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### ***Being* in Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting**

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# Being in Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting

Sophia Suk-mun Law

*Visuality is very much a socio-cultural process. Comparing a Baroque landscape painting to a traditional Chinese landscape, one can clearly see that Baroque and ancient Chinese landscape painters perceived nature in two very distinct ways. This paper will first explore the historically and culturally specific nature of the visuality found in the ancient Chinese landscape tradition. It will go on to argue that the meaning of the ancient Chinese painters' visualisation of nature points to a kind of being in nature which in some respects echoes Heidegger's philosophy of being. Traditional Chinese landscape painting is better known as shanshui (literally meaning mountain and water), the earliest reference to which can be traced back to the fourth century. This paper explores the perspective of ancient Chinese thoughts on nature and the emergence of shanshui as a painting tradition, and its close relationship to classical Chinese philosophy, especially Daoism. It will illustrate that shanshui reveals an experience of the conceptual rather than the visual. The theme of shanshui is thus more about being rather than seeing.*

*Keywords: Baroque; Being; Conceptual Experience; Heidegger; Landscape Painting; Shanshui; Socio-cultural Visuality; Visual Experience*

*Visuality*, as defined by Walker and Chaplin (1997: 22) is “vision socialised”. Our visual perception is more than a camera’s eye, which involves not only a mechanical intake of light and colours, but also complex neuronal activity in the brain regions concerned with cognition and memory. As Norman Bryson (1988: 91) pointed out, when “human beings collectively orchestrate their visual experience together it is

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required that each submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world". How we see the world and how we present the world are therefore, to a great extent, time and culture specific. In his discussion about Western society, sociologist Donald Lowe (1982) explicitly stated that the history of perception was closely related to the development of Western civilisation. In an interview, Nicholas Mirzoeff preferred the term 'visuality' to 'visualisation' when referring to the visual in the overlap between representation and cultural power (Dikovitskaya 2006: 255). *Visuality* is a socio-cultural process. This is obvious when one examines and compares a Baroque landscape painting to a traditional Chinese landscape. While both took nature as their subject, it is indisputable that Baroque and traditional Chinese landscape painters perceived nature in two very distinct ways. Unlike landscape painting in the West, which emerged fully as an independent subject in the seventeenth century and quickly attained great significance, landscape painting in China reached its peak much earlier in the tenth century. This paper will first explore the historically and culturally specific nature of the *visuality* found in the ancient Chinese landscape tradition. It will go on to argue that the meaning of the ancient Chinese painters' visualisation of nature points to a kind of *being* in nature, which in some respects echoes Heidegger's philosophy of *Being*.

According to James Herbert, "art is a human construct that functions in particular ways at particular times" (in Dikovitskaya 2006: 186). How an artist presents his/her subject and how he/she incorporates the viewer's response to the work are subject to the specific socio-cultural context of the artist's time. The landscape tradition embodied in the Five Dynasties and Northern Song periods has been considered a classic of Chinese art ever since its emergence. Traditional Chinese landscape painting is better known as *shanshui*, which literally means mountain (*shan*) and water (*shui*). In fact, the earliest reference to *shanshui* can be traced back to the fourth century. Its emergence was closely related to classical Chinese philosophy, especially Daoism. One of the earliest constructs of *shanshui* comes from the story of a monk called Zong Bing (2007: 375–443) of the Southern Dynasty.

As a Daoist who sought the Way (the Absolute) in nature, Zong Bing had travelled throughout his life to numerous mountains and rivers, seeking enlightenment from nature. One day, in his later years, he was no longer able to roam freely in nature because of his degenerating physical condition. While lamenting the disability that restricted him from contemplation in the natural world, an idea sparked in his mind – he might be bound by his physical body but his spiritual mind should never be so restrained. Immediately, he took up his brush and started depicting the mountains and rivers that he had visited earlier in life. He then meditated in front of the finished image on the wall and, according to his own account, then lay down comfortably on his mat and enjoyed his *woyou* (spiritual travelling in bed) among these images of mountains and waters. This is the famous story of Zong Bing *Woyou*

and can be taken as the key point for the emergence of the *shanshui* tradition in the history of Chinese painting.

