dao just coincide with the aesthetic experience and realm of

art" (see Liu 2007, preface). Dao 道 and mei 美 with their intrinsic attributes, can only be perceived and understood by the human mind, which is what Emerson expresses as "the plastic power of the human eye" (Emerson 1983, p. 7). The great beauty of heaven and earth, i.e., the beauty of the functioning and transforming of way of heaven and earth, is exactly the original implication of mei 美.

The formulation of "great beauty" (*damei* 大美) can be found in the fable of Zhi 知 (lit. knowinghood) inquiring about Dao 道 in "Knowinghood Journeyed North" (*zhibeiyou* 知北游). The Dao seeker Zhi 知 asks Wu Wei 无为, who lives by the dark water, Kuang Qu 狂屈, who lives by the white water, and the Yellow Emperor 黄帝, who lives in the legendary imperial palace, about the techniques of knowing Dao, settling in Dao, and obtaining Dao. Wu Wei 无为 does not know how to express it; Kuang Qu 狂屈 wants to speak but stops; and the Yellow Emperor talks a lot, but in the end, he believes that the silent Wu Wei 无为 and Kuang Qu 狂屈 are masters of Dao. After hearing the words of the Yellow Emperor, Kuang Qu 狂屈 praises the Yellow Emperor for his true understanding of Dao. In this story, the three people who are asked about Dao together complete the description of Dao's attributes in an indirect way. Using a reverse narrative paradigm, the fable conveys a philosophical notion that the essence of Dao lies in purposeless behavior (*wuwei* 无为). This paradox of "not doing but being able to achieve" is similar to the eternal changes in nature and also similar to Emerson's "the constitution of the world", which the *Zhuangzi* calls "Great Beauty". Therefore, the following text then goes further to explain that "there is great beauty in heaven and earth without expressing, there is the clear rule in four seasons without discussing, and there is the reason in all things without saying. The sage traces back to the beauty of heaven and earth and thereby reaches the truth of all things. Thus it is that the Ultimate Person (*zhiren* 至人) does not take purposeful actions, the Great Sage (*dasheng* 大圣) does not plan things: that is to say, they merely cast their gaze over heaven and earth" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 422). The so-called "gaze over heaven and earth" is to observe the functioning and transforming state of the way of heaven and earth, similar to what Emerson said about "the plastic power of human eye" (Emerson 1983, p. 14), so as to understand the rules of change in all existence and yet conform to it. In the dialogue, Wu Wei 无为 does not answer in order to adhere to the truth of Dao, conforming to how the "Ultimate Man" (*zhiren* 至人) comports himself; Kuang Qu 狂屈, knowing and without answering, does not deviate from the track of Dao and can be regarded as the "Heaven-Man" (*tianren* 天人); and the Yellow Emperor, who answers but immediately denies what he has said, is shrewd in changing because not answering does not conform to secular principles, and is therefore the "sage" (*shengren* 圣人). The great beauty of heaven and earth is the natural rules of the universe, whose intrinsic essence is manifested as the circling alternation of four seasons and the transforming principle of the life and death of all things in the world. The realm, reached by the "Ultimate Man" and the "Great Sage" who have obtained access to Dao, similar to what Emerson said about "Genius", is a transcendence over the Emersonian useful sphere of "Commodity" and an achievement of the spiritual experience of useless "Beauty". This kind of experience is described in the *Zhuangzi* as "supreme beauty and happiness", which finds a similar expression of "enchantment" in Emerson's work. This layer of sense of mei 美 originates from its original meaning and echoes Emerson's delineation of beauty.

### 3. The Similar Selection of Natural Aesthetic Imagery

Since beauty is an expression of the universe, nature, as an important part of the universe, has become the same writing object in the *Zhuangzi* School and Emerson. The *Zhuangzi* explains the inner ideas of the beauty of heaven and earth using fables; Emerson's *Nature* uses poetic descriptions of nature to express the soul's narrative about beauty. Despite the distinctions in language and the expressive approach, the ideological essence revealed between the lines shows amazing similarities. Next, we will try to differentiate and analyze several natural images that are involved in both the *Zhuangzi*'s and Emerson's *Nature*.

### 3.1. The Spiritual Awakening Facing the Vast Beauty of Forests and Seas

Emerson said, in the first chapter of his book *Nature*, “In the woods, we return to reason and faith ..... I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.” (Emerson 1983, p. 10). The “uncontained and immortal beauty” is his inspiration from the natural jungle. In the chapter “Beauty”, Emerson made a further confession: “Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness.” (Emerson 1983, p. 17). It can be seen that the “faith” he has regained is the admiration of the “great immortal” beauty, that is, the laws of the universe; the “reason” he has retrieved is the ideas “as grand and open as heaven and earth”. Emerson deeply realized that “nature is a sea of forms radically alike and even unique. A leaf, a sun-beam, a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind. What is common to them all,—that perfectness and harmony, is beauty. The standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms,—the totality of nature.” (Emerson 1983, p. 18). Here, the sea is a metaphor. Its vastness and permanence symbolize the immensity and immortality of nature; its inclusiveness of absorbing all rivers signifies the beauty of “perfection and harmony” in various natural forms such as leaves, sunshine, scenery, etc. When people are integrated into nature, it seems as if their spirit and thoughts are enlarged to the breadth and profundity of the universe.

