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## **Breakthrough from Artistic Aesthetics to Natural Aesthetics: A Review of Du Xuemin's *Nature and Beauty: An Introduction to Natural Aesthetics in Modernity***

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**Abstract:** It is a long-standing situation that the study of artistic beauty has been the center, while the study of natural beauty has been marginalized in aesthetic research. Highlighting the independent significance of natural beauty and constructing natural aesthetics is not only a breakthrough from traditional aesthetic research centered on artistic beauty, but also an opportunity for the self-improvement of aesthetics. *Nature and Beauty: An Introduction to Natural Aesthetics in Modernity* written by Du Xuemin always discusses the issue of natural aesthetics from the perspective of dialogue between artistic beauty and natural beauty. On the one hand, it emphasizes the independence of natural beauty and the necessity of constructing natural aesthetics. On the other hand, it advocates that natural beauty, and artistic beauty should be placed in their respective positions, each with its own irreplaceable value. Lastly, it always emphasizes the integration, unity, and coexistence of natural beauty and artistic beauty. The study of natural beauty and the construction of natural aesthetics at the present time help us to have a more complete and accurate understanding of the object of aesthetic research, clear the full meaning of the aesthetic in modernity, and clarify the boundary and rational relationship between artistic beauty and natural beauty.

**Keywords:** Artistic beauty; Natural beauty; Natural aesthetics; Modernity; Chinese cultural standard

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**题目:** 从艺术美学向自然美学的突围——评杜学敏《自然与美：现代性自然美学导论》

**摘要:** 在美学研究中，长期以来的局面是，以艺术美的研究为中心，对自然美的研究被边缘化。彰显自然美的独立意义，进行自然美学的建构，是从传统的以艺术美为中心的美学研究的向外突围，也是美学学科自我完善的一次机会。《自然与美：现代性自然美学导论》一书始终站在艺术美和自然美的对话视野中来讨论自然美学的问题，一方面强调自然美的独立性和建构自然美学的必要性，一方面主张自然美和艺术美各归其位，二者各有其不可替代的价值，一方面又始终强调自然美和艺术美的融合、统一、共存。在当代进行自然美的研究和自然美学的建构，有助于让我们更加完整准确地理解美学研究的对象，有助于澄清现代性审美的全部真义，有助于让我们更加厘清艺术美和自然美的边界和合理关系。

**关键词:** 艺术美；自然美；自然美学；现代性；中国文化本位

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### Introduction

Traditional aesthetic research is centered around artistic aesthetics, which should not be controversial. For example, Hegel said that the most accurate name for his aesthetics should be “philosophy of art”, and Taine also named his aesthetic works “philosophy of art”. Even in the study of aesthetics in the 20th century, the study of art was actually of paramount importance, not to mention Kandinsky, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, Greenberg, George Dickie, Arthur C. Danto, and other specialized art aesthetics researchers, even in Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse, and others in the aesthetics of people, the study of art is also a core component of their aesthetics. For example, Heidegger’s aesthetic masterpiece *The Origin of the Work of Art* is dedicated to exploring the existence and origin of artistic aesthetics. Adorno and Marcuse are fond of modernist art, and Benjamin is fond of art in the era of mechanical reproduction. These are important examples of this study of artistic aesthetics.

The relationship between natural beauty and artistic beauty is very complex, and the debate over which one is more qualified to be the core object of aesthetic research seems to be ongoing. Therefore, in some aestheticians, it is often seen whether natural beauty is higher than artistic beauty or artistic beauty is higher than natural beauty. For example, Kant believed that natural beauty is superior to artistic beauty, Hegel believed that artistic beauty is superior to natural beauty, and so on. Of course, the two are not completely

opposed to each other, and at times, they also use mutual intellectual resources to argue for their own rationality. In the 18th century, some landscape aestheticians often viewed natural beauty from the perspective of painting art, thus proposing the new concept of “picturesque beauty” in natural aesthetics, which laid the foundation for the development of natural aesthetics in the future. In the 1830s and 1840s, the Barbizon School in France adopted the principle of “facing nature and sketching from the scenery” as their creative principle, advocating for direct outdoor sketching. Whether a painter had superb sketching ability became the standard for measuring their creative level. Later, the Impressionist School was inspired by this and used the changes in outdoor light and shadow to create paintings, which had a great impact on modernist painting. At this time, natural scenery also became art and directly transformed into the object and content of artistic creation. Of course, the concept of “picturesque beauty” proposed in natural aesthetics in the 18th century also revealed that the concept of “natural beauty” was not mature and independent at that time, so the appreciation of nature must still be measured and evaluated in relation to the center of aesthetic research at that time, namely artistic beauty. In the 20th century, with the development and maturity of ecological aesthetics and environmental aesthetics disciplines, the question of how to break through the framework of artistic aesthetics in the study of “natural beauty” and how to break through from the previous aesthetic framework based on artistic aesthetics was naturally raised. Looking at the research on natural beauty throughout the 20th century, breaking free from the constraints of artistic aesthetics and making the study of natural beauty a truly independent field should be seen as a general trend. Of course, as for Du Xuemin’s book *Nature and Beauty: An Introduction to Natural Aesthetics in Modernity* (hereinafter referred to as *Nature and Beauty*, Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, 2022.), the purpose of the book is not merely to free the study of natural beauty from the limitations of artistic aesthetics, but also to attempt to make the study of natural beauty independent from ecological aesthetics and environmental aesthetics. As the subtitle *An Introduction to Natural Aesthetics in Modernity* of the book indicates, its ultimate goal is to start from the study of “natural beauty” and prove the legitimacy of the existence of an aesthetic discipline or field called “natural aesthetics”. This reflects that the book has a more profound research theme beyond and breaking through the limitations of artistic aesthetics.