Zong Bing's story illustrates that *shanshui* emerged as an independent subject in the history of Chinese painting, and it appeared as an urge toward the inner expression of the understanding of nature, situated within a philosophical framework. The structural framework of *shanshui* aims to promote a spiritual contemplation rather than a visual appreciation. When ancient Chinese referred to such kind of paintings of nature as *shanshui*, they were implying the unique references of *shan* and *shui* in Chinese philosophy.

*Shan* (mountains) and *shui* (water), as two prototypes of nature, had long been of interest to ancient Chinese philosophers. References to *shan* and *shui* can be found in the ancient classics of both Confucianism and Daoism. Ancient Chinese philosophers took the merits of the two natural elements as a kind of metaphor for human virtues. In the *Analects*, Confucius pointed out that, "the wise find joy in water; the benevolent find joy in mountains" (in Lau 1992: 53). In other words, sages had intuition and insight into the truth of nature as found in mountains and water. Laozi proclaimed the merits of water, which he compared to the best of man:

Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way. . . . The best of man is like water, which benefits all things, and does not contend with them, which flows in places that others disdain, where it is in harmony with the Way. (in Lau 2001: 11)

Laozi further attested that "the reason why the River and the Sea are able to be king of the hundred valleys is that they excel in taking the lower position. Hence they are able to be king of the hundred valleys" (in Lau 2001: 97).

As we can see, ancient Chinese philosophers perceived nature in a very conceptual way. Furthermore, these thinkers often affirmed a sense of order and harmony in nature. Zhuangzi believed that nature demonstrates the interconnectedness of all forms of life, a perspective which is close to the modern science of ecology. He elucidated:

So it is the mountains and hills are made to be the elevations that they are by accumulation of earth which individually are but low. So also rivers like the Kaing and the Mo obtain their greatness by the union of [other smaller] waters with them. (in Legg 1962: vol. 2, 162)

A similar perception of nature as a unified organic whole is found in the *Book of Changes*:

Heaven is the ultimate source . . . great indeed is the ultimate source. Ten thousand things receive their beginnings from it . . . the clouds drift and the rain falls. All things flow into their forms. (Chan 1973: 184)

Again, nature is interpreted here as a chain of interconnected things in different forms. It continues to explain the relationships among the myriad of things:

Ten thousand things receive life from it [Earth] when it is in harmonious union with heaven. Earth contains everything in abundance. Its virtue is in harmony with the infinite. It encompasses all things and illuminates the universe. Each individual thing achieves perfect success. (Chan 1973: 205)

Ancient Chinese philosophers saw the different elements in nature not as separate entities, but as parts of a unified whole. As just one entity among the wealth of things in existence, man, in the eyes of these ancient philosophers, is merely a small creature: “Between Heaven and earth I am but as a small stone or a small tree on a great hill, so long as I see myself to be this small, how should I make much of myself?” (Legg 1962: vol. 1, 376). With such an awareness of the humble nature of man, the ancient Chinese philosophers listened to and learnt from nature. Daoists, in particular, had a great affinity for experiencing man in the natural environment and seeking a kind of harmonious unification between man and nature:

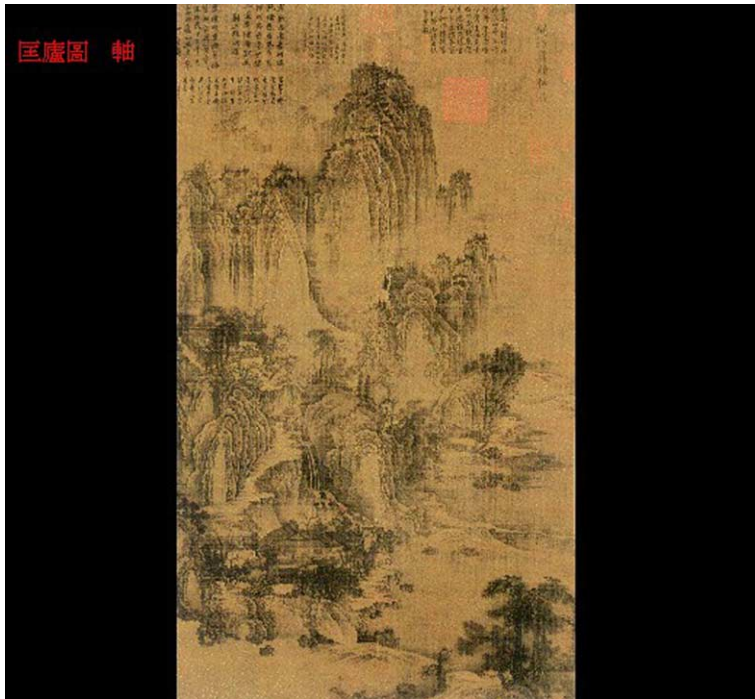
I am a unit in the mist of space and time. In winter, I wear skins and fur; in summer, grass-cloth; in spring, I plough and sow, my strength being equal to the task; in autumn, I gather in my harvest. At sunrise, I get up and work; at sunset, I rest. I enjoy myself between heaven and earth, and my mind is content. (Legg 1962: vol. 2, 150)