A similar experience of the beauty of vastness also appears in the fable of the *Zhuangzi*. The chapter “Autumn Waters” (*qiushui* 秋水) states:

The autumn floods arrived on time, and numerous rivers were pouring into the Yellow River. The expanse of its unobstructed flow was so great that a horse on the other bank could not be distinguished from a cow. The River God Hebo 河伯 was overjoyed, delighting in his own powers, believing all the world’s beauty now to be encompassed within himself. Flowing eastward, he arrived at the Northern Sea. Casting his gaze toward the east, he saw no end to the waters. It was then that he began to turn his face around, swirling into the vast and boundless sea, and sighed to the sea god Ruo (*beihairuo* 北海若): “There is a saying in the outlands: ‘He who hears the Dao a mere hundred times believes no one can compare with him.’ This describes me perfectly. When I first heard that there are those who belittle the erudition of Confucius and the righteousness of Boyi 伯夷, I didn’t believe it. But now I have seen your vastness with my own eyes. If I had never come here to your gate, I might have become a laughingstock to the masters of well-versed Dao (*dafang* 大方)! (Guo and Cheng 1998, pp. 328–29)

In this story, the River God, the incarnation of the Yellow River, has absorbed the water of many rivers in the Yellow River basin in the rainy season, so that the water level rises sharply, the flow is full, and there is a vast expanse of water between the banks. Looking from afar across the water, the islands are remote, and the horses and cows are indistinguishable. At this moment, the River God becomes complacent, thinking himself to be embracing “all the world’s beauty”. However, when he continues to travel eastward into the Northern Sea and witnesses the boundless and magnificent sea, all of a sudden he becomes enlightened, realizing his own insignificance, and is deeply impressed by the imposing grandeur of the sea. The River God’s psychological state of “seeing the ocean and then sighing” is the same as how Emerson feels when facing the swaying branches in the storm: “The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.” (Emerson 1983, p. 11). This sense of sublimity is attributed to the power of the storm and also the conveyance of the beauty of nature. In “Autumn Waters” (*qiushui* 秋水) of the *Zhuangzi*, the beauty of vastness of sublimity is symbolized by Ruo of the Northern Sea (*beihairuo* 北海若). Having marveled at the majesty and mystery of the Northern Sea, the River God comes to realize that because opposite concepts, such as largeness and smallness, many and few, wisdom and stupidity, beauty and ugliness, are restricted by certain space–time conditions, all things have their own limitations. So, by putting down his pride and transcending the

differentiation between “largeness and smallness”, he begins to humbly consult Ruo of the Northern Sea about the way of survival between heaven and earth, embarking on his spiritual journey toward sublimity. Similar to the River God’s experience of abandoning the differentiation between largeness and smallness, Emerson makes a similar statement in his essay collection *Nature*: “At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish.” (Emerson 1983, p. 541). This spirit of transcending mundane ideas and integrating with heaven and earth composes the tacit understanding of the two philosophers when facing nature.

### 3.2. The Praise for the Harmonious Beauty of Time Sequence and Season

The harmonious time sequence is the representation of the beauty of the universe. It is also the operating principle of Dao in the *Zhuangzi*. The elucidation of this principle in the *Zhuangzi* is often encompassed in the context of a fable and directly stated by the protagonist of the fable.

As mentioned above, in “Knowinghood Journeyed North” (*zhibeiyou* 知北游), right after the narration of Knowinghood (*zhi* 知) having journeyed north seeking Dao, appears the parallel sentence pattern of “heaven and earth containing great beauty but never saying, four seasons having clear law but not talking, and all things connoting reason but not expressing”. Its purpose is to juxtapose “four seasons’ clear law”, “all things’ reason”, and “the beauty of heaven and earth”, suggesting they are of identical implications. The “four seasons’ clear law”, namely, the natural time sequence, is one of the manifestations of beauty. The principle of the alteration of the four seasons is directly stated in summarizing sentences so that the concept of the “purposeless behavior” (*wu-wei* 无为) of Dao is illuminated. In “Gengsang Chu” 庚桑楚, as the practitioner of Laozi’s Dao of “non purposeful behavior”, GengSang Chu helps the common people of Wei Lei 畏垒 obtain an especially abundant harvest and thus wins honor as a “sage”. The local people intend to pay tribute to him with ritual prayers, only to be turned down by him. Gengsang Chu’s response is not understood by his disciple Nanrong Chu 南荣越, so he explains to his disciple that: “When the Bright and Warm Qi 阳气 of spring bursts forth, all the plants come to life. When the fruits of the earth get access to the Dark and Cold Qi of autumn, they all mature for harvest.” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 444). Gengsang Chu inspires his student with the phenological principle and shows that he has only complied with the guideline of “great beauty without speaking”, i.e., the purposeless principle of Dao. There is a dialogue between the two ancient holy kings Yao 尧 and Shun 舜 in the chapter “Heaven’s Way” (*tiandao* 天道), who discuss the way of the Heaven-King (*tianwang* 天王) to govern the world. Dissatisfied with Yao’s 尧 approach of “purposive action” (*you-wei* 有为), Shun 舜 comments: “With the intrinsic virtuosity (*de* 德) of the Heavenly, even what is put forth is tranquil and still. The sun and moon shine down and the four seasons come and go, just as day and night have their regular sequence, just as the clouds drift along and then the rain comes forth.” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 274). The operation of the sun and moon, the four seasons, the day and night, and the wind and rain, following the natural time sequence, is attributed to the functioning and transforming Dao. However, Dao is tranquil as usual as if it has done nothing, indicating that it is “great beauty” to follow the natural norms and observe the governing principle of “purposeless behavior” (*wuwei* 无为). The fable emphasizes the importance of “purposeless behavior” by first stating, then negating, and then affirming. “Heaven-King” here refers to the king proficient in Dao, the ancestor of the Chinese nationality, who, together with Yao and Shun, the Chinese esteem as the ancient saint-kings. Since saint-kings oppose human interference and advocate natural principles such as beauty, let alone ordinary people.

Compared with the approaches of “expression by an agent” and “conceptual generalization” in the *Zhuangzi*, Emerson chooses a poetic description of the landscape. But what he describes is not the scenery belonging to any specific place or time, but the colorful natural scenery from morning to night and the annual circulation of seasons from winter to autumn.