### **1. Beyond the limitations of artistic aesthetics**

Regarding the reason for conducting research on natural aesthetics, In *Nature and Beauty*, it clearly states: “For a long time, when modernity has been mentioned in the field of aesthetic research, people often focus on the artistic philosophy and aesthetic discourse about artistic beauty/ the art of beauty that emerged at the same time as modernity. As a result, the natural aesthetic discourse of natural beauty/ the beauty of nature, which is also in the process of modernity, has been neglected or even rejected.” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.278) “The basic characteristics of aesthetic modernity are: to criticize and oppose the rationalization, institutionalization, and purpose rationalization principles of the modernization movement from the perspective of aesthetic principles and artistic self-discipline.” “The aesthetic modernity discourse discussed above mainly focuses on artistic aesthetics, thus seriously ignoring the natural aesthetic dimension.” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.34) In other words, since the birth of aesthetics, our long-term aesthetic research has been more focused on the study of artistic

aesthetics and neglected the study of natural aesthetics, which is of course a huge flaw. Moreover, regarding artistic aesthetic modernity as the entirety of modern aesthetic research itself does not conform to the historical fact of the development of modern aesthetics. In *Nature and Beauty*, it points out, based on its detailed explanation and sorting, that “natural aesthetics is not a one-sided fiction of some scholars who are concerned about this discipline: it actually runs through the natural beauty thinking of thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and other aesthetic schools in the history of Chinese and Western aesthetic such as Lao-Zhuang’s Taoism, Marxism, environmental aesthetics, ecological aesthetics thought with unique problem dimensions.”(Du Xuemin, 2022, pp.43-44) Only by truthfully presenting the evolution of the important issue of natural beauty in the development of Western modern aesthetics, presenting its differences and similarities in the thoughts of different aestheticians, can we obtain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the issue of modernity and the aesthetic discipline itself. Unfortunately, even in contemporary times, some scholars still hold biases against natural beauty: “It (‘the appreciation of natural beauty’--the quoter) itself does not have an inherent dynamic structure but is a secondary phenomenon of certain cultural systems. Obviously, the appreciation of natural beauty itself cannot cause its own conflicts and revolutionary movements, and its various changes are passive.” (Zhao Tingyang, 1990, p.169) This makes it even more urgent for us to incorporate the re understanding of natural beauty issues into current aesthetic research topics.

The issue of natural beauty has long been obscured in modern aesthetics, as Adorno has already pointed out: “*Philosophy of Art* is Schelling’s main aesthetic work. Since Schelling, aesthetics has almost exclusively focused on artistic works, interrupting the systematic study of ‘natural beauty’. In Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, some of the sharpest analyses of natural beauty are made. Why has natural beauty been removed from the aesthetic agenda? The reason is not as Hegel wants us to believe, that natural beauty has been abrogated in a higher realm. On the contrary, the concept of natural beauty is completely suppressed. Its continued appearance may trigger a hidden pain, reminding people of the violent actions taken by each artwork as a purely artificial product in opposition to natural objects. Artworks are entirely created by humans, in stark contrast to the non-human nature” (Adorno, 1998, pp.109-110). Art creation emphasizes human talents, emotions, and essential powers. Art is an artificial product that can better highlight human subjectivity and abilities, which is completely different from the natural beauty that arises naturally. It is understandable that it is more valued in modern times. But as Adorno pointed out, art is not completely opposed to nature. “The contemplation of natural beauty is an inseparable component of any art theory” (Adorno, 1998, p.110). The two are both opposed to each other and interdependent. From the perspective of natural beauty, it has “continuously provided meaningful impulses for art for a long time” (Adorno, 1998, p.112). Without understanding the issue of natural beauty, one cannot fully comprehend the issue of artistic beauty.

In summary, the reason why the study of artistic beauty has long been emphasized in aesthetic research while neglecting or even belittling the study of natural beauty is triple reasons. Firstly, there is a bias towards natural beauty, believing that it is a subordinate aesthetic phenomenon compared to artistic beauty. The second is the arrogance in the study of artistic aesthetics, which seeks to use the study of artistic beauty to encroach the study of natural beauty. The third is the fear of artistic aesthetics research towards the study of natural

beauty, because the natural beauty precisely highlights the hegemony of human subjectivity and its arbitrary behavior in the creation of artistic beauty. The result of doing so is also threefold: firstly, it obscures the fact that human aesthetic history includes the coexistence of artistic beauty and natural beauty; secondly, it hinders us from better understanding the truth that artistic beauty and natural beauty are both different and cooperate with each other; thirdly, it distorts the true meaning of aesthetic modernity by understanding it as artistic aesthetic modernity, making it impossible for us to see the entire history of aesthetic modernity or truly understand all the factors and mechanisms that promote the development of modernity in society.