The unique feature of the above quote is its generalisation. The description is of a conceptual, not visual, perception of the changing seasons and times. It focuses on the joy of *being* ‘between heaven and earth’ and the contentment of such a state of mind. So we can imagine that when a Daoist monk like Zong Bing wandered in nature, it is not what he saw and felt that matters, but rather his understanding of *being* as a part of that environment.

Zong Bing’s visualisation of nature must have been influenced by Daoism. Although his work did not survive, clues as to how his *shanshui* images might have looked can be found in his treatise on landscape painting called *Hua shanshui xu* (Preface of *Shanshui*). The story of his *woyou* (mind-travelling) and his treatise had a tremendous impact on the development of ancient *shanshui* tradition. *Shanshui* masters of the Five Dynasties and Northern Song followed in his footsteps and attained the highest achievements of the tradition. The works of Jing Ho, Dong Yuan, Ju Ren, Li Cheng, Guo Xi and Fan Kuan have been taken as classics and exemplars of traditional *shanshui* painting. Despite some stylistic differences, the works of these ancient masters share some common characteristics including a sense of monumentality, generalisation and universality, as well as expressions of harmony and the perfect integration of man and nature. Illustrated by these canons with references taken from ancient treatises on *shanshui*, in the following section I will elucidate how these features reflect the visuality structured in ancient *shanshui*.

The first significant feature found in classical *shanshui* is a vivid sense of monumentality. Works of the Five Dynasties and Northern Song periods including Jing Ho's *Mt. Lu* (Figure 1), Ju Ren's *Thousands of Peaks and Dense Forests* (Figure 2), Li Cheng's *Solitary Temple and Clear Peaks*, Guo Xi's *Early Spring* (Figure 3) and Fan Kuan's *Autumn Travellers Dwelling in the Mountains* (Figure 4) all adopt a colossal and panoramic composition. In these images, mountains, occupying most of the painting space, are centred and raised vertically like a monument standing firm and solid in front of us. Behind the prodigious mountains are distant clouds painted in washes of ink, or remote mountains shaped in fading washes. Such rendering creates an enormous sense of space extending into the infinite. Jing Ho's composition is particularly grand and breathtaking as it displays a series of mountains set in a vast region.

The visage of monumentality and infinity is advocated in Zong's theory. At the beginning of his *Hua shanshui xu*, Zong opened with a discussion of the limitations upon, as well as the freedom of, a landscape painter. He proclaimed that the pupil of one's eye is small and yet its range of vision is infinite; although the silk used for a painting is only a metre or so in width and length, the view it encompasses can extend to thousands of miles (Zong 2007). This suggests that Zong, when creating his images, was not constrained by the physical boundaries of the one-point perspective



**Figure 1** Jing Ho, *Mountain Lu*, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, ca. 900. 185.8 × 106.8cm. National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.



and the limited size of the silk. His image, as we can imagine, had to be spectacular, exhibiting miles of scenery sweeping across the painting surface. As mentioned earlier, the Daoists' vision of nature adheres not to any particular natural element, but to the vastness of nature, which is best manifested in the sense of monumentality explicated in the works of the Five Dynasties and Northern Song masters. These canons of *shanshui* are referred to by scholars as monumental landscapes (Sullivan 1984).