In the chapter “Beauty”, Emerson claims that nature deifies human beings “with a few and cheap elements”, while the appreciation of the daily beauty from morning to night can “make the pomp of emperors ridiculous” (Emerson 1983, p. 15). He writes about dawn, sunrise, sunset, moonrise, noon, and evening, especially the charming dusk in winter:

The western clouds divided and subdivided themselves into pink flakes modulated with tints of unspeakable softness; and the air had so much life and sweetness, that it was a pain to come within doors. ... The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for their background, and the stars of the dead calices of flowers, and every withered stem and stubble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music. (Emerson 1983, p. 15)

The scenery designated by Emerson as “the mute music” is contributed to by the coordination of the wind, cloud, light, air, blue sky, and withered plants, all of which are both the elements and the creators of the beautiful scenery. Among them, “stubble and stem” are more of a symbol of eternal beauty. These beautiful views are the effects of the orderly operation of the universe, similar to Dao’s creative and transformative effects.

During the year, it is the elegance of winter scenery that Emerson enjoys most, instead of the summer. He is convinced that the winter is just as agreeable and admirable as the summer, as long as “beauty” always plays its role and never stops. For those who never fail to keep an eye on scenery, each moment, even the same patch of field, has its unique beauty. “The heavens change every moment, and reflect their glory or gloom on the plains beneath. The state of the crop in the surrounding farms alters the expression of the earth from week to week.” (Emerson 1983, pp. 15–16). This change in appearance stems from the vitality of life, which in turn originates from the movement of the sun and the moon, a reflection of the power of beauty. Emerson asserts that the alternation of grassland and roadside wild plants represents a silent summer clock. As for the birds, insects, flowers, grass, and even aquatic creatures, although they are only embellishments of the landscape, their colorful and magnificent scenes are superior to any picture because their “magnificence” reflects the charm of “beauty”. Yet, the landscape is also constantly changing, similar to a mirage seen by accident, which implies the changeful attribute of a natural time sequence. Every fragment in a natural time series has the color of life, reflecting the power of beauty.

Emerson not only applies music and clock as metaphors to describe a time sequence, but also provides a direct statement on the natural process. Here is a passage from the chapter “Commodity”:

Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other’s hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man. (Emerson 1983, p. 12)

This is Emerson’s scientific description of “beauty”. The rule of the natural ecological cycle involves the circulation of air and water, the propagation and growth of seeds, the relationship between animals and plants, and the dependence of human beings on nature. He names it “the divine charity”, but this “profit welfare” itself is not and will never supersede the higher level of grace, i.e., beauty. He makes the following statement in “Beauty”:

The intellect searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God, and without the colors of affection. The intellectual and the active powers seem to succeed each other, and the exclusive activity of the one generates the exclusive activity of the other. There is something unfriendly in each to the other, but they are like the alternate periods of feeding and working in animals; each prepares and will be followed by the other. (Emerson 1983, p. 18)

“Beauty” is as sacred as God. Human activity is also the manifestation of the working of “beauty”. As for “intellect”, in Emerson’s view, it is inseparable from “beauty”. “In-

tellect”, “action”, and “beauty” interact and alternate to form a harmonious order of the unity of opposites. Emerson addresses that in order to comprehend the beauty of the time sequence hidden behind the transformation of natural objects: it is necessary to possess a pair of eyes that represent the soul of genius. However, in the *Zhuangzi*, the requisite is for the “zhiren” 至人 to attentively “listen” to the rhythm of nature.

Emerson conveys the implications of “beauty” using time sequence, integrating scientific elements, intuitive experience, and divine will. It is both abstract and figurative and boasts both logical thinking and divine intention. The language expression seems to be random but orderly. Its visual and intuitive features are consistent with the allegorical style of the *Zhuangzi*, while its scientific elements, e.g., terms such as sky, air, monsoon, evaporation, and irrigation, find their correspondences bearing ancient Chinese notions in the *Zhuangzi*, such as heaven (*tian* 天), Qi 气, yin 阴, and yang 阳. Above all, the two philosophers’ affirmation of the sacred time sequence tends to be consistent.

### 3.3. The Satori from the Beauty of Dawn Light

In Emerson’s experience of nature, there is a moment when he is “glad to brink of fear” (Emerson 1983, p. 10). That is the dawn. He watches the spectacle of morning from the hilltop over against his house:

... from day-break to sun-rise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations; the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How does nature deify us with a few and cheap elements! (Emerson 1983, p. 15)

At dawn, the earth receives the first light of the morning, and the world turns from dark to bright. Notwithstanding, only for a moment, this magical scene will arouse people’s infinite reverie. At this moment, people can appreciate the process of everything turning from fuzziness to clarity and can really perceive the tick-tack pace of time elapsing. Within the surroundings that seem real and illusory at the same time, people can become suddenly enlightened about the truth of the world.

It is difficult to sort out right from wrong for all the things in the world using logical debate. In the chapter “On Leveling All Things” (*qiwulun* 齐物论), the *Zhuangzi* terms this phenomenon “guyi zhiyao” 滑疑之耀, i.e., the flickering light that makes doubts even more perplexing. The *Zhuangzi* puts forth that: “if you want to affirm something that is denied and deny something that is affirmed, the best means is to be ‘Illuminated’ (*ming* 明).” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 33). The so-called “Illuminated” does not have a clear definition but can be understood with the assistance of another statement that “the sage does not take this course, but opens things up to the light of heaven”. This is the sage’s insight to solve the dispute between right and wrong, the sage who is integrated with the virtue (*de* 德 lit. the attribute of Dao being manifested in objects) of heaven and earth. There are few imagery descriptions in the *Zhuangzi* about “the light of heaven”, but Emerson’s *Nature* seems to be able to supplement this deficiency.