From both anthropological and philosophical perspectives, the relationship between humans and nature is the most fundamental issue that human society must face. Although humans bid farewell to apes, they have not completely lost their naturalness, and in terms of their environment, humans still rely heavily on nature. From a philosophical perspective, the system of natural philosophy was formed in ancient Greece. In ancient China, there were also sayings of “unity of heaven and man” and “separation of heaven and man”. As the book *Nature and Beauty* profoundly points out, “The relationship between human and the natural world, the natural endowment (the dual nature), or the issue of the relationship between heaven and man, is always almost a fundamental problem in philosophy and in all over the world. It can be said that the so-called fundamental problem of philosophy is the relationship between thinking and being. The reason why philosophy regards the relationship between man and the dual nature as a fundamental problem that cannot be separated from its roots is because even after man becomes independent from nature and becomes the spirit of all things (nature), any human activity still needs to be carried out in the relationship between man and nature or between heaven and man, and obtain its essential determinacy. Since the dual nature and its relationship with human beings constitute the prerequisite and foundation that cannot be separated from any human activity, it will inevitably become the basic reference frame and fundamental dimension for philosophers to understand themselves and society. The exploration of it cannot but become a continuous philosophical tradition, especially for philosophy directly related to nature (including traditional natural philosophy but not limited to it).” (Du Xuemin, 2022, pp. 273-274) The relationship between humans and nature is a fundamental philosophical question, and the issue of natural beauty should also become a fundamental aesthetic question. From the perspective of the aesthetic historical genesis, natural beauty must have emerged before artistic beauty in time. Even from the perspective of Hegel’s logical evolution, artistic beauty is still later than natural beauty. From the perspective of the development of modern aesthetics, the issue of natural beauty should be the fundamental content of aesthetics itself, or in other words, the opening of the modern era and the emphasis and discovery of natural beauty issues are synchronous and isomorphic. As Burckhardt pointed out with Petrarch as an example: “Italians are the earliest modern people to see and feel the beauty of the external world” (Burckhardt, 1979, p.292), and this earliest Italian is Petrarch, “the earliest true modern person” (Burckhardt, 1979, p.294). From the perspective of modernity itself, the issue of natural beauty has become a crucial point in our understanding of the entire social problem of modernity. We must use natural beauty to create and establish modernity, reflect on and criticize modernity, and even restart modernity. Various complex social and cultural issues that arise in modernity converge on the issue of natural beauty, which is an important entry point for us

to understand and reflect on the legitimacy and rationality of modernity. It is precisely because of this, especially from the last two aspects related to modernity, that the issue of natural beauty gradually rises to become a natural aesthetic issue with disciplinary and methodological properties.

## 2. Natural aesthetics as a modern aesthetic property and system

From the perspective and standpoint of modernity, this is the most distinctive feature of Du Xuemin's masterpiece, as demonstrated by its subtitle *Introduction to Natural Aesthetics in Modernity. Nature and Beauty* points out that "the dominant issue faced by this book is the 'natural aesthetics' study of the 'modernity' of 'nature' from the perspective of natural beauty and the natural aesthetic activities of people, that is to say, from the perspective of the aesthetic relationship between human beings and both internal and external nature." (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.1) Throughout the book, this is indeed a consistent theme.

Modernity itself is a complex concept, and it is not an exaggeration to say that there are as many different understandings of modernity as there are thinkers. For example, Max Weber defined modernity from a rational perspective as a process of disenchantment and secularization, a process of differentiation and autonomy among science, morality, art, religion, and others; Calinescu, following Weber's concept of autonomy, distinguishes modernity into aesthetic modernity and social modernity. As autonomous art/aesthetic modernity, it is a reflection and criticism of social modernity, which is actually the so-called "reflexive modernity" or "the reflexivity of modernity"; Foucault, on the other hand, understood modernity as something universal beyond a specific stage, which is "a specific spiritual mentality, personality traits, and even cultural psychological structure expressed by people in a specific historical period through feelings, thoughts, actions, and behavioral patterns" (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.32). As long as there is such temperament and feeling, regardless of when and where it originated, it can have "modernity" (contemporaneity or temporality). *Nature and Beauty* adopt a comprehensive and broad understanding of "modernity" that draws on the strengths of others, as can be seen from its writing. For example, the book discusses the natural views of modern aestheticians such as Kant and Hegel who emphasize rationality, as well as the natural aesthetic views of Rousseau, who to some extent embraces rational modernity while reflecting on it. It also discusses the natural aesthetic views of thinkers with anti-modernity such as Heidegger, Dufrenne, and Adorno, and incorporates the natural aesthetic views of ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi and Zhuangzi into its discursive framework of natural aesthetics in modernity. That is to say, the modernity referred to in the book *Nature and Beauty* is not only a historical thing, but also constantly adds new connotations with the development of the times. From the perspective of Chinese and Western cultures, it is also a universal thing, appearing both in the West and the East.

I believe that the most core dimension of modernity is its understanding of subjectivity, manifested in history, that is, how subjectivity is established, reflected, and even reconstructed in the process of modernity. This is a fundamental issue, and by addressing it, we can grasp the key to the thorny super problem of modernity. The issue of subjectivity plays a crucial role in modernity, and similarly, it has a significant impact on the construction of modern natural aesthetics. In the preface to the book *Nature and Beauty*, Professor You Xilin, a renowned Chinese aesthetician and doctoral supervisor of Du Xuemin, grasped this key point and hit

the nail on the head by pointing out:

“Natural beauty is the only foundation that does not belittle the human subject and promises the natural subject, thus it is the homogeneous foundation of the relationship between humans and nature.” “Because natural beauty is the purposiveness of the subject (human beings) encompassing the purposiveness of the object (it breaks through the subject-centered state), and reaches a unified product at a higher level with the purposiveness of the subject itself, therefore, natural beauty is not only deeply related to the relationship between humans and nature, but also transcends this relationship. Natural beauty provides a higher good that enhances the unity between humans and nature: the existence of natural beauty enables humans to not only surpass individual self-centeredness, but also surpass species human self-centeredness. Nature has not only freed itself from the position of being dominated by humans, but also has not fallen into the wild jungle law of spontaneous regulation. Instead, it has enhanced the natural purposive system in a humanized form that harmonizes with the human subject and receives help.” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.13)