As indicated by the story of *Zong Bing Woyou*, the first realisation of Zong's *shanshui* was not any specific scene, but an accumulated conceptual perception of his episodes of *being* in nature throughout his lifetime. We can thus deduce that his depiction came from the flow of his 'mind-travelling', and we might envisage that the perspective of his images changed as his mind flew from one point to the next. This is the 'freedom' of a landscape painter that Zong emphasised in his treatise and that later painters adopted as a principle in the creation of *shanshui*. Traditional *shanshui* paintings do not adopt a fixed point perspective, as used in Western landscape art, but combine the 'three-distance perspective', namely, the 'high', 'level' and 'deep' distance, into one single painting. Take, for example, Guo Xi's *Early Spring* (Figure 3) in which the whole image does not have a coherent sense of space. Rather, it consists of various perspectives from different standpoints, including one from below looking upwards (the colossal mountain in the central upper section), from a high point looking toward the far distance (the distant mountains in the upper right section) and from the front looking to the back (the path in the left middle section). Such rendering of space incites the audience's vision to roam and wander around the image, and facilitates a viewing that is dynamic.

Ancient *shanshui* masters perceived natural elements as parts of an interconnected chain of things. Most ancient *shanshui* are set in longitudinal format. Rocks, trees, mountains, water, architecture and figures are all placed and structured in a continuous and ensuing flow, assisting a viewing of the work with changing perspectives, leading one from bottom to top, from foreground to distant background. The three-distance perspective and the seamless arrangement of elements in ancient *shanshui* provoke an experience of 'mind-travelling' around a grand and colossal sense of space.

Lack of specificity, or generalisation, is another emblematic characteristic of ancient *shanshui*. Sharing the ancient philosophers' vision of nature as a united whole in harmony, ancient *shanshui* painters, in depicting their subject, focused not on the individual apparent quality of things, but on their shared abstract quality. Even in a work with a specific title, such as Jing Ho's *Mt. Lu* (Figure 1), the form and expression of the mountains evince a communal sense of monumentality and immenseness, as in other ancient monumental landscapes. It shows none of the details or specificities of Mount Lu. In fact, it does not actually resemble the real Mount Lu, which is situated in Jiujiang in the Jianxi province. The real mountain is not exceptionally large and Lu's image is far more stupendous and immense than the real mountain. Likewise, we can barely identify the actual location of Ju Ren's *Thousands of Peaks and Dense Forests* (Figure 2). We can only say that the mountains are round in shape and

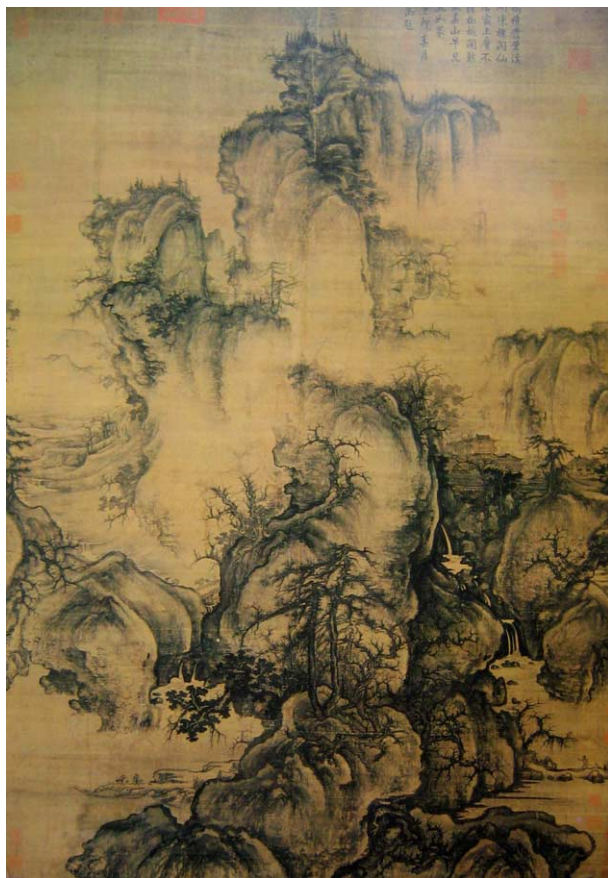
full of vegetation, as are the peaks found along the Yangtze River in the south. On the other hand, Fan Kuan's and Li Chen's images depict more rocky and angulated structures, reminiscent of the mountains in northern China.