Emerson writes down how he feels about the dawn light in his essay collection *Nature*:

The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, and is stimulating and heroic. The anciently reported spells of these places creep on us. The stems of pines, hemlocks, and oaks, almost gleam like iron on the excited eye. The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them, and quit our life of solemn trifles. Here no history, or church, or state, ... We were led in triumph by nature. (Emerson 1983, pp. 541–42)

The “light” in the morning is the manifestation of eternal “beauty” in Emerson’s work and also the symbol of “virtue of sage” in the *Zhuangzi*. The illumination of this light seems to have magic power, and thereby, the jungle shines brilliantly. The magnificent and sacred bright scene makes people intoxicated as if they have entered a fairy forest and forgotten all

the right and wrong of the world in an instant, only walking along the way. Their spirit is attracted by the magic “Illumination”, transcending so many trivial troubles in the world. On this point, there is sympathy between Zhuangzi and Emerson.

The “Dao’s real existence and credibility” in “The Great Master” (*dazongshi* 大宗师) outlines the characteristics of Dao, i.e., it can be handed down without necessarily being taught, can be felt without being seen, and can create ghosts and gods and heaven and earth. A series of representative figures is listed, who have gained the power of Dao, including the gods of heaven and earth, the kings of the world, and the ministers who govern the world. Then appears the plot of Nanbo Zikui 南伯子葵, the seeker of Dao, asking Nüyu 女偶, the gainer of Dao, how to learn Dao. Nüyu first gives an account of the conditions for learning Dao, i.e., people who study must have “the innate capacity of a sage”. Then, she describes the seven stages of learning it: “expelling from mind all under heaven” (*waitianxia* 外天下), “expelling from mind the existence of any definite things” (*waiwu* 外物), “expelling from mind life itself” (*waisheng* 外生), “the great enlightenment from darkness to brightness at dawn” (*zhaoche* 朝彻), “Seeing the wholeness of all things alone” (*jiandu* 见独), “no division of past and present” (*wugujin* 无古今), and “entering into the undying, unliving” (*bushi busheng* 不死不生). The first three stages refer to dismissing surroundings and the physical body that cause oneself disturbances; the latter three stages refer to the three realms of viewing the world from the perspective of space and time. As for the “Zhaoche” 朝彻 in the middle, Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, a Daoist scholar in the Tang Dynasty, commented: “‘Zhao’ 朝 means morning. ‘Che’ means illumination. ‘Zhaoche’ 朝彻 describes the state of sudden realization to treat death and life equally and forget both outside things and one’s own self, as if getting enlightened by the first bursting light of the rising sun.” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 148). Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 interprets “Zhaoche” 朝彻 as “getting enlightened by the first bursting light of the rising sun”, corresponding to the “dawn light” described by Emerson. The “innate capacity of a sage” mentioned by Nüyu 女偶 is equivalent to the genius who has experienced the “oversoul” mentioned by Emerson. The powers of those who have obtained access to Dao stated in “The Great Master” (*dazongshi* 大宗师) are similar to the “revelations of nature” stated by Emerson. In the chapter “Language” of *Nature*, he wrote: “At the call of a noble sentiment, again the woods wave, the pines murmur, the river rolls and shines, and the cattle low upon the mountains, as he saw and heard them in his infancy.” (Emerson 1983, p. 23). With its unique scenery and sounds, nature is generous and caressing to nurture the inspiration of jungle children. “Long hereafter, amidst agitation and terror in national councils, —in the hour of revolution,— these solemn images shall reappear in their morning lustre, as fit symbols and words of the thoughts which the passing events shall awaken.” (Emerson 1983, p. 23) In Emerson’s view, language was originally a symbol of nature, and it is also logical for people’s impressions of jungle scenery to be converted into persuasive language. Compared with Emerson’s rational narration, the statement lacking the differentiation of man from god in “The Great Master” (*dazongshi* 大宗师) is somewhat of a bluff. However, it is their common direction to strengthen the power of nature.

The experience of “the great enlightenment from darkness to brightness at dawn” (*zhaoche* 朝彻) is not based on the logic of cause and effect but on the intuitive perception of the senses. It is accidental, similar to a dream that can be met but cannot be sought. In the words of “On Leveling All Things” (*qi wu lun* 齐物论), it is an “accidental encounter” once in a lifetime. Emerson said:

To the senses and the unrenewed understanding belongs a sort of instinctive belief in the absolute existence of nature. ... This despotism of the senses binds us to nature as if we were a part of it, and shows us nature aloof, and, as it were, afloat. ... These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distinctness of objects. If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moments of life are these delicious

awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God.” (Emerson 1983, p. 33)

All these intuitive revelations entail rich associations with certain content in the *Zhuangzi*, e.g., the statement that “heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things are equal to me”, and the profound implications of the fables of “the penumbra (*wangliang* 罔两) asking the shadow” and “Zhuangzi dreaming of butterflies” in “On Leveling All Things” (*qiwulun* 齐物论), as well as the discussion between Zhuangzi and Huishi 惠施 (circa 370B.C.–circa 310B.C.), another Chinese philosopher in the Warring States Period, on “human feeling without being affected by feelings” at the end of “The Signs of Fullness of Power” (*dechongfu* 德充符), and the “chaotic but never separated” relationship between things and oneself, which is repeatedly elaborated on in this classic.

### 3.4. The Natural Wilderness as the Transcendental Soul Space

The motive propelling Emerson to escape the sophisticated and overcautious style so willingly and let nature make him ecstatic is to appeal to people to return to God through direct communication with nature, so as to bypass the shackles of American religion that bound people’s spirit at that time—Calvinism and its cumbersome religious disciplines. He expressed his ideas many times by writing articles and making speeches. In January 1842, when he delivered a speech at the Boston Freemasons, he said that “society is good when it does not violate me; but best when it is likeliest to solitude” (Emerson 1983, p. 195). This kind of social model advocated by Emerson is similar to a copy of the “world of supreme virtue” (*zhide zhishi* 至德之世) in the “Steal Box” (*quqie* 祛箧) of the *Zhuangzi*, in which “people in neighboring countries can see each other and hear the crowing and barking of each other’s chickens and dogs, but people do not communicate with each other until they die of old age”. (Guo and Cheng 1998, pp. 207–8). In Emerson’s essay collection *Nature*, he said that “the incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them, and quit our life of solemn trifles. Here no history, or church, or state, is interpolated on the divine sky and the immortal year” (Emerson 1983, p. 541). “History, church and state” are all elements of a secular society, symbolizing the center or power of society, which is designated as “Weique” 魏阙 in the *Zhuangzi*, i.e., the imperial court. The marginal places opposite the central “Weique” 魏阙 are “Rivers and Seas” (*jianghai* 江海) or “Wilderness” (*huangye* 荒野). The writing of the marginal zone has become the common interest of Zhuangzi and Emerson.