Whether natural aesthetics is the only aesthetic theory that promises the dual subjectivity of natural and human subjects when breaking anthropocentrism, I dare not make a rash statement. In my opinion, ecological aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, and various animal sovereignty aesthetics, the “object-turn” in aesthetics, including the Chao-praxis aesthetics and Chao-subjectivity theory that I am advocating. They share a common ideological purpose with natural aesthetics or are all on the path of criticizing anthropocentrism and reconstructing subjectivity. However, Professor You Xilin’s discourse, as the doctoral supervisor of Du Xuemin, undoubtedly highlights the importance of subjectivity in the field of modernity to the topic of natural aesthetics. In other words, it is an indicative sublimation or summary of the core problem clues that *Nature and Beauty* should present. Du Xuemin undoubtedly has a conscious awareness of this point. When he talked about the academic significance of the study of natural beauty in the perspective of modernity for the entire aesthetics, he pointed out that “from the fundamental purpose of aesthetic research, as a branch of philosophy and a backbone discipline of modern humanities, the ultimate significance of aesthetics, especially as a fundamental discipline and theoretical discipline, lies in the pursuit and construction of a human value system, and the realization of human aesthetic survival” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.48). To achieve this goal, we need to rethink the subjectivity of human beings in the study of natural beauty, and on this basis, reconstruct the relationship between humans and nature. We can achieve the so-called aesthetic survival.

The main content of *Nature and Beauty* is an exploration of the modernity dimension in the natural beauty discourse of Western modern and contemporary aestheticians, or in other words, a review and reflection of their relevant discourse on natural beauty from a modern perspective. They involve Kant, Hegel, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger, Dufrenne, and others.

In Kant’s view, the concept of “nature” has a rich connotation. In terms of the discourse on natural beauty, Kant mainly approached it in two senses. Firstly, he regarded natural beauty as “the manifestation of the concept of formal purposiveness in a purely subjective form” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.91), such as the beauty of flowers. Secondly, he discussed it from the perspective of intrinsic natural purposiveness, that is, subjective

freedom. Therefore, the aesthetic of this intrinsic natural purposiveness connects natural phenomena on the one hand, and leads to moral freedom on the other hand, becoming a bridge connecting the intellectual realm and the practical rational realm. The reason why Kant proposed that “beauty is a symbol of morality” is precisely because of this. Du Xuemin also correctly pointed out in his works: “Kant’s natural beauty and teleological view of nature together defend the moral dignity of human beings.” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.123) Although both are representative figures of German classical aesthetics, unlike Kant who values natural beauty more than artistic beauty, Hegel values artistic beauty more than natural beauty in his aesthetic system. Starting from his viewpoint that “Beauty is the sensible manifestation of the Idea”, Hegel believed that artistic beauty is superior to natural beauty. Of course, it is not to say that Hegel completely does not involve natural beauty in his discourse, but rather that even when discussing natural beauty, he believes it is a transitional stage that will ultimately be abrogated by artistic beauty. The reason why artistic beauty is superior to natural beauty is because “artistic beauty is a beauty generated and regenerated by the mind, and the mind and its products are superior to nature and its phenomena, and artistic beauty is also superior to natural beauty.” (Hegel, 1979, p.4) Undoubtedly, Hegel's discourse of promoting artistic beauty and suppressing natural beauty became the source of emphasizing artistic aesthetic modernity and obscuring natural aesthetic modernity in later aesthetics. Of course, regardless of the differences in Kant and Hegel's discourse on natural beauty, they share the same emphasis on the subjectivity of natural aesthetics as rationalist aesthetics in the Enlightenment era. However, one is from the perspective of highlighting and affirming the subjectivity in the appreciation of nature, while the other is from the perspective of belittling and negating the subjectivity in the appreciation of nature.

Among Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau was a “rather unconventional leader level figure” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.50). This “alternative” was reflected on one hand in his admiration for reason. The main purpose of Rousseau's advocacy of “natural education” was to awaken human nature and lay the foundation for the establishment of a capitalist modern society. On the other hand, Rousseau was also a pioneer of Romanticism. Will Durant referred to Rousseau as the “father of the Romantic movement” in his book *A History of World Civilization* (Will Durant, 2009, p.1029). The Romantic movement had a dual nature, calling for enlightenment and rational modernity, and recognizing the potential dangers of Enlightenment rationality earlier. Therefore, by calling for a return to nature, it fought against the enormous problems brought by capitalist urban civilization. The term “natural beauty” also has two meanings in Rousseau’s view. One is the natural beauty in the sense of nature: “I must always strive to be as close to nature as possible, so that the senses that nature endows me with feel comfortable, because I deeply believe that the more its happiness is combined with my happiness, the more real my happiness will be.” (Rousseau, 1978b, p.509) The second is the natural beauty in the sense of nature, for example, he said, “The more we depart from the state of nature, the more we lose our natural taste.” (Rousseau, 1978a, p.191) Here, nature is the natural meaning of human nature, which is the perfect state of human nature and a perfect aesthetic ability.

My discussion sequence of the thoughts of Rousseau and Kant is slightly different from that in *Nature and Beauty*. *Nature and Beauty* emphasizes more on the “historical response” of Kant’s “dual modernity of enlightenment and aesthetics” revealed by Rousseau in natural beauty (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.78). However, I