The feature of generalisation envisaged by ancient *shanshui* also applies to the sense of time elicited by their images. Again, even in works where the title specifies a season, such as Guo Xi's *Early Spring* and Fan Kuan's *Autumn Travellers Dwelling in the Mountains* (Figure 4), a collective sense of the season rather than a particular day and moment is presented. Such an approach is well elucidated in Guo Xi's theory on landscape painting, *Linquan Gaozhi*, in which he talked about the essence of mountains and waters in different seasons. He said:

Mountains in Spring are saturated with mist and clouds, make people feel lively; mountains in Summer are full of green and shade, make people feel bright and open; mountains in Autumn are clear and vivid, make people feel solemn; and mountains in Winter are static and gloomy, make people feel quiet and lonesome. (Guo 2007: 67)



**Figure 2** Ju Ren's *Thousands of Peaks and Dense Forests*, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, ca. 980. 185.4 × 57.5cm. National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.



**Figure 3** Guo Xi, *Early Spring*, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, ca. 1000–ca. 1090. 158.3 × 108.1cm. National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

Similarly, Guo described how clouds and mists should look in different seasons. He explained that clouds and humidity in the natural environment change with the seasons, each of which has its own features. A landscape painter should not, therefore, look into the form of each cloud but rather should work according to the general rules and cloud/humidity patterns of each season. Likewise, as in his elaboration of the essence of mountains, he pointed out that the clouds and mists in spring should be soft and moist; in summer, rich and clear; in autumn, sparse and dry; and in winter, faint and grey. He further affirmed that only by taking the macroscopic features of the seasons, and leaving aside the microscopic elements could the clouds and mists in a landscape painting appear to be real (Guo 2007). Guo's vision of the seasons as representing laws and orders echoes with the earlier quote regarding the Daoist's reflection of his living in nature. The principle of generalisation in depicting nature became a guide for most ancient *shanshui* painters. It directed their attention from verisimilitude to conceptual expression.



**Figure 4** Fan Kuan's *Autumn Travellers Dwelling in the Mountains*, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, ca. 1000. 206.3 × 103.3cm. National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

Western landscape tradition ran a very different course of development. It emerged as a proper subject in seventeenth-century Europe and its emergence was closely related to the advancement of science in Western civilisation. Telescopes and microscopes were invented near the beginning of the seventeenth century, and in 1656 the Dutch scientist Christian Huygens made the first pendulum clock, enabling time to be counted in seconds. These discoveries extended the European artists' vision of the world into the universe and gave precision to the concept of time, enabling them to see the world anew. The Baroque landscape paintings of the seventeenth century, in particular, are admired for their panoramic sense of space and the precise detail of a particular moment. Take Ruisdael's *The Windmill at Wijk* for example, in which the light arising in the distance from beyond the horizon of the sea creates an infinite sense of space on the canvas. The rolling clouds in the sky foretell the coming of a rainstorm, illustrating a precision of time. The land in the foreground is shaded by the clouds while the windmill stands motionless between the light and the dark. The painting freezes a moment in a quiet scene that presages a forthcoming chaos. Without knowledge of the universe and time, the vastness of space and the precision of time were unimaginable by Western painters before the seventeenth century.

Science has a significant impact on the development of Western landscape. This does not mean, however, that Western landscape painters show no interest in philosophical thoughts. Western landscape painters like Nicolas Poussin took a philosophical approach to landscape painting, and his landscape has been taken as a reflection; a meditated view of life (Christiansen 2008: 30). In his work with strong religious and philosophical connotation such as the *Four Seasons*, the very complex iconographic references are explicated by specific details. On the other hand, the scientific study of nature adopted by ancient *shanshui* masters is easily disguised by the emphasis of generalisation. As drafts of the Five Dynasties and Northern Song *shanshui* are all based on a close study of real nature, elements in these works are not imaginatively but naturalistically represented. It is the incoherent sense of space adopted in the painting as well as the lack of specific details of time and space that deter our recognition of such realism.

