

The Landscape of the Void: Truth and Magic in Chinese Landscape Painting

While landscape can be explored through the discourse of language and materiality, the enchantment of landscape remains ambiguous. In trying to unconceal the magic of landscape, this paper turns to the connection between Heidegger's phenomenology and Chinese Daoism through the concept of landscape as the painted picture. Using the literal meaning of the Chinese landscape as the "scene of the wind", or rather the scene of the invisible, I explore how landscape can be understood through the combination of Heideggerian hermeneutics and Chinese Daoism as the literal and metaphorical Void between mortality and divinity, earth and sky. Traditional Chinese landscape painting, as the Daoist philosophy in portraying the essence of truth in Nature and life, is contrasted with Western Romanticism and Ruskin's ideals of art as truth. Through the disturbance of what is subject and object, as well as what is visible and invisible in the perception of landscape, I conclude that the magic of landscape lies in the paradox: the between state where logic is inverted, where the void is nothingness, where truth is sought, and where belief is magical.

Keywords: Chinese landscape painting; Heidegger; phenomenology

Introduction: What's magical about landscapes?

Are landscapes magical? Deep in my heart, I believe that the answer is yes. However, I rarely would share it as the reason to why I am concerned about landscapes and landscape design. To avoid being considered as irrational, or worse, as childish, even among professional 'landscape loving' colleagues (in landscape architecture), it is better to steer away from 'supernatural' terms to describe landscape in everyday conversation. As a taboo of Western scientific thought, landscapes can be poetic, symbolic, and sacred but not magical unless we are talking about the imaginary landscapes of fairy tales. It was not until I came across magician-turned-philosopher David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997) that the magic of (my) landscapes could be unconcealed.

Building upon Merleau-Ponty's philosophies of perception and language, the mysticism of Balinese shamanism, the storytelling of the Indigenous Apache, and sleight-of-hand magic, Abram uncovers poignant relationships between human beings and nature. Although the connections between perception and body/material, nature/land, place/memory, and culture/language all intertwine together beautifully, the landscape that I was looking for was not attainable. Abram (1997) concludes, 'Language was disclosed as a profoundly bodily phenomenon, sustained by the gestures and sounds of the animate landscape' (261). While rediscovering the 'flesh' of language, which in Abram's instance is through the origins of oral languages, can unveil the once forgotten sensuous magic of the land, I continue to question whether *landscape* can ever exist outside of discourse. Sacredness and land can be convincingly weaved together but in the deconstruction of *landscape* through the Western lens, I find that I can never escape the spiral trap of language. Resembling Heidegger's circular inquisitions through the meaning of what is a thing, what is work, and what is art, my question of what is landscape also cannot not be unpacked satisfactorily from the perspective of Western logic. As Heidegger (1971) states, 'Ordinary understanding demands that this circle be avoided because it violates logic' (18). Fortunately, Heidegger also states that 'we are compelled to follow the circle . . . To enter upon this path is the strength of thought, to continue on it is the feast of thought, assuming that thinking is a craft' (18). I do not attempt to follow the circle in a manner as rigorous as Heidegger, but starting this path at least provides opportunities for alternative perspectives into the circle's core.

The word 'landscape,' deriving from the Dutch term *landschap*, implies the visual perception-*scape* of the physical entity of *land*. Prior to the sixteenth-century when *landschap* became associated with the painting of scenes of land, the term was

used to designate units of farms or fenced fields (Tuan 1974, 133). Objectivity of a commoditized unit of land shifted to the objectivity of land as a representable image. During the Romantic era, landscape became associated with the aesthetic terms of the sublime, the picturesque, and the beautiful. While the sublime described the majestic fear and awe of nature, the picturesque and the beautiful took on more scenic interpretations of landscapes. If landscape in the Western perspective is always through the lens of the human-nature binary (in the sublime) or through a picture-frame (the picturesque and the beautiful), then can landscape ever be more than the semantics of a cultural aesthetic? For aesthetics scholar T.J. Diffey (1993) the term landscape is already attributed with beauty; thus, an identified landscape 'has already been recognized aesthetically' (52). In an attempt to avoid the recirculation through the looped path of landscape as language, I turn to the materiality of landscape.