In his essay *Nature*, Emerson wrote that “the day, immeasurably long, sleeps over the broad hills and warm wide fields. To have lived through all its summer hours, seems longevity enough” (Emerson 1983, p. 541). Here, the fields, far away from the urban area, are beneficial to both human physical and mental health. In the chapter “Prospects” of Emerson’s *Nature*, he said: “A man is a god in ruins. When men are innocent, life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal as gently as we awake from dreams” (Emerson 1983, pp. 45–46). Here, the environment in which people live, including nature and society, is replaced with “ruins”, which should be an exaggerated metaphor, emphasizing that people can live naively and simply in places where there is no human trace, or the trace has been abandoned, and can prolong their life. “To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone” (Emerson 1983, p. 14). This statement, which is in Emerson’s summary in the chapter “Beauty”, emphasizes the medicinal effect of the wide and vast space of nature, i.e., the wilderness, on the human spirit. Emerson talks so many times about the benefits of the wilderness to life in his writing, while the wilderness is exactly the ideal realm advocated by the *Zhuangzi*.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the domain of pleasure reached by those who have obtained access to Dao is called “the space of nothing” (*wuheyong zhixiang* 无何有之乡). “Nothing” indicates the non-interference of whatever it is, but it is delineated in the *Zhuangzi* as an open and boundless wilderness. “Space of nothing” and “wilderness” are both metaphors, signifying the supreme realm of Dao in a desolate wilderness without any human trace. In



“Responding to the Emperors and Kings” (*yingdiwang* 应帝王), Heavenroot (*tiangen* 天根) asked a nameless man about Dao. The nameless man, who was wandering in “the space of nothing” and “the wilds of graveyard” (*kuanglang zhiye* 旷垠之野), blamed Heavenroot (*tiangen* 天根) for disturbing his mood. “Kuanglang” 旷垠 refers to a graveyard, i.e., the place of death. Death means returning to the initial state of life. “The wilds of graveyard” is also “the space of nothing”. In “Lie Yukou” 列御寇, it is directly written that “the Ultimate Person (*zhiren* 至人) reverts the pure kernel of spirit in them to the beginninglessness, sweetly sleeping in a place with nothing” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 594). The spirit of those who have entered the realm of Dao returns to the original state of human beings, hides in a domain without human intervention, and enjoys carefree happiness. At the end of “Wandering Far and Unfettered” (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥游), Huishi 惠施 says that his big tree is useless. Zhuangzi suggests to him: “Why not plant it in a space without anything else, on a vast and boundless wilderness? Then you wander aimlessly around it, sleeping carefree under it! You won’t attract an axe to cut down, nothing can harm you. You’re of no use, what’s bothering you?” (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 18). The “space of nothing” is demonstrated as a realm of pleasure free from man-made disasters. Compared with Emerson’s “health” value, the “wilderness” in the *Zhuangzi* provides a spiritual refuge for those who have accessed Dao, in a cruel reality in which life is subject to destruction at any moment. Emerson also reveals the role of “refuge” that the wilderness plays in *Nature*: “In the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all.” (Emerson 1983, p. 10). Does not the description also apply to Liezi 列子, who “rides the wind”, and Songrongzi 宋荣子, who “won’t work hard because the whole world praises him, and won’t be depressed because the whole world blames him” in “Wandering Far and Unfettered” (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥游)? Emerson comments: “The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me. I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages.” (Emerson 1983, p. 10). In the “wilderness”, there is the “beauty” he is so obsessed with, so he tends to forget the secular hierarchy. This is in harmony with the ideas of “nobles and slaves respecting each other” and “unity of all things” in “On Leveling All Things” (*qiwulun* 齐物论). According to the *Zhuangzi*, the “way of great beauty” consists in the initial state of the universe. “Wu” 无 does not originally mean “none”. Xu Shen 许慎 said that “Wu” is a special word connected with “yuan” (元 lit. beginning) (Xu 1963, p. 267). In philosophy, “wu” 无 refers to the obscure state of matter, that is, the state before the formation of matter.

To sum up, the symbolic fields, ruins, and wilderness and the metaphorical “space of nothing”, “boundless wilderness”, and “wilds of graveyard” all refer to the original state of the universe, intact from the impact of human beings. They are the realms inhabited by “beauty” and Dao, and the common spiritual hometown of the Zhuangzi School and Emerson.

In one speech on *The Daoist Aesthetics and the Western Culture*, the Chinese scholar Ye Weilian 叶维廉 criticizes the linguistic style characteristic of scientific thinking by quoting T.E. Hulme (1883–1917), the representative figure of the British and American modernist poetry school, “The miscellaneous universal images that are beyond the descriptive power of pen and ink, are sectioned and reduced to just a few symbols and codes from the perspective of human subjective prejudices.” (Ye 2002). The beauty of nature, belonging to such a category of indescribable imagery, should be observed and appreciated personally in the real setting of nature, and then “conveyed to the readers in a tangible and perceptible manner through visualized, intuitive and concrete language.” (Ye 2002). The great philosophers, facing the appeal from nature, will come to the same contemplation: both