With an emphasis on a conceptual rather than visual manifestation of nature, ancient *shanshui* aims to convey an experience of 'being in nature' rather than 'seeing nature'. This *being* in nature is not about any singular experience of when and where man encounters nature, but a perpetual truth experienced by man in/with nature, namely, the wholeness and universality of the cosmic, laws and cycles in nature, and the integrative harmony between man and things. This can be best explained by comparing the sense of vastness in nature found in both Western landscape and ancient *shanshui*. In Western art, the cosmic sense in nature often evokes a sense of might, and even the destructive power, of nature. A moment prior to a thunderstorm, as described earlier in Ruisdael's work, Turner's images of snowstorm and shipwrecks, as well as Friedrich's depiction of graveyards and the *Sea of Ice*, are all about the omnipotent power of nature, so much so that it can be lethal. In contrast to landscape painters of the West, ancient *shanshui* painters were not attracted to the unrelenting power of nature. This explains why images of natural disasters cannot be found in ancient *shanshui*. To ancient *shanshui* painters, their images visualise not the unusual but the common and perpetual sense of nature. They convey a message of a transcendental experience of *being* in/with nature.

In "The Origin of the Work of Art", Heidegger introduced the concept of *being*, which he interpreted as truth and the essence of art. He argued that "in the work it is truth, not merely something true, that is at work" (in Krell 1977: 181). With regard to Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes*, dated 1885, he explained that the painting "is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This being emerges into the unconcealment of its Being" (in Krell 1977: 161). He went on to elucidate further the meaning of a work of painting or poetry:

The picture that shows the peasant shoes [as in Van Gogh's work], the poem that says the Roman fountain, do not simply make manifest what these isolated beings as such are – if indeed they manifest anything at all; rather, they make unconcealment as such happen in regard to beings as a whole. (in Krell 1977: 181)

The theory of unconcealment is based on the belief that “in the work of art the truth of beings has set to work” (in Krell 1977: 162). ‘To set’ here means ‘to bring to stand’, as Heidegger explained: “Some particular being, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its Being. The Being of beings comes into steadiness of its shining” (in Krell 1977: 162). Therefore, a work of art is not the reproduction of some particular entity at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the general essence of things – the truth of beings (Krell 1977: 162).

The ancient *shanshui* tradition of the Five Dynasties and Northern Song, as described above, presents not a personal encounter but rather a more generalised conceptual understanding of one’s *being* in/with nature. The essence of *shanshui* lies in this revelation of truth. Elements exhibited in *shanshui*, the mountains, water, trees, rocks and man, all come together to denote the universality of nature. As mentioned in earlier quotes of the Daoist theories, man is just a humble tiny entity of the whole. This explains why human figures depicted in ancient *shanshui* are often tiny and indistinct. *Shanshui* is more than a representation of nature. It is a vehicle for experiencing the *being* in/with nature.

The same kind of gracious unification of ‘*being* in nature’, as demonstrated by the *shanshui* masters, appears to have been experienced by the adventures of a modern Western explorer Richard Byrd, a pioneering polar explorer who undertook a five-month solo winter expedition at the Antarctic Advance Base in 1934. His book, *Alone*, is based on the diary that he kept during the trip, and contains vivid descriptions of his existence in the extremes of the natural world. Byrd explained his motivation for being alone in the Antarctic:

Aside from the meteorological and auroral work, I had no important purposes... Nothing whatever, except one man’s desire to know that kind of experience to the full, to be by himself for a while and to taste peace and quiet and solitude long enough to find out how good they really are. (Byrd 1938: 3–4)

Byrd was expecting to live his experience to the full at the extremes of nature and in absolute solitude. It was in such total segregation from the material and social world of his daily life that Byrd got closest to nature. He experienced a unique sense of the changing time between day and night in the Antarctic in this authentic reclusiveness: “These are the best times, the times when neglected senses expand to an exquisite sensitivity. You stand on the Barrier, and simply look and listen and feel” (Byrd 1938: 83) he recounted. On one extremely cold afternoon, he experienced something he called ‘harmony’:

[On one April afternoon, I] took my daily walk at 4pm today, in 89 of frost. The sun had dropped below the horizon, and a blue – of a richness I’ve never seen anywhere else – flooded in, extinguishing all but the dying embers of the sunset... I paused to listen to the silence... The day was dying, the night being born – but with great peace. Here were the imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it! That was what came out of the silence – a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres,

perhaps. It was enough to catch that rhythm, momentarily to be myself a part of it. In that instant I could feel no doubt of man's oneness with the universe . . . It was a feeling that transcended reason; that went to the heart of man's despair and found it groundless. The universe was a cosmos, not a chaos; man was as rightfully a part of that cosmos as were the day and night. (Byrd 1938: 84–85)