Theories of material vitalism and performativity allowed for a temporary suspension of Cartesian logic without venturing into what is marginalized as mysticism. Political theorist Jane Bennett (2004) provides a political ecology to material matter by bringing awareness of the 'power' of things. This shift in perception gives things that were once mere objects the chance to become subjects with agency and power. Being more influenced by Adorno and Merleau-Ponty than Heidegger, Bennett states that her goal 'is not the same as questing for the thing-in-itself . . . but rather the not-fully-humanized dimension of a thing as it manifests itself amidst other entities and forces' (366). On the other hand, physicist Karen Barad (2003) concretizes a similar idea through her theory of agential realism where the phenomena between human and non-human entities provide the basic units of ontology. In the vitalist landscape, this phenomena is usually overlooked, not understood, and indescribable. For anthropologist Tim Edensor (2010), landscape is the excess created in the resistance to representation

of language and can be felt through a heightened contemplative condition in an ‘affective field’ or phenomena of interacting entities. While these new materialist theories find ways to pass the orbital force of language, I am still not satisfied with the conclusion of this landscape. While we can try to believe that trees hear our secrets and grass touch our feet, trees and grass are not landscapes. While the force of twinkling stars or dancing fireflies can mesmerize us, even the poignancy of these stars and fireflies do not encompass the entirety of the poignant landscape. Personally and intuitively, landscape is inclusive of language and material agency, more than a representation, and not only a phenomenon between things.

Landscape: The scenery of the invisible

While taking a detour to explore landscape in another language, the closest term that I find suggesting landscape as the perceptual image in Chinese is *fēng jǐng* 風景 (wind + scene). Similar to the English word, the Chinese term implies a perceptual framework (that is, the scene). Thus, in both languages, landscape is visual and anthropocentric. However, the Chinese landscape is the scenery of the wind and not of the land – it is the vista of the immaterial. Hence, the Chinese landscape is a paradox: It is a vision of the invisible. If we shift from the perceptual landscape to the recorded landscape, we encounter another perspective. A Chinese landscape painting, *shān shuǐ huà* 山水畫 (mountain + water + picture), is literally a painting of the mountains and the water, both material and tangible features of nature. So how does the vision of the invisible become a representation of material features on paper? And can the painted mountains and water be considered as representation in the Western sense?

Landscape did not always exist as a subject matter in both European and Chinese paintings. The Western landscape that we understand today first emerged along

with perspectival techniques in sixteenth-century Renaissance and became popular into the Romantic and Impressionist eras. In fact, Dutch psychiatrist Jan Hendrik Van den Berg suggests that the *Mona Lisa* is the first European painting to depict landscape as an entity independent of human activity (Karatani 1993, 28). Landscape paintings that are described as most characteristically Chinese first appeared in the eight-century T'ang Dynasty when the fine arts flourished and subsequently collapsed, leaving a period of nostalgia in the ninth-century when the first historical records of Chinese paintings were discovered (Sullivan 1979, 40-43). Although styles shifted throughout the centuries, like the image of the Western landscape, the overarching traits of Chinese landscape painting remained intact. The reason why landscape paintings emerged in Europe and in China, although at different times in history, is a possible broader metaphysical inquisition to humanity. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to explore this issue. Consequently, I am left with a simpler quest and that is how European and Chinese landscape paintings differ as a result of philosophies of perception.

