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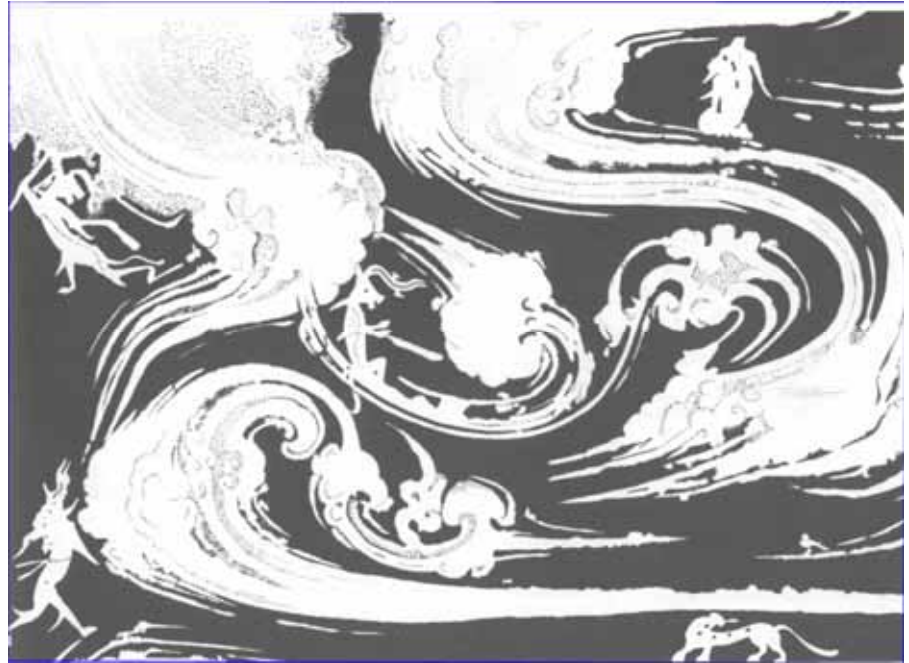
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## Mysticism made visible: Taoist spirituality and the art of landscape painting

### John Clarke

The mystical sense of oneness with nature is certainly not limited to the Chinese, but its people have developed an especially refined sense of reverence for mountains, rocks, streams, pools, animals, trees, and flowers in which the ever-moving spirit of the *tao* is to be found. Landscape for the Chinese was not just a scenic backdrop to human activities but was invested with deep religious significance, the contours of the earth reflecting cosmic influences, and the shape of the land decipherable like a sacred text. According to John Blofeld, travelling in China prior to the Communist revolution, 'A feeling for nature amounting almost to worship was apparent to the traveller in any part of the country where traditional ways had not yet been supplanted', a feeling which he found especially apparent in the Taoist monasteries which he visited.

This sense of mystical communion with the natural world was most fully expressed in the great landscape paintings created in China over the past thousand years, their spirit summed up memorably in Janet Cooper's phrase 'mysticism made visible'. Of all the Chinese arts landscape painting stands supreme and expresses most completely the Taoist vision of nature. These works derive from a number of cultural and religious sources, including Confucian, Buddhist, and even shamanistic traditions, but there is no doubt that this art form was a particularly important medium for the expression of Taoist mystical impulses. It was primarily practised, not purely as an art form in the Western sense, but rather as a kind of spiritual exercise, as a way of attaining insight into the *tao* itself, and even as a way of participating in the creative activity of the *tao*.



This form of art was widely practised in monasteries - Chan Buddhist as well as Taoist - as part of the religious discipline of these foundations, and in more secular contexts the creation of such paintings, and of associated landscape gardens and miniature tray landscapes, provided Taoist monks, and indeed the Confucian literati as well, not only with a means of recreation and escape, but with a form of spiritual exercise akin to the practice of yoga and meditation. In the words of the Tang poet Fuzai concerning the work of a contemporary artist: 'When we contemplate Master Chang's art, it is not painting, it is the very *Tao* itself. Whenever he was engaged in painting, one already knew that he had left mere skill far behind. His ideas reach into the dark mystery of things, and for him, things lay not in the physical senses, but in the spiritual part of his mind'.

This unique tradition of painting has not always been appreciated in the West. For long it was viewed as inherently lightweight, conveying

a vaguely poetic mood rather than a serious philosophical or spiritual intent, and in spite of the mania for *chinoiserie* in the eighteenth century, and the continued admiration for the meticulous perfection of Chinese craftsmanship, landscape painting, the art form which the Chinese themselves held to be their supreme creation, was until recently regarded as immature by comparison with Western art.

In spite of this long-standing lack of appreciation in the West, Chinese landscape painting has begun to acquire a belated recognition. We are beginning to realise that this form of painting cannot be separated from other aspects of the spiritual life of China, and must be seen within the wider context both of its religious and philosophical ideas, as well as its moral and political dimensions. This change of attitude has involved a growing awareness of depth of feeling and truth to nature that is present in the great landscape paintings of the Sung period which,



long before the advent of non-representational painting in Europe, used methods which have only become acceptable in the West since the modernist revolution of the twentieth century.