value more the modernity aspect of Rousseau's anti-modernity that is different from Kant and Hegel. I believe that the most direct inheritance of this modernity of anti-modernity is not Kant and Hegel, but later Marx, Heidegger, and others. If we put it in the most general sense, Marx's so-called "humanization of nature" (i.e., the transformation and practice of nature) refers to the way in which humans, as class subjects, differ from animals in their activities. This means that "animals are only constructed according to the scale and needs of the species to which they belong, while humans know how to produce according to the scale of any species" (Marx, 2014, p.53). However, the "humanization of nature" discussed by Marx has never been in an abstract sense but has its specific social and historical connotations. This specific and concrete connotation is based on the era in which he lived. Marx saw that in capitalist society, the practice of transforming nature and labor of laborers were alienated. The so-called "labor produces palaces, but produces sheds for workers" (Marx, 2014, p.49) needs to be understood from this perspective. Marx always held a critical attitude towards the "humanization of nature" under the conditions of capitalist society, which is based on the alienation of workers. To overcome this humanization of nature in a state of alienation, it is also necessary to enter a free society through the extension of social history, the continuous accumulation of labor, and the great improvement of productivity, in order to achieve the ultimate change: "Society is the essential unity of man and nature, the true resurrection of nature, the realization of naturalism by man, and the realization of humanitarianism by nature." (Marx, 2014, pp.79-80) The so-called naturalism realized in society and humanitarianism realized in nature here are not only in the most general sense, that is, from the perspective of the connection and difference between humans and nature as quasi-subject, but also from the perspective of achieving a specific historical stage that truly overcomes the alienation of capitalist society. Reflected in the appreciation and experience of natural beauty, it has three levels of meaning. Firstly, for workers in capitalist society, they cannot feel the natural beauty that they have manifested through their labor practice in the process of transforming nature. The so-called "worried and poor people have little feeling for the most beautiful scenery" (Marx, 2014, p.84.). Secondly, in the most general and abstract sense, even in capitalist society, workers can change the relationship between humans and nature in their practice of "humanized nature", and win opportunities for the general public, especially capitalists, to appreciate the beauty of nature through the transformation of nature. Thirdly, it is to completely overcome the alienation of capitalism and enter the communist stage. Through their free labor and practice, humans once again adjust the relationship between humans and nature. At this time, labor is free, and nature becomes an object of the great beauty in human joyful labor, becomes an object that can be fully appreciated by everyone.

Heidegger's understanding of natural beauty reflects the natural aesthetics view of anti-modernity that is in line with Rousseau and Marx. In many of Heidegger's works, he criticized the domination, deprivation, and exploitation of nature by modern technological artifacts: "Forests are forest farms, mountains are quarries, rivers are hydraulic, and wind is the wind that sets sail." (Heidegger, 1999, p.83) "Hydroelectric power plants are enframed over the Rhine River, which enframes the river for the water pressure of the river. The water pressure of the river enframes turbines to rotate, and the rotation of the turbines drives some machines. "The driving devices of these machines produce electricity, and the long-distance power plants and their grids for

transmission are customized for this electricity.” Heidegger was quite opposed to the attitude of using nature as a purely presence-at-hand, so he emphasized that we should respect and echo to nature. In Heidegger’s aesthetics, nature as the object of technology is exhausted nature and is not beautiful; and the nature that he hopes for is a kind of nature in its fundamental sense, which is actually what Heidegger called “being”. Therefore, in *On the Essence of Truth*, he interprets nature as the “emerging presence”, and this emerging presence is the struggle between the earth as a concealment and the world as a unconcealment in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. It is in this tearing struggle that “truth” emerges, and the beauty that appears as the essence of “truth of being” also be presence. Dufrenne’s discourse on natural beauty to some extent absorbed the phenomenological aesthetic ideas of Heidegger, Merleau Ponty, and others. Dufrenne’s discourse on natural beauty mainly has two aspects. Firstly, he emphasizes the naturalness of the artwork itself as an aesthetic object: “The ontological satisfaction of the sensory unity that form endows it with makes us completely say that the aesthetic object is nature.” “The aesthetic object becomes nature through its own sensory power.” (Dufrenne, 1996, p.121) These are all about the artificial form endowing and blending with the natural objects described in the artwork as an aesthetic object, or “transforming those things in nature that can be aestheticized and manifested as aesthetics themselves” (Dufrenne, 1996, p.113). Dufrenne’s argument shows that art works are always difficult to escape the influence of nature. In order to achieve their brilliant sensibility, first of all, they must incorporate natural objects into the aesthetic perspective of art, and secondly, make themselves appear like nature. And the ultimate aesthetic effect it presents is actually the unity of artistic beauty and natural beauty. Dufrenne’s discourse fully demonstrates that it is not to suppress nature, but only through a full dialogue with nature can artistic beauty be better formed and manifested. Secondly, the “nature” in the sense of natural aesthetic experience can break through the control of human subjects to a certain extent with its inherent inevitability. In a superficial detachment from human control, it actually engages in dialogue with human subjects, reflecting a deep and hidden connection between humans and nature: “At this moment, nature speaks to me, and I can hear it... Nature speaks to me in this way, not only within ‘the scope of our own silence’, as Schelling said, but also within the scope of its silence... While talking to me about itself, it also talks to me about myself... However, it at least tells me that this boundless presentation is a presentation for me, so I am secretly in harmony with this boundless presentation.” At this moment, nature presents itself to humans as a “glorious” beauty.

In the specific analysis and discussion of the natural beauty points of Western modern and contemporary thinkers in *Nature and Beauty*, there are many brilliant insights, such as Kant’s proposition that “the concept of natural beauty superior to artistic beauty is not natural beauty in the sense of beauty of natural things, but natural beauty in the sense of beauty like nature self, that is, natural beauty as opposed to artificial beauty” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.113). As explicitly stated by Kant, “the reason why the beauty of this flower is judged as natural beauty is it involves in an appreciative judgment about emotional pleasure without any conceptual intervention, rather than a teleological judgment about what the flower actually is” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.94), which helps clarify people’s misunderstanding of Kant’s natural beauty as a natural thing as an objective entity. Furthermore, in his analysis of Heidegger’s thoughts on the essence of “the essence of the essence”, he pointed

out that Heidegger was not an anti-essentialist, and that some anti-essentialists in the current academic community are actually just “allergen sufferers for essence” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.212). The shining points of these ideas are everywhere, and the clusters are too numerous to be fully loaded.