There is a saying in Chinese to describe the most stunning and surreal landscapes. The phrase *rén jiān xiān jìng* 人間仙境 (human + between + immortal + border) describes a landscape that is as divine as the realm that borders between mortality and immortality. In the Western equivalent, it is somewhere between the magical fairyland and the heavenly sublime. Chinese landscape paintings often depict this scenery: mountainous landscapes among the mists analogous of a place between heaven and earth. Mountains became the staple of Chinese landscape paintings as Buddhists and Daoists searched for temple sites where they could 'cleanse the mind of worldly thoughts and cravings through communion with nature' (Sullivan 1979, 26). Sullivan suggests that the Chinese landscape painter differs from the European painter in that he was always a philosopher whose understanding grew with age:

. . . being a philosopher, his vision did not fade with the passing of his youth, but strengthened and deepened as he grew older. The Chinese have little sympathy for immaturity, or for a romantic view that sees nature as a projection of the artists' own emotion. (11)

But how does the Chinese misty mountainous paintings relate to *my* indefinable landscape? How can these landscapes that float between earth and heaven fill the gap between landscape as discursive text, language, and history, *and* the materiality of soil, plants, and water? Surprisingly, this gap can be mediated through Heidegger and his interpretation of Being and Chinese philosophy. Abandoning the absoluteness of Western logic, Heidegger adopts a more heterogeneous philosophy that is very much based on Chinese Daoism. Between the polarities of earth-sky and mortality-divinity is the Void (Goulding forthcoming, 15-17). This Void is not understood in Western thought. It is intangible and inaccessible; it is not nothing, but it can hardly be described as something. Although the Void is difficult to grasp, it is influential and pivotal as it is the point of conjuncture. As clear as the Void can be represented in Heidegger's fourfold diagram, it remains somewhat ambiguous (perhaps as it should be) in my own thoughts until a shift in my imagination takes over. When I visualize the fourfold pictorially with the sky above and the earth (that is, the land) below, simultaneously with the polarity of mortal humanity and the unworldliness of the divine, it becomes clear what the Void is. The Void I see is a landscape; more precisely, it is the Chinese landscape! This shift in perception creates an accessible path towards the Void, allowing me to find a place for the perplexed landscape that I previously couldn't pin down.

Heidegger uses the metaphor of the clearing in the forest, *lichtung*, to describe the Void (Goulding 2003, 378). The forest exists whether we are in among the trees or in the clearing. The difference between the dark forest and the clearing is what is

concealed or unconcealed within our perception. This analogy can also be applied to landscapes. Within the forest we see the trees and its components: the leaves, branches, and bark. We can feel the ground and the soil beneath us. We may hear the rustling of the leaves or the sounds of animals. Although semantically debatable, some landscape architects and conservationists may consider us to be *in* the landscape. Yet we don't necessarily *see* the landscape. It is not until we reach the clearing that the landscape can be seen. Heidegger's clearing in the forest or the unconcealed is considered a revealing of the truth. Heidegger (1971) describes,

In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open centre is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know. (51)

This truth is not the single absolute reality in the Western scientific sense, but rather a personal clarity and acceptance of uncertainty as truth:

Thanks to this clearing, beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees. And yet a being can be concealed, too, only within the sphere of what is lighted . . . The clearing in which beings stand is in itself at the same time concealment. (51-52)

Heidegger's original fourfold has the void as the enclavage, the unfolding ground of *Da-sein*, or the truth of Being (Goulding forthcoming, 15). Not only is the clearing the truth of events but the unconcealment of existence.

Landscape as Truth

If landscape corresponds to the Void and the Void is the unconcealment of truth, then can we conclude that landscape is a form of truth? Indeed, it is precisely this notion of truth that forms the basis for the philosophy of Chinese landscape painting. Chinese

painting is not about representing nature or scenery, but instead it is an expression of the truth of nature. This truth is perplexing from the Western perspective because the truth in Chinese Daoism is a paradoxical phenomenon. Heidegger (1971) describes through the definition of ‘origin’ that there is essentialism to art (18). More broadly applied, there is an essence to everything. This essence is not static or property driven; it is the meaning of the entity itself: ‘[I]t lies in what the entity *is* in truth. The true essential nature of a thing is determined by way of its true being, by way of the truth of the given being’ (49). Perhaps, we could call this essence the soul of the entity or being. In less ‘mystical’ terms, it is considered the *nature* of the thing. This perspective on nature is important in Daoism – the nature of things are how things are, or in Heidegger’s terms, the Being of beings or how a thing things.