Emerson situated in a boundless jungle and the River God Hebo 河伯, the spokesman of Zhuangzi, confronting the vast sea, have been overwhelmed by the same enlightenment that nature is all-encompassing, whereas they themselves are belittled. From observing the blossoming and withering of flowers and the spring's sowing and autumn's harvest, they have perceived the harmony and consummation of all natural things existing in the chain of time sequence, as well as the infinite charm of the universal order. When the first light of dawn manifests itself, transforming the dark earth into brightness, they obtain their sudden access to the profundity and power of life, with Emerson describing the outlines of things turning "transparent" and the Zhuangzi describing this spiritual experience as "the great enlightenment from darkness to brightness at dawn" (*zhaoche* 朝彻). The idealized wilderness and the imagined "space of nothing", isolated from the bustling noises of the masses, are the places where the individual spirit can be elevated in tranquil solicitude, where Emerson forgets all about the hierarchy between superiors and inferiors, thereby having a feeling of "intimacy" and where it is pointed in the Zhuangzi that people can enjoy their natural span of life, intact from any harm. By resorting to poetic language or allegorical narration, they have succeeded in revealing the mysteries of the beauty of nature: nature, as an expression of the universe, pleases the human spirit from a simple level; its nurture of life is the virtue gifted by God from the angle of a deeper understanding; and the ultimate realm of beauty consists in the integration of the human mind and nature, which is manifested in the form of art. All these ideas about the beauty of nature are impressively illustrated by a series of stories or landscapes, avoiding the intricate trivialities of argumentation.

#### 4. The Closeness of Aesthetic Concepts

The above text analyzes two layers of similarity in the expression of beauty between Emerson and the Zhuangzi: firstly, both take the original meaning of beauty as the conceptual meaning of beauty; secondly, both choose the same natural objects as the medium for expressing beauty. The emergence of this phenomenon should be directly related to their similar perception of beauty, and the reason behind it can also be said to be the result of this phenomenon, i.e., their similar aesthetic concepts. Below, we will analyze the aesthetic concepts of Emerson and the Zhuangzi from three dimensions: (1) admiration for natural vitality, (2) the importance of spiritual discovery, and (3) the unity of beauty.

##### 4.1. Beauty Contains the Attribute of Inner Vitality

Emerson said, at the beginning of the chapter on beauty, that beauty, as the world in ancient Greece, "is the constitution of all things", which primarily forms the sky, mountains, trees, and animals. Emerson also had an important viewpoint: "Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe" (Emerson 1983, pp. 14, 19). Why is "the constitution of all things" beauty? What is the relationship between "world", "universe", and "nature"? This depends not only on Emerson's definition of "nature" but also on analyzing the original meaning of nature. He wrote in the Introduction of *Nature*:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses;—in its common and in its philosophical import. ... Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. (Emerson 1983, p. 8)

Emerson divided nature into philosophical nature and common nature. The common sense of nature refers to the material world that has not been fundamentally changed by humans, such as space, air, rivers, leaves, etc. Philosophically, nature and the soul together constitute the universe. Soul, also known as ME, refers to the subjective self. Nature is NOT ME, which refers to things that are separate from the subjective self, including common

nature, art, all other men, and one's own body, referred to as "Wu" 吾 in the *Zhuangzi*. This common sense of nature is equivalent to the original form of the ancient Greek "world" and is one of the subjects of Emerson's chapter on "beauty", that is, the "world" of beauty.

The reason why material nature is beautiful is that it can inspire people's minds and influence their lives, in Emersonian words, serving people's desire for beauty and giving us light. This can also be found from the etymology of nature. The root of the word "nat" refers to birth, while the noun suffix "ure" refers to behavior or outcome. The original meaning of nature should be an innate behavior or characteristic. The origin of this word in ancient Greek refers to self-birth and self-growth, or rather an automatic force that organizes life (Jia 2012). Emerson understood nature by perceiving its primitive vitality. Faced with the sunshine of dawn, the scenery of winter, the sequence of nature, and the vast wilderness, he felt the rhythmic beauty of primitive vitality, which elevated his spirit. At this point, the nature of the common import has transformed into the philosophical nature in its irresistible appeal to the soul.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the universe or heaven and earth are both works and incarnations of Dao, similar to what Gao Shan said about material nature and effective nature (see Gao 2023). The "great beauty" that exists between heaven and earth is the expression of Dao. It is quiet and silent, constantly evolving, yet it makes all things thrive. The merit of creating and transforming "great beauty" can also be traced back to the original meaning of the Chinese word "Ziran" 自然.

According to the explanation in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* 说文解字, "自" (zi lit. self) refers to the state of breathing through the nose, which is the beginning of life, and "然" (ran) is an ancient character for "燃" (ran), meaning the state of burning, figuratively inferring the state of decay of things. Nature actually refers to the process and state of the beginning and end of life. For humans, the fate of life and death is beyond their control, so nature originally referred to the state or characteristic of self-emergence and self-destruction, not interfered with by human intervention, and then was extended to mean the essentiality and nature of things (see Jia 2022).

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the beauty discussed by Emerson and the *Zhuangzi* stems from the power of life. Beauty is not only the creation of life but also the manifestation of creators.