A factor which has helped us to become more attuned to Chinese landscape art undoubtedly is the growing need to integrate our conception of human existence more intimately with nature, and to challenge the well-established belief in our right to dominate and control the natural world. Chinese landscape painting is arguably ecological in spirit, and presents an almost mystical sense of the underlying interconnectedness of all things and in particular the integration of the microscopic human world within the macrocosm of nature as a whole. In this form of art no lordly place is given to the human element, and the image of the tiny human figure and human dwellings in the landscape teaches us, in terms which cannot adequately be expressed in words, that it is in nature that we find symbolic values and, above all, universal harmony.

Mountains held a central place in many landscape paintings. They were seen as symbolising closeness to untrammelled nature, and as embodying a spiritual power, a source of energy and life (*ch'i*) with which we are invited to become identified, a view which almost certainly has roots that go back to ancient animistic beliefs. This attitude is something

with which it is possible for us in our own age to empathise. It is important to remember that a positive and even a mystical attitude to mountains only emerged in the West in fully articulated form only in the Romantic period. Prior to that time the mountainous regions of the world were looked upon by Christian thinkers as alien and horrid, and theologians often found mountains an incomprehensible irruption on the face of God's otherwise beautiful world, to be explained away as the rubble-heap left over from the creation!

There has of course been a tradition in the West of landscape painting which goes back to the Renaissance. But in this tradition nature has often been portrayed as a background to the central drama of human or mythological activity. By



contrast, in Chinese landscape painting the human element is not allowed to dominate the scene, but is integrated into it, not in a way that overwhelms or humbles the human world but rather which places the human and the natural in balanced proportion to one another. It is this quality that inspired the Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain to comment that the great Chinese landscape artists were primarily concerned, not with the depiction of nature but with a '*sort of interpenetration between Nature and Man*', a feature which gave Chinese art a uniquely spiritual quality.

The language of Chinese landscape painting is one which not only evokes feelings of peace, harmony, and mystical union with nature, but generates at various levels an underlying sense of life and creativity. The landscapes themselves seem to be alive, animated by *ch'i*, expressing under the painter's brush the movements of animals, and suggesting that the painter's art is in some sense associated with the cosmic processes of creation. Some painters expressed this by saying that when painting they actually *become* the mountain, the water, the bamboo, and in the words of a ninth century writer, Zhang Yanyuan, '*Painting brings the finishing touches to the world of the universal creator*'.

Thus, the painter was expected not merely to represent the visible shape of nature but in some sense to draw out its spiritual topography

through a process of empathetic identification. The product of this art, therefore, was not an just object in a frame or on a scroll, to be looked at and admired for its form and colour, but rather a mysterious thing that contained the essence of the world of nature. According to the twentieth century writer and artist Mai-mai Sze, painting in China 'is not a profession but an extension of the art of living, for the practice of the tao of painting is part of the traditional tao of conduct and thought, of living in harmony with the laws of Tao'.

In this way the act of painting manifests, not merely the cultivation of technique, but rather the kind of creative spontaneity which is central to Taoist thinking. This is summed up in the phrase *wu-wei* which means acting without contrived effort, and which encourages us not to attempt to impose our wills on nature, or to struggle with the obduracy of our own limitations, but to achieve an inner freedom which follows rather than confronts the flow of nature. It is a process which could only be described as one of self-transformation. Whereas in the West the emphasis has been largely on the art-object, and, until the twentieth century at least, on its representational element, in China the main focus of interest, particularly in the Taoist context, has been more on the process of artistic creation itself, and indeed on its fundamentally religious nature. Thus, painting was seen, not just as a way of producing an aesthetic object, nor even as merely an object of spiritual contemplation, but as an expressive act, more precisely as a way of achieving and manifesting and circulating the *ch'i*, the spiritual/material energy of nature itself.

As such it is a form of yoga. Painters, suitably prepared through quiet sitting and through the lifelong absorption of nature into their very being, were thought to achieve a state of emptiness out of which the painting emerges spontaneously yet with the utmost artistry, thus imitat-



ing, and indeed participating in, the way in which the world of nature itself emerges spontaneously yet with the utmost harmony out of the primal emptiness of the *tao*. According to the philosopher Jianping Gao landscape painting was a way of 'mutual transformation' in which the artist 'becomes the semi-Creator of the world', and in which the painter was not supposed to 'gaze' at the world with the aim of conquering its appearance, but to 'contemplate it' with an inborn love, continually identifying with it in his soul, in order to make himself part of nature and nature part of him.

In this way the creative activity of the artist is nothing less than the Taoist quest for unity with the *tao*, a form of 'mysticism made visible'.

Perhaps the nearest comparison with Western aesthetic theory and practice is to be found in the Romantic period. Here, not only was

the metaphysical significance of art recognised, and even given a privileged position, but the expressive factor came to be of central importance, and the process of artistic creation was sometimes seen to be endowed with a spiritual, even a priestly, function.

Whatever the plausibility of this kind of historical comparison, the religio-aesthetic tradition of the Taoist monks, with its emphasis on inner freedom and self-realisation, its simplicity and its gentle enhancement of emotion and awareness, seems able to speak to us today in ways that would have been difficult to comprehend until relatively recently. It is not that art has begun to replace religion - or morality for that matter but rather that through the activity of art in whatever form in contrast to its passive contemplation or critical appreciation, many people have begun to discover an access to experiences of ecstasy and fulfilment that have in the past been almost exclusively identified with formal religions. We can hardly hope to reproduce the unique qualities of this ancient Chinese tradition of painting, but some of its spirit can be recovered in our own quest for a more harmonious life in tune with the creative energies of the natural world.

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