What Byrd experienced here, the sense of oneness, accords with the perception of nature envisaged by the ancient Chinese philosophers and *shanshui* masters. To these ancient elites, as for Byrd, man should be absolutely humble in his *being* in/with nature. In another diary entry Byrd recorded his daily walk:

The last half of the walk is the best part of the day, the time when I am most nearly at peace with myself and circumstances. Thoughts of life and the nature of things flow smoothly, so smoothly and so naturally as to create an illusion that one is swimming harmoniously in the broad current of the cosmos. (1938: 103)

'Swimming harmoniously in the broad current of the cosmos' is a state of mind that ancient *shanshui* wanted to attain. The highest achievement of *shanshui*, as advocated by the ancient master Guo Xi, is to lead the audience from appreciating to actually living in the *shanshui*. In his treatise *Linquan Gaozhi* (Dedication to Forests and Rivers), Guo stated that there were three kinds of achievement in *shanshui*. The first and lowest is a medium for appreciation, appealing to the senses. The second is a means to travel, setting one on a journey larger than the physicality of the painting. The last and highest is to bestow a spiritual space to live in, allowing one to contemplate and become fused with nature. An interesting note here is that in ancient Chinese characters, the two characters for 'travel' (遊) and 'swim' (游) were interchangeable. The meaning of 'swim' in ancient texts also bears the meaning of being submerged, permeated and enveloped. The highest achievement of *shanshui* is to attain a state in which one is totally inundated by nature and feels the perfect harmony between man and nature. Here we find a communicable sharing of *being* in nature – a kind of truth in terms of the concept of *being*.

Coomaraswamy, in his *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, points out that "true knowledge of an object is not obtained by merely empirical observation or reflex registration (*pratyaksa*), but only when the knower and known, seer and seen, meet in an act transcending distinction (*anyor advaita*)" (1974: 6). To Coomaraswamy, "Asiatic art is ideal in the mathematical sense: like Nature, not in appearance, but in operation" (1974: 11). I quote this idea not to distinguish the features of Asiatic art and Western art, but to highlight the concept of 'in operation', which I consider a state of *being*, a process of revealing truth: "Reality subsists there where the intelligible and sensible meet in the common unity of being, and cannot be thought of as existing itself outside and apart from, but rather as, knowledge or vision, that is, only in act" (Coomaraswamy 1974: 6).

Ancient *shanshui* tradition is not about what the painter sees, but about how the painter experiences nature. It is a visual text illustrating the process of the painter's being and becoming a part of a unified whole in nature. The aesthetic and the meaning of *shanshui* can be described in terms of another extract from Coomaraswamy:

The most significant elements in the Asiatic theory are the views (1) that aesthetic experience is an ecstasy in itself inscrutable, but in so far as it can be defined, a delight of the reason, and (2) that the work of art itself, which serves as the stimulus to the release of the spirit from all inhibitions of vision, can only come into being and have being as a thing ordered to specific end. (1974: 6)

As a kind of Asiatic art, ancient *shanshui* tradition demonstrates the elements of this theory. It serves as the stimulus to the release of spiritual awareness, of a kind of harmonious *being* between man and nature that goes beyond time and space. Under the strong influence of Daoism, such a concern for *being* in *shanshui*, as in Heidegger's theory, has a larger meaning and denotes a particular existence. There are traces of the impact of Asian thoughts on Heidegger's philosophy (Parke 1987). For Heidegger, although we *comport* ourselves to entities, to things which *are*, the *being* of the entity is not itself an entity (Gorner 2007: 15). In Daoism, the *being* of an individual is not definite, but instead there is a universal human nature consisting in the ability to exist in harmony with the whole of existence (Hochsmann 2001: 26). It is the role of the ancient *shanshui* masters, having experienced their contemplation of nature and thus developed their expertise to envisage such states of *being*. The images of the Five Dynasties and Northern Song *shanshui* are about *being*, not sensual personal emotions. They are stimuli to a kind of awareness of all life in nature, which leads to a single *being* in a fuller and broader sense. Although philosophers care about the meaning of life and art, the meaning of *being* in ancient *shanshui* is alien to most of us, given the increasing distance between modern life and nature. Perhaps it requires an extreme environment, as experienced by Byrd in his days of absolute solitude in the Antarctic, to enable one to perceive the universality of *being* in traditional Chinese landscape painting.

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