Nature and Beauty, through the sorting out of the natural beauty concepts of Western modern and contemporary aestheticians such as Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Duchamp, basically connects a development thread of Western modern natural aesthetics. At the same time, based on the ideas of these Western aestheticians, it presents or constructs a system of so-called modern natural aesthetics that exists in Western aesthetics. This natural aesthetic system includes functional dimensions represented by Rousseau, free dimensions represented by Kant, artistic dimensions represented by Hegel, practical root dimensions represented by Marx, essential dimensions and experiential dimensions represented by Heidegger and Dufrenne. The sorting of Western natural aesthetic concepts in *Nature and Beauty* is basically based on the combination of two levels: external natural beauty and internal natural/free natural aesthetics. This is actually Du Xuemin’s consistent viewpoint, as he always understands and presents Western aesthetics from his own perspective of natural aesthetics.

From Rousseau to Dufrenne, different aestheticians have their own different ideological systems and aesthetic research interests, but they also consider the issue of natural beauty within the common ideological camp of modernity. They take the seemingly small issue of natural beauty as a starting point to consider the issue of human subjectivity, and use the reflection on human subjectivity as an opportunity to constantly reconstruct a modern view of nature, reconstruct a new relationship between humans and nature, and rethink the balance and position that humans should grasp in nature and the universe. And its ultimate goal is nothing more than to provide guarantees for a more poetic and aesthetic survival of humanity while correctly coordinating the relationship between humans and nature. The reflection and understanding of modernity are constantly evolving, and the recognition of a modern natural aesthetic is also constantly evolving. Humans are also constantly seeking a poetic way of living in the natural world. And it is precisely in the reflection on modernity and the grasp of the scale of the relationship between humans and nature that a kind of ethical aesthetics leading to purposive goodness is taking shape. In short, the natural aesthetics of modernity is actually a kind of ethical aesthetics of modernity.

### **3. Adhering to the Chinese centric stance of modernity**

In addition to sorting out the Western modern natural aesthetic ideas, *Nature and Beauty* also uses a chapter to analyze in detail the Chinese natural beauty theory from Laozi and Zhuangzi to contemporary ecological aesthetics. Undoubtedly, the analysis of Chinese natural beauty theory in *Nature and Beauty* is also based on a modern perspective. According to Foucault’s definition of modernity as discussed earlier, there may also be dimensions of modernity present in the society and thought of a certain period in ancient times. Even if ancient ideas do not have the connotation of modernity, we can still stand on the current standpoint of modernity, observe them from the perspective or vision of modernity, or transform ancient discussions about natural beauty into modernity, thus endowing them with the connotation of modernity. On the one hand, the

organization of the chapter in *Nature and Beauty* aims to supplement the Chinese aesthetic theory of natural beauty in cross-cultural dialogue between China and the West, in order to avoid the lack of subjectivity in aesthetic discourse. On the other hand, it aims to incorporate Chinese natural beauty discourse from ancient times to the present into this modern aesthetic framework, making it a necessary component of modern natural aesthetics and even modern aesthetics, laying the foundation for Chinese aesthetics to embark on the path of modernity, move towards cross-cultural aesthetic dialogue, and compose a common world aesthetic discourse.

According to the analysis of *Nature and Beauty*, the research on the theory of natural beauty in China generally consists of three parts. Firstly, it is the natural beauty theory represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, also known as the discourse of “beauty of heaven and earth”. Laozi and Zhuangzi’s “view of nature” includes both the “natural endowment” and the “natural world”. (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.225) These two types of nature are the ontological meaning of nature and the nature of external things. Laozi and Zhuangzi’s theory of natural beauty has become a resource for many thinkers in later generations and even contemporary times. In the construction of his theoretical system and the expansion of his life sentiment, Laozi and Zhuangzi’s theory of natural beauty is often borrowed, which makes Laozi and Zhuangzi’s theory of natural beauty always an open, contemporary, and modern ideology. Secondly, it is Li Zehou’s theory of natural beauty in practical aesthetics. The discussion on Li Zehou’s theory of natural beauty is placed in the second section of Chapter 4, which is a review of Marx’s theory of natural beauty. The reason for this is that Li Zehou’s theory of natural beauty in practical aesthetics is strongly influenced by Marx’s ideas on practical aesthetics and natural beauty theory. Li Zehou’s theory of natural beauty extended from the 1950s to the 1980s and 1990s, and his views remained largely unchanged. He simply accepted Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and proposed the perspectives of “humanization of nature” and “humanized nature” to discuss human practice and the changes it brings to the relationship between humans and nature, as well as the natural aesthetic issues arising from these changes. Marx’s natural aesthetics is a modern form of natural aesthetics, and similarly, Li Zehou’s theory of natural beauty, influenced by Marxist thought, is also a modern form of aesthetics. However, according to my opinion, there is a significant difference between Li Zehou’s theory of natural beauty and Marx’s theory of natural beauty. In Marx’s view, the proposal of his theory of natural beauty mainly presents its modernity of anti-modernity in the process of criticizing capitalist alienated labor, while Li Zehou’s practical aesthetics is placed in the context of China’s call for rationality and the construction of social modernity, resulting in his theory of natural beauty being more aimed at catering to the enlightening modernity and lacking the characteristics of critical modernity from Marx’s theory of natural beauty. Thirdly, it is the natural beauty theory of ecological aesthetics and life aesthetics, represented by Zeng Fanren, Yuan Dingsheng, Cheng Xiangzhan, and others, which has flourished since 2000. In the advancement of social modernity, human subjectivity and centrism are increasingly expanding and strengthened, and the originally harmonious ecological relationship between humans and nature is being disrupted. The natural ecological crisis is becoming increasingly prominent, and it is in this context that ecological aesthetics has officially emerged. “The most fundamental characteristic of ecological aesthetics is that it is an aesthetic view that includes an ecological dimension, which distinguishes it from the aesthetic form characterized by ‘anthropocentrism’”