#### 4.2. Aesthetic Requires Spiritual Insight and Transcendence

Having explained that beauty lies in the constitution of the world at the beginning of the chapter on beauty, Emerson put forth the significance of human eyes in the discovery of beauty, i.e., "the plastic power of the human eye" (Emerson 1983, p. 14). It is mainly thanks to the power of the eyes that human beings are capable of deriving a sense of delight from the contours, colors, movements, and combinations of natural objects. The eyes serve as windows to the soul, which means the discovery of the eyes stems from the perceptive ability of the soul. In other words, the involvement of spiritual elements is key to the presentation of beauty. "The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy, is that which is found in combination with the human will" (Emerson 1983, p. 16). Through spiritual communication with nature, humans can have both their sentiments and morals elevated. "Nature stretcheth out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness" (Emerson 1983, p. 17). Situated in vast forests, people will marvel at its boundlessness and mystery and cannot help feeling ashamed of their own superficiality. Faced with the sequence of sunrise and sunset, the rise of clouds and the fall of rain, and the fading of spring and the coming of autumn, people will be in awe of the harmonious unity of nature and the punctual flow of the time sequence. The sun's rays at dawn will enlighten people with the infinity of both time and space. In the background of the expansive wilderness with its fathomless potential of vitality, people cannot but admire a category of infinite and immortal beauty. In the last case, the wilderness does not belong to any category of material nature anymore but serves as a spiritual space people acclaim and appreciate.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the great beauty between heaven and earth does not only consist in changes in the natural objects but also lies in the human understanding of the rules and the infinite power of the functioning of heaven and earth, and thereby taking after heaven and earth and returning to the innate state of tranquil and purposeless behavior. Equivalent to the Emersonian wilderness, both the “space of nothing” (无何有之乡) and the “boundless wilderness” (广漠之野) in the *Zhuangzi* are the ideal realms of the Daoist spiritual transcendence and figurative expressions of a type of soul space. Proficient in metaphors and imagination, the *Zhuangzi* has its “space” and “wilderness” related to human living surroundings. “Space” (*xiang* 乡), similar to a small town, refers to the precincts of residence for the common masses in ancient times and is later used to indicate the hometown or the dreamland desired from the innermost heart. The “wilderness”, originally meaning the area beyond the suburbs, is a place far away from cities and cultures, which human beings rarely inhabit. The “space of nothing” applies hyperbole rhetoric and specifically refers to the place in its natural state, alienated from the disturbing interference of human social trivialities. The “boundless wilderness”, i.e., the vast and empty outskirts, corresponds with the Emersonian wilderness. In fact, “to sleep in the boundless wilderness” represents a carefree state of life, and the wilderness does not necessarily signify any specific patch of soil or any agricultural land, which manifests the spiritual transcendence of Daoism.

#### 4.3. Beauty Is the Unity of Multidimensional Connotations

In his description of beauty, Emerson mentions multiple different terms, all of which have characteristics related to beauty. The “great beauty” in the *Zhuangzi* is the manifestation of Dao. Beauty and Dao stem from the same origin despite their different designations. Dao is an all-encompassing term, similar to beauty, with rich connotations and infinite denotation. Beauty, as Kant comments, has an attribute beyond conceptualization, and Dao is also hard to define. Both aesthetic and Dao-obtaining procedures are the integration of the subjective spirit and the objective target, as well as the unity of intuition and intellect.

Emerson once said: “Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue” (Emerson 1983, p. 16). Therefore, the connection between beauty, God, and virtue was constructed. At the end of the chapter on beauty, he summarized the following:

The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. This element I call 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 the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same all. (Emerson 1983, p. 19)

From this passage, it can be seen that in Emerson’s thoughts, the world and the soul are unified, and truth, beauty, goodness, and virtue are the different faces of the soul’s ultimate end, in other words, the different faces of the world. With an aesthetic appreciation of nature, the soul can ascend and directly converse with God. This elevated soul was named the Oversoul by Emerson.

Emerson’s comment combines important philosophical concepts together, such as beauty, goodness, truth, virtue, God, fairness, universe, world, nature, spirit, soul, and ultimate end, which demonstrates the holistic unity of the universe. However, within this unity, the soul is elevated by Emerson to the summit, which reflects the human-centered Western tradition in his thoughts. He ultimately persisted: “Beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good. It must stand as a part, and not as yet the last or highest expression of the final cause of Nature” (Emerson 1983, p. 19).

However, in the *Zhuangzi*, all the meanings are hidden in the core philosophical category of Dao. The terms such as beauty, goodness, truth, and virtue serve to explain Dao. The air flows between heaven and earth; all things are born and come to death; birds fly in the sky; fishes swim in the water: all these natural phenomena are the appearances of great beauty and the working of Dao. It is written in “The Great Master” (*dazongshi* 大宗师) that “The huge block of earth bears my physical form, labors me with life, eases me with old



age, rests me with death. Thus to make my life is something good and to make my death is also something good" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 143). "The huge block of earth" means the earth created by Dao. Any effect Dao exerts on life is attributed to goodness. Dao and virtue are unified. In "The Sign of Virtue Complete" (*dechongfu* 德充符), it is written that "Virtue is the establishment of perfect harmony." (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 124). A person who has reached the harmonious state of Dao is one with virtue. If this virtue is manifested as drifting and indistinct as the silky string, it is called "Obscure Virtue" (*xuande* 玄德) or "Great Obedience" (*dashun* 大顺). In essence, it is Dao, but in concrete things, it is called virtue. In "On Leveling All Things" (*qiwulun* 齐物论), it is written that "It would seem as though there must be a True Master among them. But whether I succeed in discovering its situation or not, it neither adds to nor detracts from his Truth" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 30). Dao's true existence as the noumenon will not be impaired even if its true conditions are beyond human comprehension. The truth here is Dao itself, and the person who has obtained access to Dao is called a "True Person" (*zhenren* 真人). Therefore, it can be seen that beauty, goodness, truth, and virtue are united in the obscure core philosophical category of Dao in the *Zhuangzi*. However, as for the role played by the human mind, it is emphasized in the *Zhuangzi* that an individual should forget his or her own physical body and spiritual mind, so as to go with the flow of the Dao of nature. It is the Daoist aesthetic essence to subjugate individual wisdom to the service of the unity of nature and man. This explains why there still exists a deep differentiation between the *Zhuangzi* and Emerson and why they have embarked on distinct development trails, despite their miscellaneous similarities.

