

# **Blue mountains, empty waters: the evolution of Chinese landscape painting under the influence of Chan Buddhism**

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In this paper I will describe the evolution of Chinese landscape painting throughout the period which led from the awareness of a primordial aesthetics to the emergence of Chan Buddhism. In fact, since the Chan tradition had a pervasive and profound impact on the Far Eastern cultures, it should be analysed in a more rigorous manner than it was in the past.

In particular, my thesis is that the Chan Buddhism consistently influenced the aesthetic canons and artistic themes of the epoch, expressing through the artworks original concepts and relevant philosophical ideas.

## **Pre-Buddhist Aesthetics**

Buddhism came very early to China, brought by merchants along the Silk Road and by the sea-routes. It started spreading during the Han dynasty (206 BCE — 220 CE), and the first historical proof of Buddhist influence dates back to the 1st century CE. In 148 CE the Pali Canon was translated in Chinese by the monk An Shigao, formerly a Parthian prince; it is still known as the most ancient translation of a Buddhist text in Chinese.

Despite that, we can still talk of 'pre-Buddhist Aesthetics' in Chinese Arts, firstly because the Buddhist influence did not arouse a sudden revolution. Instead, Buddhism has been absorbed in a long process of integrations and modifications. Secondly because we can already individuate, before the coming of Buddhism, some very interesting features in artworks that are typical of Chinese expression.

The consolidation of primitive forms of devotion in a social framework implies the codification of rites that express religious feeling through aesthetic devices. That is why music had a crucial role in the progression of artistic expression in Chinese culture: it was a binding agent between the common aesthetic consciousness, the individual need for sensuous pleasure and the social renewal of religious conventions, essential to protect the hierarchical system. In ancient China rites and music 'were both unified and distinct, [...] they at once worked together and had a division of labor', according to Li Zehou in his Chinese Aesthetic Tradition.

Nevertheless music also had a unifying power, as illustrated in the Book of Rites:

Music is the harmonization of heaven and earth; the rites order heaven and earth.  
When there is harmony, the myriad living things are in accord; when there is order,  
all things are differentiated.

This ritual function repeats one more time the deepest beliefs of ancient Chinese wisdom: that the numerous oppositions into which reality is divided must be brought back to an ideal unity, that is the mirror of true harmony.

There is no divine anger, no overflowing pain, no intolerable grief in classic Chinese art, whether from mythology to painting. All forms of art are consecrated to a poetic serenity, a composed equilibrium where sorrow is represented at most by a fragile sense of melancholy. We are far from Achilles' murderous rage, Oedipus' unmentionable sin, Ajax's crushing madness.

In fact, it is important to underline the tight link between artistic creation and pedagogic purposes in Chinese art. Artworks were never completely untied from the social dimension. Instead of being the result of an individual expression, as they are mainly perceived in the West after Romanticism, Chinese artworks were rather individual interpretations of a common substrate of knowledge and beliefs.

Furthermore aesthetics and art criticism in China have been developing in parallel with pictorial art since its very early appearance. Thus we possess a huge number of texts trying to describe art purposes and techniques, to fix rules for the evaluation of paintings, to comment on an artist's competence and intentions.

The most important art critic of this period was Xie He, who in his 'Classified Record of Painters of Former Times' (Gu huapin lu, about 550) codified the famous 'Six Principles' of general painting. They are settled in order of importance, and the first principle can be translated as 'spiritual resonance'.

Originally 'spiritual resonance' probably meant that a successful painting needs, more than anything else, to capture the 'spirit' of the depicted. Briefly, the vital force (qi) that animates the natural world should animate the painting as well. And conversely, the art piece should have a spontaneous adherence to natural world, showing no affectation. We could maybe make reference to the Western notion of 'inspiration', but there is more: the principle of spiritual resonance involves a sentiment of belonging to the cosmic unity, and we notice a dialectic between natural macrocosm and artistic microcosm.

The second principle is the 'internal hierarchy of the strokes', which concerns not only the texture of brush traits but also the importance of a coherent style linking drawing, colouring and writing.

The principle of resemblance deserves 'only' the third place in this scale, despite its enormous importance in the Western figurative art tradition. The fourth concerns the application of colours, tones and layers. In fifth place we find another pivotal principle of Western

paintings, the organization of space and depth. Finally, there is stylistic adherence to ancient models.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties landscape painting achieved an unprecedented popularity due to the 'Green-Blue' landscape style inaugurated by Zhan Ziqian (about 550-600) and continued by Li Sixun (651-716) and his son Li Zhaodao (about 670-730). The only left painting of Zhan Ziqian is 'Strolling about in Spring'.