(Zeng Fanren, 2010, p.279). This is reflected in the attitude towards nature, ecological aesthetics advocates for ecological natural beauty. “In the concept of natural beauty, it advocates for the ‘interrelationship’ of ‘equality and symbiosis’ between nature and human beings, rather than the traditional epistemological aesthetic relationship of ‘humanization of nature’” (Zeng Fanren, 2009, p.108). Whether ecological aesthetics can truly overcome anthropocentrism remains to be seen, just as *Nature and Beauty* also puts forward several constructive suggestions on the theoretical basis of ecological aesthetics: “How does the strong criticism of traditional epistemological aesthetics (especially Chinese practical aesthetics) and its anthropocentric tendency towards ecological aesthetics understand the possible existence of ecological aesthetic activities? What are the special characteristics of this ecological aesthetic activity that distinguish it from non-ecological aesthetic activities? How should we view the relationship between ecological aesthetics and natural aesthetics, which may be more fundamental than the relationship between ecological beauty and natural beauty? And how should we view the status of people in ecological aesthetics? How to ensure that this ecological aesthetic can achieve the ecological aesthetic of the unity of heaven and man, without distinguishing between the self and the object, without showing anthropocentric tendencies or subjectivity, thus maintaining a consistent state of ontology and life theory?” (Du Xuemin, 2022, pp.262-263) However, in any case, contemporary Chinese ecological aesthetics has its modern dimension, and its discourse on natural beauty makes it a modern form of natural aesthetics.

It is obvious that in the long history of Chinese aesthetics, there are certainly rich discussions on natural beauty, not just the three representative ideas listed above. From Laozi and Zhuangzi to practical aesthetics and ecological aesthetics, “the concept of natural beauty in China has undergone three stages of historical evolution: classical natural beauty, modern natural beauty, and contemporary ecological beauty. It also demonstrates a significant ethical construction value, which is the contribution of the concept of natural beauty in Chinese aesthetics to natural aesthetics.”(Du Xuemin, 2022, p.272) This highlights the modernity dimension of Chinese aesthetics and its Chinese centric position, which reflects the conscious identity recognition of subjectivity in contemporary Chinese aesthetics research, including natural aesthetics, and the desire and effort to make unique contributions to the construction of modern natural aesthetics. In the construction of natural aesthetics, *Nature and Beauty* delves deeply into the “natural beauty as nature itself” from Laozi and Zhuangzi, which has been unconsciously overlooked and obscured by later generations. This is a grand vision of the cross-cultural dialogue and intersection of modern Chinese and Western aesthetics, surpassing Western modernity and not satisfied with Western discourse on natural beauty. Instead, it imbues the connotation of natural beauty with the characteristics of Chinese culture, paving the way for a modern natural aesthetic system that integrates Chinese and Western aesthetics.

As a Chinese scholar, Du Xuemin has always been fully conscious of his subjective stance, which is a modern Chinese centric cultural stance, in his research on natural aesthetics. Whether in the study of natural beauty or other aesthetic topics, Western intellectual resources always have an overwhelming advantage, but do Western perspectives have limitations that are difficult to overcome? The answer is self-evident. “How to avoid the potential Westernization of natural aesthetics that may arise from the abundance of intellectual

resources and issues related to natural beauty in our research?” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.276) This is a question we must face. Du Xuemin personally demonstrated to us through his aesthetic research practice that we must supplement the study of natural beauty with the lesson of Chinese intellectual resources and endow it with a modern connotation. “Only by relying on this link can this study always be based on the practice of natural aesthetics of the entire human race (rather than Westerners or Chinese people) to think about the characteristics and value significance of natural aesthetics.” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.276) In the study of natural beauty, we have our own cultural perspective and overcome the binary opposition between Chinese and Western aesthetics and culture. Only by exploring together in the dialogue between Chinese and Western aesthetics and culture can we jointly deepen our thinking on the issue of natural beauty. On the premise of adhering to the Chinese cultural standpoint of modernity, its thinking on the issue of natural beauty not only turns it into a practical problem that we ourselves have to face, but also into a universal modernity problem that both China and the West need to face together. It has become a fundamental problem in aesthetic research, that is, we need to explore the issue of natural beauty and make it a key to opening up and solving the eternal problem of beauty and aesthetics.