The soul is invisible; the nature of a thing is veiled, and the wind of the landscape is formless. How then is the invisible made visible? Analysing Heidegger, Goulding describes the valley as a watercourse that runs through rocky terrains creating a gorge (forthcoming, 16). Even without the mountains, the essence of the valley exists. In the Western sense, a thing’s existence is relative to something else: We cannot see the valley without the mountains. For Heidegger, the truth of the valley is in itself and that is its essence. In Chinese Daoism, the nature of the valley is in itself. The nature of the things in the world are carried through to language, and thus, to the semiotic understanding of the thing. The Chinese character for valley, *gǔ* 谷, is derived pictorially from a flowing river and not as the space between mountains.¹ While Goulding (2015) describes Chinese characters as an animated film, the landscape

¹ See Richard Sears, “Character: 谷” for ancient scripts of the Chinese character.

enthusiast in me sees the Chinese characters as landscapes, portraying the essence or truth of the place, thing, or event they are symbolizing.

Heidegger (1971) claims that art is truth, or more precisely that nature of art is to unconceal through the work of art:

The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this deconcealing, i.e. the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work. (38)

The Chinese landscape painting similarly captures the essence of the world, from what is 'out there' to the paper through the action of painting. The (brush)work must carry through the truth:

Not only must the way in which [the artist] plies his brush fix the essential character of trees, rocks, and mountains, but the brushwork must itself be alive – it must dance on the paper or silk, for only thus can the artist animate what would otherwise be a set of lifeless conventions. (Sullivan 1979, 17)

Peculiarly, the notion of art as truth is not unique to Heidegger among Western theorists. It was also a well-debated theory in Romanticism. Romantic art critic John Ruskin argued that the landscape painter must paint to mimic reality. The best painters were those that could capture the essence of the landscape including the experience and emotions of the artists themselves and reveal all this through the artwork. In other words, Ruskin believed that art should express a truth. Seeking and expressing truth is the artist's purpose as '[n]othing can atone for the want of truth' (Ruskin [c.1860]1987, 26) and 'no artist can be graceful, imaginative, or original, unless he can be truthful' (26). Art should be both mimetic and expressive which is achieved simultaneously by portraying truth through the artist's personal expression of his or her own perception of truth (Belsey 1980, 8).

Through the Cartesian perspective, Ruskin's theories can be considered as ironical. Ruskin, who was fascinated by J.M.W. Turner's landscape paintings, found the most abstract landscape painter of his time to be the one most expressive of reality. Turner's later paintings, which were strong in colour and movement and captured only glimpses of recognizable objects, were hardly like any other landscape paintings or landscapes observable in reality. But Turner's paintings were also deeply evocative and expressive. As landscape paintings that *represented* real landscapes, Ruskin's admiration of Turner does not make sense. However, if we are to look at Ruskin's theory from the perspective of Chinese philosophy, then all things fall into place.

Sullivan (1979) suggests that Ruskin's attitude towards art and landscape painting was 'very Chinese' (4). Chinese landscapists believed that paintings were meant to capture the true essence of nature and not what is observed. The true essence of nature is an assemblage gathered through understanding rather than replication. Although Turner's landscapes do not resemble Chinese landscapes, what Ruskin seeks in Turner's works are the aspirations of Chinese artists. However, while Ruskin's appreciation of Turner is in accordance with Chinese philosophy, Turner's approach to landscape painting is not equivalent to the Chinese painter's attitude. Turner's landscapes are far more abstract than the Chinese landscape and rely on a greater sense of subjectivity. Although Romanticism attempted to find a truth to humanity through a recovery of emotions and subjectivity, mostly as the rejection of the objectivity of Enlightenment, it was also trapped within its own dichotomy of human as subject in contrast to an external world of glorified nature. Chinese Daoism, on the other hand, recognizes the polarity of human objectivity and subjectivity. Chinese landscape paintings capture this *yin-yang* composition to express the truth of nature.