Figure 1: Detail from Zhan Ziqian, 'Strolling about in Spring', ink and colours on silk, Palace Museum, Beijing. Source: Wikimedia Commons. "Stroll About InSpring". Licensed under Public Domain via Commons —

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stroll\\_About\\_InSpring.jpg#/media](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stroll_About_InSpring.jpg#/media)

This painting establishes a double innovation in the history of Chinese art. Firstly, the beginning of the Green-Blue style, and, more important, the invention of a new kind of artwork, called Shan shui (mountains-waters). In fact Shan shui is the equivalent of the word 'landscape' in the Chinese language and they used to describe landscapes with the juxtaposition of distinctive features of the land. In this attitude we find once more an allegory of the mystic dichotomy characterizing Daoist cosmology, the mountains representing the solid reality of the Earth, exemplified by the principle of yang, and the waters recalling the imperceptible essence of yin.

Even the colours form a bright, unreal dialogue: green and blue, the colours of wood and water, dominate the scene, with some accents of white and gold. Chromatic combination follows elemental rules exposed in classic books of Chinese tradition, reminding the

observer of the correct relationships of elements and their mutual dependence.

The use of shading to suggest distance or proximity creates a primitive perspective that seems to emphasize the extraneousness of the natural world to men's lives, reminding the observer how relative human wills are — not vain, just limited whether compared to the infinity of space and time. By redimensioning human ambitions the painter absolves a pedagogic duty, transmitting the right comprehension of everyone's role.

It is important to note how the depiction of waters and cloud is treated, because we will find a very different solution in latter paintings: clouds are fully drawn, even with outlines, coloured of a glittering white, and water's movement is simulated by a texture of subtle crossed lines. The qinglu (Blue and Green) style is renowned for the clearness of lines, the formal equilibrium and the attention for details.

## **Early Chan Aesthetics: the ink wash paintings**

Originally Daoism shared with yoga the consciousness of a cosmic unity, the practice of meditative forms, the evaluation of body as inseparable from mind and the consequent attempt at perfecting awareness control of breath and actions, and also an analogical thought founded on natural cycles. At the beginning of 8th century the Sinification of Buddhism was almost completed, giving birth to the Chan tradition that we could describe as a spontaneous evolution of Buddhism under Daoist influences.

Chan masters had started regarding early Daoist texts as brilliant examples of enlightened prose. In particular they were attracted to the notion of wu (nothing/emptiness/being-without) from Laozi and from the mistrust of Zhuangzi towards logical argumentations and the capacity of language to seize reality.

The famous metaphor of the empty jar from Laozi in the Daodejing explains that a jar is useful due to its emptiness (wu); once it is full, it is useless. Then the empty space inside the jar represents the potentiality or virtue (de) of the object. At the same time wu is the essential condition of nature because the actual state of objects is not determined once for all (it is 'empty' of permanent essence). Nevertheless, their instability (and therefore their in-determinability from a theoretical point of view) constitute their final virtue (de), id est the infinite variety of possible determinations.

At the same time, the Chan Buddhism emphasizes the mutual interpenetration of all phenomena in the Universe, expressed through the metaphor of Indra's net:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each eye of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. [...] If we now arbitrarily select one

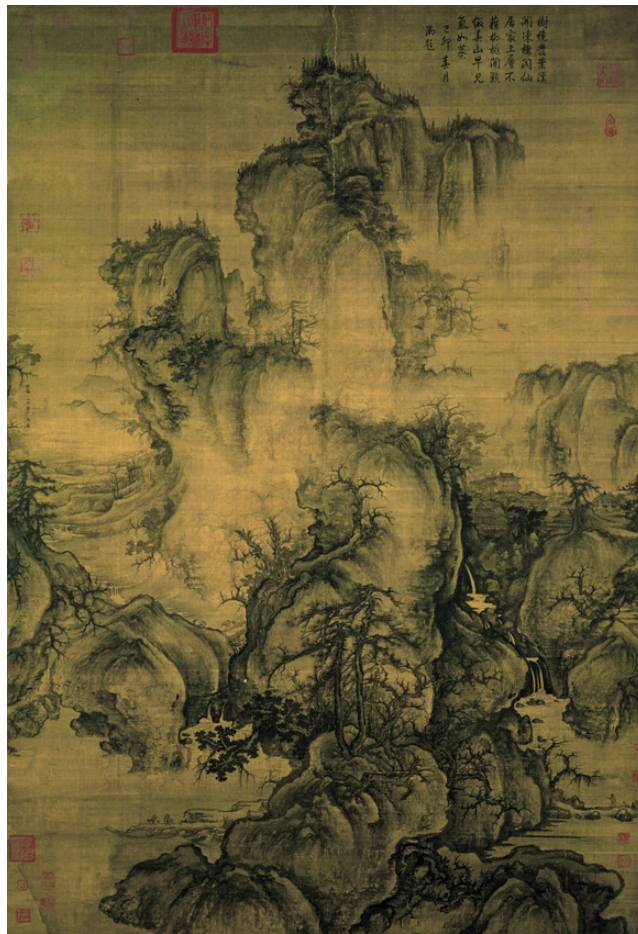


Figure 2: Guo Xi, 'Early Spring', ink and colours on silk, National Palace Museum, Taipei. Source: Wikimedia Commons. "Guo Xi — Early Spring (large)" by Guo Xi . Licensed under Public Domain via Commons —

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guo\\_Xi\\_-\\_Early\\_Spring\\_\(large\).jpg#/media](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guo_Xi_-_Early_Spring_(large).jpg#/media)

of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.