## 5. Conclusions

British aesthetician Bernard Bosanquet once said: Natural beauty is not objective, it exists in the fleeting concepts of ordinary people. It depends on human observation of nature and the subject's aesthetic appreciation (Bosanquet 1985). This article, from the perspective of aesthetic experience, deeply and thoroughly explores the commonality between American transcendentalism and early Chinese Taoist thoughts with a detailed comparison of Chinese and English texts. It summarizes the similarity between Emerson and Zhuangzi's understanding of the inherent essence of beauty, that is, beauty lies in the inherent vitality, the transcendentalism of the soul, and the richness and unity of connotation. This metaphysical understanding of ontology stems from their respect for the beauty of the principles of material nature and their perception of the beauty of natural things. Emerson's thinking emphasizes logic but has imagery; the thinking of the *Zhuangzi*, although characterized by vivid storytelling, also has an inherent logical approach. Emerson uses a family of meaningful terms to express beauty; the *Zhuangzi*, on the other hand, reveals the multidimensional meanings of the highest philosophical category Dao. Within these two distinct discourse systems, the experience and presentation of beauty share the same goal. The vastness, profoundness, harmony, and grace of the natural world make people feel spiritually peaceful, introspective, uplifted, and reverential. Emerson sees himself in the natural scenery and verifies the existence of the Oversoul, while Zhuangzi achieves a transcendent realm through human imitation and obedience to the beauty of heaven and earth.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that this article strengthens the analysis of relevant concepts in cross-cultural comparative research. Dao and beauty are both concepts that are difficult to define and are thereby open to interpretation. Tracing the implications of these words in a specific context is the approach to breaking through the linguistic obstacles in cross-cultural research. Emerson defines beauty as "the composition of all things in the world", which connects with Dao in the *Zhuangzi*, while Dao, as the holistic manifestation of the universe, is the "Great Beauty" itself, thus unlocking the commonality in aesthetic experience between the two. The Chinese aesthetician Liu Shaojin 刘绍瑾 comments that despite the lack of a conceptual system corresponding to Western aesthetics in ancient China, the Daoist classics boast "a plentiful resource of aesthetic ideology", even if they do not treat beauty as the object of exploration. The Daoist aesthetic ideology, with

its enlightening and implicative attributes, is “open to an incessant procedure of interpretation oriented both to the past and the modern times” (Liu et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the association between the meaning of the Chinese character *mei* 美 and that of English beauty, must overcome the obstacles set by changes in its sense and trace it back to its initial implications in the context of the *Zhuangzi*, as this composes the linguistic cornerstone for the essays of Emerson and the *Zhuangzi* to encounter in the poetic nature.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The “nature” used by Emerson is synonymous with the “Ziran” 自然 in Chinese Taoist classics, both referring to the “natural state of things without human interference”, and its typical representative is nature rather than human society (Jia 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Similar to the classics of the pre-Qin period in China, the book *Laozi* is usually considered to have been written by Laozi alone, while the author of the *Zhuangzi* may have been multiple people because, at that time, people did not have a clear sense of authorship, and often used the founder’s name of the school of thought as the book title. This is a characteristic of pre-Qin works. When using these two names in this article, to avoid misunderstandings, we refer to the book rather than the author, and the definite article “the” is added before it. The translations of the original text of the *Laozi* mainly consult the version: Lynn, Richard John. (translator). 1999. *A New Translation of the Tao-Te Ching of Laozi As Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press. The translations of the original text of the *Zhuangzi* mainly consult three translation versions, namely, [1] Graham, A.C. (translator). 2001. *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. [2] Ziporyn, Brooks (translator). 2020. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. [3] Wang, Rongpei 汪榕培. (translator). 1999. *Zhuangzi*. Changsha: Hunan People’s Publishing House.
- <sup>3</sup> Due to the correspondence between “ziran” 自然 in Chinese and “nature” in English, there is confusion about the meaning of the words. Liu Xiaogan 刘笑敢 distinguishes between material nature and humanistic nature to highlight their spontaneity (Liu 2006, pp. 316–21). In fact, the phenomenon of polysemy is very common in the ancient Chinese language. The “ziran” 自然 in Chapter 25 of *Laozi* has the meanings of both the material nature and the natural attribute of spontaneity. Dao’s characteristic is “wuwei” 无为, which means that human non-purposeful behavior is the function of Dao because “wu” means “Dao”.
- <sup>4</sup> Qi 气 is a philosophical concept in ancient Chinese culture, meaning “vital energy” 元气. It is usually divided into yin 阴, yang 阳, wind, rain, darkness, and brightness, with yin and yang being the most important. Yin means dark and hidden, while yang means high and bright.
- <sup>5</sup> As Grossman observes: “Emerson’s brand of fresh home-grown English adds a radiant color to the ancient thoughts of the Chinese Master.” (Grossman 2007, Foreword, p. xxi).
- <sup>6</sup> Emerson wrote: “Some men have the perception of difference predominant, and are conversant with surfaces and trifles, with coats and watches, and faces and cities... And other men abide by the perception of identity. These are the orientals, the philosophers, the men of faith and divinity.” Richardson wrote: “Emerson’s absorption in Asian religion and literature cannot be understood unless one sees that for him the East was the proof persuasive precisely because it was non-Western that at the deep end of the pool, where it matters, Westerner and Easterner are profoundly alike, indeed identical. ” Emerson’s “identity” reflects both his “cross-cultural thinking ability” and his “open mind”, ultimately realizing the fact that there are similar thinkings and ideas in the East and West. (Richardson 1996, p. 408).

- <sup>7</sup> Sima Tan 司马谈 of the Han Dynasty, the father of Sima Qian, talked “On the Gist of the Six Schools of Thoughts”: “Emptiness is the normality of Dao, and obedience to Dao is the principle of the king.” (Sima 1982, p. 3292.) Ban Gu 班固 of the Han Dynasty commented, in “Art and Literature Annals—A Brief Introduction to Scholars”, that “The school of Daoism probably originated from the historian, who had recorded the ancient and modern ways of success and failure, survival, disaster and fortune... This is the art of the king to rule the world.” (Ban 1962, p. 1732.)
- <sup>8</sup> Bu 部 is the name of the category classified by Xu Shen 许慎 according to the composition of the Chinese characters. There are 206 categories of Bu in Shuo Wen Jie Zi 说文解字, for example, Yang Bu 羊部, Gan Bu 甘部, Da Bu 大部, Shi Bu 示部, etc., and the meanings of the Chinese characters belonging to the same Bu are related.

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