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# Chinese Landscape Aesthetics

## The Exchange and Nurturing of Emotions

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And high over the willows, the fine birds sing to each other, and listen,  
Crying – “Kwan, Kuan,” for the early wind, and the feel of it.  
The wind bundles itself into a bluish cloud and wanders off.  
Over a thousand gates, over a thousand doors are the sounds of spring singing,  
And the Emperor is at Ko.

*Excerpt of The River Song, by Li Bai, 8th century CE, translated by Ezra Pound<sup>1</sup>.*

The Chinese language has a variety of terms that are typically translated into English as *landscape*. There is 景观 jǐng guān – scenery view. An old meaning of 景 jǐng is light, luminous. So, literally 景观 jǐng guān means luminous view. The term is generally used when referring to foreign educational programmes in landscape architecture. Traditionally, university departments in China indicate an engagement with ideas of landscape with the characters 园林 yuán lín – garden forests. These are the characters for the classical Chinese gardens. The characters 风景 fēng jǐng, that literally translate to wind scenery, or wind light as the French sinologist François Jullien suggests<sup>2</sup>, are also fairly common. Landscape in painting is referred to as 山水 shān shuǐ – mountain(s) water(s) – but also as 山川 shān chuān – mountain(s) river(s). The attentive reader will have noticed that the Chinese language always employs a pair of characters to refer to landscape. Likewise, there is always an in-between that indicates space for agency.

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound and Timothy Billings (ed.). *Cathay: A Critical Edition*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> François Jullien. *Living Off Landscape: Or, the Unthought-of in Reason*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield International, [2014] 2018, p. 46.

You see a white path disappearing into the blue and think of traveling on it.  
You see the glow of setting sun over level waters and dream of gazing on it.  
You see hermits and mountain dwellers and think of lodging with them.  
You see cliffs by lucid water or streams over rocks, and long to wander there.

*Excerpt of The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams by Guo Xi, ca. 1080 CE*<sup>3</sup>

Landscapes allow viewers to travel, to dream of gazing, dwell and wander, suggested the celebrated painter Guo Xi in the treatise entitled *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams*, written around 1080 CE. The Chinese *wind light* and *mountain(s) water(s)* that refer to landscape as mentioned above, reflect the fact that the Chinese concept of landscape developed in conversation with poetry and painting. Indeed, the etymological development of the terms cannot be separated from the interaction with an art that goes beyond the perceptual. Wind touches us. Art in China is affectual. Calligraphy, which is closely related to painting, is the prime example, highlighting that art in China involves body and mind. As painting, calligraphy forms through skilfully performed movements that are learnt during decades of practice. Likewise, art is not appreciated from a distance but again engaged with. It is touched, written and stamped on.

In Europe, the meaning of *landscape* has also evolved in connection with painting. The defining development, however, took place only in the 16th century when the Renaissance initiated the interest in the depiction of undisturbed nature. Before this, landscape painting did not exist as a discipline in Europe. Reflecting this relative late development, a contemporary definition of landscape is: “the appearance of the area of land, which the eye can view at once; the aspect of a country, or a picture or photograph representing it; the production of such pictures or photographs.”<sup>4</sup> While the term *landscape* can be found in European literature of earlier centuries, its concept at the time also related to questions of representation. *Landscape* is formed by the noun *land* and the ancient Indo-Germanic verb *scapjan*, which in its meaning is close to *shaping*.<sup>5</sup> However, *shape*, as unity in form, indicating something that differentiates itself from other things, emphasises borders. The idea of a cut-out, that is present in the contemporary meaning of *landscape*, reflects the fixation of the term *landscape* during the Renaissance when concepts of part-whole relations were discussed that are inherent in a mechanical interpretation of nature and the living. In consonance with the Renaissance ideas that also form the basis of linear perspective, the concept of *landscape* similarly further developed with an emphasis on the visual sense. *Landscape* depicts an ideal. Its ideas, developed in painting, were later transmitted to physical spaces and influenced what the typical Western perception of landscape is.