“Ten years of sharpening a sword”, Du Xuemin quietly cultivated the research field of natural aesthetics and put in a lot of effort, thus achieving results that are equal to his efforts. *Nature and Beauty* is a rare and excellent aesthetic work in current domestic aesthetic research and can even be said to be “the best book” that systematically studies natural aesthetics from a modern perspective, elevating it to a high level of disciplinary construction. Looking through the entire book, if I have to offer some suggestions, the main points are as follows: Firstly, although the book discovered the natural beauty with ontology from Laozi and Zhuangzi, and applied it to the analysis of some aesthetic ideas, the book still lacks its own unique aesthetic vocabulary. If more unique concepts and categories related to natural beauty can be proposed on the existing basis and fully demonstrated in the historical review, it will make the construction of its modern natural aesthetic system more comprehensive and detailed. Secondly, although the subtitle of the book is *An Introduction to Natural Aesthetics in Modernity*, the book still lacks a systematic exposition and explanation of fundamental issues such as what natural beauty is and what the ultimate or future form of natural aesthetic construction will be. This leads to a lack of construction in the book, and more emphasis is placed on historical analysis. Of course, it is not denied that the author has their own views and self-awareness on natural beauty. Thirdly, when sorting out the modernity dimensions of natural aesthetics represented by Western thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Dufrenne, there is insufficient connection and analysis between their modernity ideas in terms of identity and differences, inheritance and reflection. Instead, the book is more satisfied with a temporal listing and lack a synchronic structural analysis. Fourthly, when sorting out and highlighting the meaning and dimensions of modernity in natural aesthetics, the understanding of the concept of “modernity” has not been implemented in a more specific category, such as ethical turn or subjectivity. If Du Xuemin can explore the modernity of natural aesthetics from one of these concepts and domains, it will make people feel more concrete and practical. Fifthly, the analysis of natural beauty theories in both the East and the West is disproportionate in length throughout the book. Most of it is a review of Western natural beauty theories, while

only one chapter is devoted to the review of Chinese natural beauty theories. This is certainly due to the dominant position of Western aesthetic thought, but when designing the structure, the commentator can still do some work to demonstrate a certain balance between Eastern and Western ideas. Sixth, although the author attempts to elevate “the concept of natural beauty and related issues” to “understanding or answering the essence of beauty” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.47), in reality, this goal has not been fully achieved. Seventh, although the author is aware of the differences between the natural view of natural aesthetics and the natural views of ecological aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, landscape aesthetics, and life aesthetics, there is a lack of systematic exposition and in-depth argumentation on the differences between them, as well as the uniqueness of natural aesthetics based on this discourse compared to other aesthetics. Eighth, when proposing the concept of “beauty as nature self” with ontological characteristics in natural beauty, applying it to the analysis of nature, life, society, and art, this was a characteristic, but it also brought its shortcomings, that is, the so-called “beauty as nature self” is not the natural beauty in the eyes of ordinary people, but a natural perfection and freedom realm of life reflected by the things that are naturally formed, which can easily confuse readers. In addition, this “beauty as nature self” is not only reflected in nature, but also in social life and art. Therefore, when discussing natural beauty, he constantly touches upon social beauty and artistic beauty. On the one hand, this illustrates the integration between natural beauty, social beauty, and artistic beauty, but on the other hand, it also leads to the continuous crossing of the research field of natural beauty. Ninth, when discussing the study of contemporary Chinese natural beauty, there is a lack of reflection on post-practical aesthetics. As a powerful aesthetic trend in contemporary China, post-practical aesthetics also has its own research topics on natural beauty, and compared to practical aesthetics, its modern characteristics may be even more distinct. The tenth, the final part of the work combines the ethical turn of contemporary aesthetics and the proposition that “aesthetics is the first philosophy”, pointing out that modern natural aesthetics has its ethical connotation. Among numerous branches of aesthetic research, natural beauty has a primary position because it can “shoulder the great responsibility of the ‘first philosophy’” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.280). This was originally a very insightful statement, but unfortunately it was briefly mentioned and lacked in-depth elaboration.

In summary, Du Xuemin’s *Nature and Beauty* is an important achievement in contemporary Chinese natural aesthetics research and is a masterpiece of aesthetic theoretical research full of wise insights everywhere. This book starts with a review of the discourse on natural beauty by both Eastern and Western aestheticians and then constructs a so-called “modern natural aesthetics”. The “natural aesthetics takes the study of natural beauty and natural aesthetics as its own responsibility, focusing on the dual connotations of the beauty of natural things and the beauty as nature self”. It is a “humanistic academic research that reflects on the dual natural aesthetics relationship between human and internal and external nature” (Du Xuemin, 2022, p.44). This modern natural aesthetics is undoubtedly a new branch of aesthetics, and the emergence of *Nature and Beauty* marks the rise and self-awareness of this new branch of aesthetics.

The modern natural aesthetics constructed by Du Xuemin has a profound theoretical foundation in both Eastern and Western thought, as well as its own theoretical summary and sublimation. It is an introduction to

“modern aesthetics” contributed by contemporary Chinese scholars, starting from the perspective of natural beauty, and is also an “introduction to modernity” guided by natural beauty. A significant feature of this book is that it always discusses the issue of natural beauty from the perspective of dialogue between artistic beauty and natural beauty. On the one hand, it constantly traces back history to discuss how Western thinkers viewed the relationship between artistic beauty and natural beauty; on the other hand, it emphasizes the theoretical significance and modern value of natural beauty research compared to artistic beauty research. It reflects on the previous excessive emphasis on artistic beauty research, which has suppressed and limited natural beauty research. It emphasizes how natural beauty research should break through the limitations of traditional aesthetic disciplines centered on artistic beauty research; on the other hand, due to the relatively broad understanding of the category of “nature”, which not only regards nature as natural things and the natural world, but also as the “nature” of “looking like nature self” and “as a matter of course”, its discourse constantly oscillates between natural beauty, artistic beauty, and even social beauty, life beauty, etc., making its discourse full of freedom and flexibility, or in other words, taking the discourse of natural beauty as an opportunity to achieve a holistic discourse on various aesthetic objects. The reason why *Nature and Beauty* always discusses and constructs the issue of natural aesthetics from the perspective of dialogue between artistic beauty and natural beauty, or the breakthrough of natural beauty research on artistic beauty, is, of course, its main purpose is to allow us to think about various issues related to natural beauty itself in the context of modernity, and to use natural beauty as the object to achieve a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of modern aesthetics. It also allows us to think about fate issues closely related to the meaning of human existence, which are related to art, society, and nature.

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