For the most part since the Renaissance, Western landscape paintings portrayed scenes by using realistic perspectival techniques. Portraying landscapes using accurate perspective automatically subjects the painting to several conditions. First, the image always represents a perception from one point of view. This singular perspective point is not only spatial but also temporal. We see the image only from the ‘front’ and only at the ‘present.’ While it is valid to say that romantic landscapes often portray nostalgic images of an ideal past, but for the viewer this past is always envisioned as the present. Impressionist paintings further emphasized this aspect of temporality. The desire for the impressionist painter to capture the spontaneity of a scene with the right combinations of colour and light embraces a more scientific approach. The relatability between Western landscape painting and the development of photography further stresses the idea of ‘capturing the moment.’ Peering through a viewfinder in the camera also conveys a characteristic of Western landscape painting that was less obvious before – that the perspective framework is inevitably objective. As a bystander to a scene, the artist is always a witness and a reporter to the image before them.

With the Western interpretation of landscape, subject and object is inevitably defined. As Karatani (1993) describes, ‘In the very moment when we become capable of perceiving landscape, it appears to us as if it had been there, outside of us, from the start’ (29). Eastern landscape painters defy objectivity by becoming *transcendental* (21). Chinese landscapes transcend place and time. Perception and subjectivity is inverted by encompassing a boundless time and space as described by Katarani:

For a brush painter to depict a pine grove meant to depict the concept (that which is signified by) ‘pine grove,’ not an existing pine grove. This transcendental vision of space had to be overturned before painters could see existing pine groves as their subjects. (27)

A Chinese landscape painting is an assembly of recollected experiences of nature

(Sullivan 1979, 8). This assembly is believed as the essence of the landscape portrayed. Chinese painters did not maintain this approach through centuries of art by accident or by ignorance to perspectival techniques. In fact, for a period of time in the Sung Dynasty (960-1279), many Northern Chinese painters were tempted to draw and paint with perfect details and perspectives (Chapter 3). Painter Fan K'uan aimed to have his landscape paintings to not only look real, but to make the viewer feel the 'rocks beneath that great cliff . . . hear the wind in the trees, the thunder of the waterfall, [and] the clatter of hooves on the stony path' (69). The period of high realism in the history of Chinese painting was short-lived and landscape paintings returned to correspond with Daoism by portraying the essences of nature. The reason Sullivan suggests for this reversal is the concept of *li* 理 (principle) (71). All things in the universe have their own principle – how things should be – and it is best to grasp the whole than to be concerned with small matters. The painter Shen Kua believed that painters 'should not concern himself with the "angles and corners of buildings,"' should view landscapes 'from the angle of totality to grasp the whole' and 'should paint what he knows is there, not just what he sees from one place' (72-74).

Despite the fact that Chinese landscapes are often not painted through a point of perspective, they do utilize certain techniques to capture the complexities of the landscapes of reality. Instead of vanishing points, the paintings capture depth by layering. The layering of landscape elements of solid features such as mountains and trees with less structured elements such as water and mist is suggestive of the concealing in Heidegger's truth in the Void. The symbolism for the potential to push back each layer recalls the revealing of each new discovery that gets us closer to the truth. When perspective styles are used, Chinese landscape paintings often employ a bird's eye view. Unlike the perspective from the ground where one's vision and

understanding is limited, the elevated view, which also corresponds to the view from the sacred mountains, implies a more encompassing perception of the world, a perception that also embraces the concepts of immortality.

Similar to Western landscape paintings, the human figure is infrequently found in Chinese landscape paintings. When people are depicted, they are often inconspicuous or diminutive compared to the landscape features. While European landscapes often depict peasants working or in leisure, the Chinese figure is usually of the pensive scholar. Although the figure modestly blends in with the landscape, he empowers a distinct energy to the painting. For example, Shen Zhou's *Lofty Mount Lu* (1467) depicts the magnificent scenery of Mount Lu as a tribute to his teacher Ch'en K'uan (Sullivan 1979, 17). At the bottom of the scroll is the tiny figure of a scholar, presumed to be Ch'en K'uan, almost lost in the landscape but at the same time not irrelevant. Within the Eastern consciousness, a human-landscape relationship exists that is harmonious and reciprocal. Katarani (1993) illustrates this relationship through the work of Japanese Meiji writer Masaoki Shiki. Shiki's *Unforgettable People* describes a scholar's narration of 'unforgettable people' who were memorable but trivial to the narrator's life. These people were unforgettable through the landscapes that they were attached to:

. . . the man on Doppo's island is not much a 'person' as a 'landscape.' As the narrator says, 'At such times, it is these people who flood my mind. No, it is these people standing in the midst of scenes in which I discovered them.' The narrator, Otsu, offers many other examples of 'unforgettable people,' but they are all people-as-landscapes . . . (24)

A shift in consciousness occurs when we conceive of people-as-landscapes – which is slightly different than people as landscapes, and much more than people in landscapes. Subject and object is further muddled. Katarani argues that landscape prior to

representation is an inversion of consciousness (23). Chinese landscape painting as a philosophical endeavour maintains this inversion and suspends the subject and object, the concealed and unconcealed, the real and the illusion. The paradox is encompassing yet assuring; as Zhangzi states, 'To recognize that what one thinks is wrong is also right and what one thinks is right is also wrong, nothing is better than ming' (quoted in Goulding forthcoming, 382).

Conclusion: The magical truth of landscape

Although Chinese landscape paintings are placed between the margins of heaven and earth, the celestial character of the Chinese landscape is very different than the Western landscape's sublime. The sublime in European paintings is based on the fear of nature – the awe and thrill of a nature that cannot be controlled. The sublime asserts this fear with the unknown and the power of divinity. The Chinese landscape is placed between the sky and the ground, *tiān de jiān* 天地間, a place that is simultaneously unknown and familiar. Thus, each element in nature is sacred. Rather than fearing the unknown, Chinese philosophy accepts the uncertainty of nature and the uncertainty of human life. This uncertainty is what is divine and is the meaning of existence. The Chinese landscape transcends not through worshipping of the sublime as the absolute, but instead as the painter's personal goal to spiritually seek the truth of the world. For Sullivan (1962), landscape painting is the appropriate medium for this endeavour because it is both visual and abstract (2). Most importantly, it stems from experience and the thought derived from that experience:

For the wanderer in the mountains attains awareness through no mere feat of the imagination, but through a journey, in space and time, in a real landscape . . . Such experiences can find expression only in a language that is both visual and abstract – visual enough so that the forms that gave rise to it may be apprehended,

conveyed, and recognized for what they are, yet abstract enough to confer upon the forms thus created the validity of a general, eternal truth. (2)

Similarly for Ruskin, landscape painting is the perfect channel towards truth. For Heidegger, the broader language of art and poetry performs the task. Nonetheless, it is the seeking of and the assembly of the essence of the world around us that expresses this truth.

Returning to the notion of magic through the exploration of truth is an absurd task through the Western lens, but through Chinese philosophy magic and truth can be perceived as complementary terms. If we think of magic not as sorcery but as the suspension of constrained judgements, a clearing opens up. The Chinese landscape can be both the land of the fairies and the land of the earth. It is this paradox held in the ‘between’ state, *jiān* 間, that captures the magic of landscape – a magic not of enchantment but of belief. Abram (1997) labels sleight-of-hand-magicians and shamans as mediators of perception (5). It is through both the magician and the audiences’ participation and imagination that make the magic possible (58). One needs magic, or more precisely the need to believe in magic, in order to see the truth. The Chinese landscape painting is a medium where magic resides. Through the transcendence of thought, the inversion of logic, and most fundamentally, a trust in magic – the trust that clarity is in the Void and that emptiness is not nothing – landscapes are indeed magical. Undoubtedly, this magic does not feel the same as the magic I once held on to, but continuing to hold on to this primal belief is what keeps the truth of the landscape illuminated. As Buber (1996) states, ‘In its primordial state, the Eastern spirit is what all spirit is in the primordial state: magic’ (69).

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Professor Mora Campbell and Professor Ted Goossen for their reading recommendations. This paper is also indebted to Professor Shubhra Gururani for her insightful lectures on new materialism. Finally, this paper could not have been completed without Professor Jay Goulding, who introduced me to the “Void” that exists between Heidegger and Eastern philosophy.

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