Considering the different contexts that facilitated the creation of the concepts of landscape in China and Europe, it is not surprising that the Chinese terms for landscape do not reflect what

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Bush and Hsio-Yen Shih. *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 153.

<sup>4</sup> Allied Chambers. ‘Landscape’, In *The Chambers Dictionary*. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd., 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Strecker. Conceptualizing Landscape, In *Landscape Protection in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 9-22.

Europeans typically associate with the idea of landscape. For example, it was only in the 18th century that China learned of linear perspective. It is most lucidly termed 透视 tòu shì – through view. Chinese landscape paintings until then used oblique projection with shifting viewpoints, referred to with the terms 远近 yuǎn jìn – near far. These paintings engage the viewer in an oscillation between the poles of the far and the near, and the fixed and the flowing. There is no separation between these poles. There is connection. China did not frame paintings. Landscape painting scrolls were explicitly conceived for interaction with the viewer. The Chinese near-far ‘perspective’ appears to take this interaction into account. The view lines point outwards, and viewpoints – shifting at short intervals – draw the viewer in again and again into a different scene. The viewer enters into relations with a new set of scenes as she or he moves along. There is no fixation as the figures and objects seem to shift constantly, entering into new relations as the viewer unrolls the painting. In fact, Chinese landscape scrolls resist the viewer. They engage people with both bodies and minds as participants. Chinese landscapes in the physical world act in a similar manner.

Chinese art did not emphasise artists with divine vision as mediators between the viewers and the world. Instead, it stressed the function of the artwork as an interface, making viewers participants in the world. The German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han goes as far as suggesting that artists in China have perfected the art of absenting themselves from their works to grant agency to those who appreciate the works.<sup>6</sup> According to Han, it is this kind of absence, which allows the work of art to perform, to act, and to engage the viewers, connecting them to the larger world. Painters also left blank space on their scrolls for others to imprint their stamps. Signs of appreciation, these stamped images become part of the painting and communicate with it. It is within the context of the work of art as interface to an experiencing of the world that Guo Xi’s text quoted further above, is to be understood.

That works of art should be created to act as mediators between viewers and the world, or rather between living and acting inhabitants and the world, was maintained over many hundreds of years. In the famous Chinese painting manual *Mustard Seed Garden: Manual of Painting*, which was written between 1679 and 1701, around 600 years after Guo Xi’s text, the painting apprentices are told that “Figures should, in fact, be depicted in such a way that people looking at a painting wish they could change places with them.”<sup>7</sup> These ideas, which have been fostered in an engagement with the painting and simultaneously the making of landscapes in the classical Chinese gardens, still linger on in the Chinese landscapes of today.

We are touched by landscape. A scene gives birth to emotions (景生情 jǐng shēng qíng). Landscape induces a process of emotional exchange between the ‘scene’ itself and someone who takes part in the scene, may he or she wander, dwell, or dream of gazing. Wind and light, and waters and mountains make the scenery. It is not inactive. It is flowing with the waters, halting with the mountains. In the images of light and wind the ephemeral is inscribed. Time is part of

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<sup>6</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Abwesen: zur Kultur und Philosophie des Fernen Ostens*. Berlin: Merve, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Mai-Mai Sze and Kai Wang. *The Mustard Seed Garden: Manual of Painting*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1679-1701] 1978, p. 220.

space. The scene performs. Both human beings wandering in the scene and the scene itself are active agents in a process that the Chinese scholar Yù Yuán 郁沅 refers to as emotion-scene blending (情景交融 qíng jǐng jiāo róng).<sup>8</sup>

Chinese landscapes nurture emotions and emerge through affection. They live within the sensorial experience of those who come to engage with them in an infinite play between the mountains and waters, light and wind.

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<sup>8</sup> Yù Yuán 郁沅, On the three types of emotion-scene blending 情景交融三类型论, *Journal of Southeast University (Philosophy and Social Science)* 东南大学学报 (哲学社会科学版), (3):89, 2007, pp. 89-94.