As the cycles of seasons, of life and death, of fullness and emptiness, even being and non being are generated one from the other, co-dependent and co-arising throughout the time and the space. There is no space, in the Chan world's view, for a rigid Parmenidean dualism in which Being and Non-Being are mutually exclusive.

I would like to examine here a painting from Guo Xi, painter from the 11th century, 'Early spring'. It is a Shan shui painting rather different from the previous one: empty spaces are used to open abyssal cliffs in the middle part of the painting, to suggest the placidity of waters, to erode contours of objects, to unfold the undefined horizon in front of the observer. The presence of man is spread along the scene, but so gently integrated in the environment that is hardly visible.

The comparison between the first and the second is striking: in the earlier painting clouds are drawn with clear contours and fully coloured with a brilliant white; the movement of the water is rendered by a subtle crosshatching. In the latter instead, skies and waters are merely empty and contours faint and emerge from a hazy vacuum.

The observer is invited to watch at the painting as an unfolding process, seizing reality in its ineffable development. Temporary oppositions are dissolved by the work of the artist, who represents the unrepresentable interpenetration of being and non being, men and nature, streams and mountains. Quoted from Shitao, artist, art theorist, Buddhist and Daoist monk, in *The Chinese Theory of Art* by Lin Yutang:

One might think of the sea only as the sea and of the mountains strictly as mountains only, which would be a mistake. To me mountains are seas and seas are mountains, and seas and mountains know that I know.

Chan masters also advocated the positive value of immediacy within the learning process, and ink wash paintings indeed point directly to the observer's conscience by depicting a floating world that does not need any further conceptualization. Their purpose is not descriptive, but rather expressive of a philosophical world view. For these reasons ink wash paintings can also be considered as useful instruments to help Chan disciples in their way to enlightenment.

## Conclusions

Finally I can summarize some fundamental points of this analysis.

First of all, Buddhism and earlier Chinese values combined with each other in a well-matched composition which is hard to split into its multiple origins. This fortunate mix was reflected in artworks. The considered landscapes present some important affinities, for example the handscroll format: whereas in the West the artist always makes reference to a delimited space such as a frame, a wall or a recess, Chinese paintings can be rolled and unrolled in a long, narrow strip.

Therefore a landscape unfolds and develops like a musical theme, rather than being a fixed window projected on the natural world. Even the clearness of sight is replaced by the uncertainty of a melody, because whereas Western paintings are often seized in a single gaze, Chinese landscapes instead invite the observer to hesitate on the depicted, to discover the scenery by directing the glance slowly across the picture. Like a musical theme, a Chinese landscape requires time to reveal itself, and this feature recalls us to the centrality of music in primitive Chinese aesthetics.

Concerning the influence of Chan Buddhism on Chinese aesthetics:

- It is impossible to claim from an historical point of view that the influence of Chan Buddhism has determined the creation of ink wash painting, but without any



doubt monochromatic ink landscapes quickly became a typical expression of Chan world view.

- Monochromatic ink landscapes possess strong philosophical and religious implications. As we can see in the second painting, the landscape sinks in a mystic haziness that seems to swallow and release the raw substance. This painting can be read as a philosophical statement, id est the raising of impermanence as a permanent feature of the Universe and the co-dependent arising of all phenomena.
- The Chan Buddhism appropriated monochromatic ink painting style emphasizing extreme features to express important concepts concerning reality. We could say that earlier paintings represented nature, whereas in Chan Aesthetics paintings described the nature of nature.

The soteriological dimension of Buddhism lent to the paintings an atmosphere of relaxed gaiety, where a melancholic flavour is subdued by an overall peace. Compared to previous artworks, Chan paintings are provided with a superior awareness, not only technical, but also philosophical.

This peculiar world view is far from the Dionysian spirit of tragic rebellion in front of the cruelty of nature. Despite suffering and isolation the painter never feels abandoned, because he is part of a cosmic communion, as is beautifully shown in this poem from Wang Wei:

Leaning alone in the close bamboos  
I am playing my lute and humming a song.  
Too softly for anyone to hear –  
Except my comrade, the bright moon.