



**Shanshui in Poetry (Part I): The
Blossoming of Shanshui in Poetry
between the Third and Fifth Centuries**

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Shanshui in Poetry

By; Gérard Dupuy

Part I – The Blossoming of *Shanshui* in Poetry between the Third and Fifth Centuries

The expression *shanshui* 山水 – “mountains and waters” – first appeared in the third century of our era in the Lower Yangzi region. It evoked the subtle relationship that might be forged between a cultivated scholar and a chosen place of predilection, where he delighted to withdraw.

“Landscape,” perhaps, yet more precisely the emotional resonance that arises between a being and the singular site he has made his own.

For Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), the great thinker at the close of the Ming dynasty, only poetry of the highest inspiration can truly grasp the emotion (*qing* 情) born of the encounter and exchange with a landscape (*jing* 景).

The *Jinshu* 《晋书》, the official History of the Jin, records in its biographies of eminent men that General Yang Hu (221–278) would retreat whenever possible to Mount Xian, noting:

“祐乐山水[...]”
“[Yang] Hu was enamoured of mountains and waters (*shanshui*) [...]”

Zuo Si 左思 (ca. 250–ca. 305), in his poem *Invitation to the Recluse* 《招隐诗》, urged his reader to transcend human music and at-

tune his ear to the voices of *shanshui*:

“非必丝与竹，
山水有清音。”

“No need of silken strings or flutes,
When mountains and waters yield
their purest music.”

Sun Chuo 孙绰 (320–377), whom we shall meet again at the celebrated Orchid Pavilion gathering, imbued his poetry with a vision steeped in spirituality. Devoted to Nature, he believed one must attune oneself to it in order to progress upon the Way (Dao 道).

This great poet composed a *fu*¹ of a thousand characters, entitled *Rhapsody on the Excursion to Mount Tiantai* 《游天台山赋》. It may be read as a mystical ascent in which each step, each détour, each pause for contemplation frees one from the mundane world, offering vision and meditation upon the hidden, the latent, and the subtle. To *shanshui*, he conferred a spiritual dimension.

Let us now turn to a foundational moment in the poetry of landscape: the *Orchid Pavilion Gathering* 兰亭.

1 The *fu* 赋, often rendered as ‘rhapsody,’ is a poetic composition of highly variable length, interweaving passages of prose with sections in verse. Abounding in vocabulary and replete with imagery, it reached its zenith between the second century before our era and the fifth century of our era.

Wang Xizhi 王羲之, then governor of Guiji 会稽, invited some fifty friends and intimates to his elegant residence at the foot of Mount Guiji, southwest of present-day Shaoxing. The occasion was the traditional Spring Festival, on the third day of the third month of the Yonghe era (353 CE).

The meeting, blessed with fair weather, took the form of a poetic contest in which forty-one poems were composed. The game, known as “floating goblets” 流觞 (*liu shang*), required each guest to sit by one of the stream’s meanders, as cups of wine, set upon lotus leaves, drifted downstream. Whosoever received a cup was obliged to drink and to compose a poem upon the spot. All of this poetic contest was faithfully recorded, both those who wrote and those who refrained. Wang Xizhi, carried by enthusiasm, wrote a preface that posterity has judged unsurpassable, and entrusted Sun Chuo with the composition of a postface. The poems of twenty-six contributors have been carefully preserved and handed down to us.

Here follow a few brief excerpts:

Xie Wan:

青萝翳岫 – Climbing plants veil the peak,
修竹冠岑 – Graceful bamboos crown the lofty hill.

Xie An:

薄云罗阳景 – Delicate clouds veil the brilliance of the sun,
微风翼轻航 – Gentle winds caress the light craft.

Wang Huizi:

散怀山水 – Scattering my thoughts among mountains and waters,
萧然忘羈 – Unfettered, I forget all constraint.
归目寄欢 – Joy settles wherever my gaze alights,
心冥二奇 – My spirit is attuned to these twin marvels.²

Sun Tong:

凡我仰希 – All my desires and my hopes,
期山期水 – I entrust to mountains and waters.

Sun Chuo:

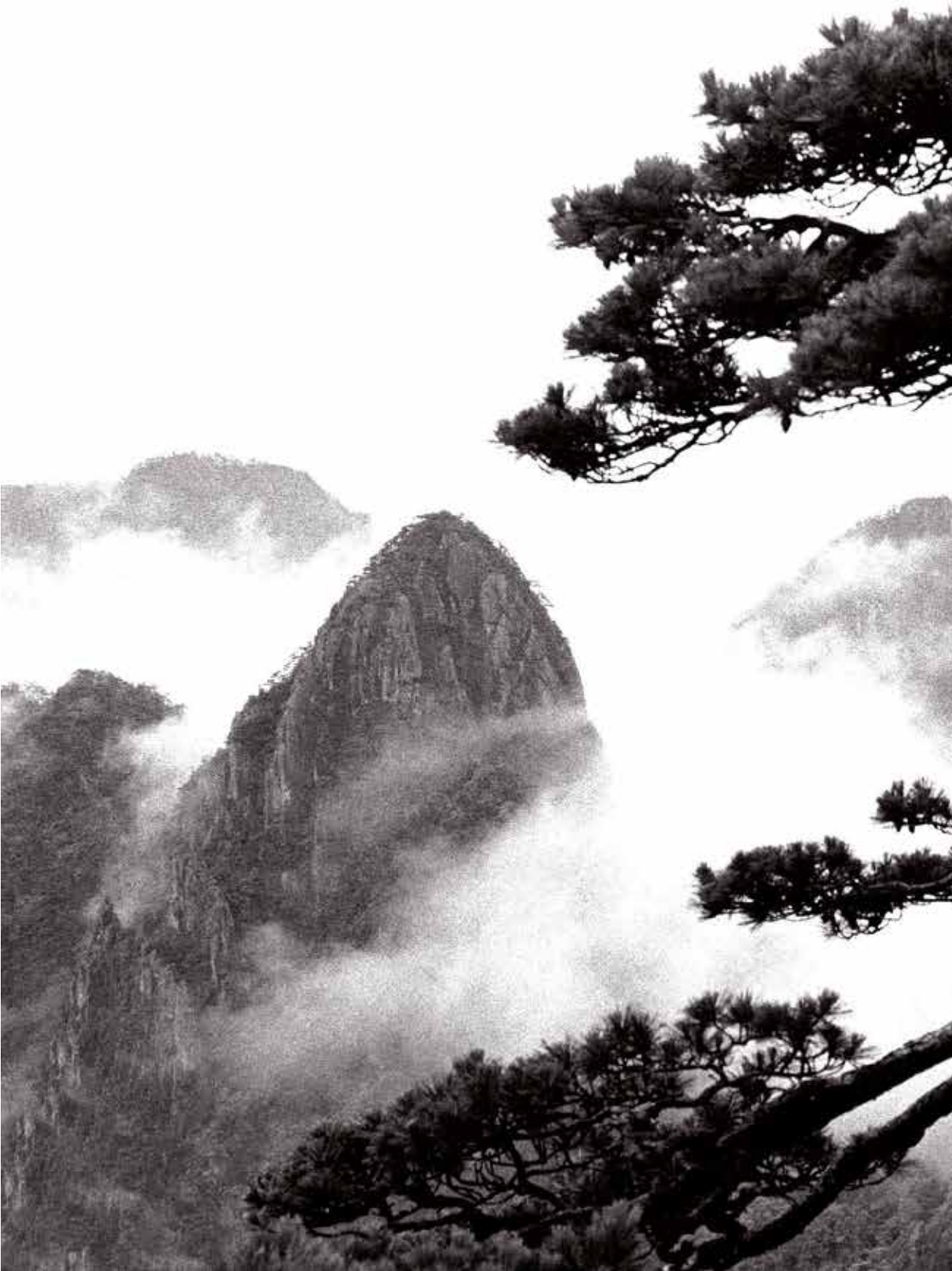
仰望碧天际 – Above, I gaze upon the edge of the azure sky,
俯磐绿水滨 – Below, I wander by the banks of green waters.

Concerning Sun Tong, elder brother of Sun Chuo, the *Jinshu*, chapter 56, remarks:

“[...]家于会稽。性好山水，乃求为鄞令，转在吴宁。居职不留心碎务，纵意游肆，名山胜川，靡不穷究。”

“He had settled in Guiji; by nature he loved mountains and waters. Thus he sought appointment in the county of Yin, and was later assigned to Wuning (present-day Dongyang). He gave little heed to the petty details of office, but wandered freely, exploring the famed mountains and remarkable streams, down to their most hidden recesses.”

2 In reading the poem, one may interpret these two marvels as the mountains and the waters.



Huang shan - Yellow mountain, photograph by Gérard Dupuy





陈淳 《仿米友仁云山图卷》 Chen Chun, in the style of Mi Youren

Another source preserves a remark of Wang Xianzhi, Wang Xizhi's younger son:

“王子敬云：« 从山阴道上行，山川自相映发，使人应接不暇。若秋冬之际，尤难为怀。 »”

“Along the road of Shanyin [in Guiji district], mountains and rivers mirror each other's splendour, overwhelming the gaze. Most of all, when autumn yields to winter, the feeling becomes inexpressibly poignant.”

At the beginning of the fourth century, this society of brilliant scholars had fled Luoyang under relentless attacks from the ‘barbarians of the North,’ crossed the Yangzi, and established themselves in the southern lands beyond the river, Jiangnan, with Nanjing as the imperial capital of the Jin.

Sketched in the third and fourth centuries, *shanshui* would assume full majesty in the fifth century, both in poetry, with Xie Lingyun 谢灵运 (385–433), and in painting.

Part II – Xie Lingyun, at the Origin of Shanshui Poetry

情动于中而形于言

The affections are stirred within and take on form in words¹

Xie Lingyun 谢灵运 (385–433) stands unquestionably at the origin of the poetic current of “mountains and waters,” which would unfold across the dynasties that followed. His early recognition is attested by the eminent place he occupies in the very first anthology, the *Wenxuan* 《文选》, compiled at the dawn of the sixth century, where no fewer than thirty-two of his poems are quoted in full. Though he had written prolifically, it is telling that almost exclusively his *shanshui* verses were chosen—even if the genre itself had not yet been codified. It was Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) who first, in a letter, distinguished Xie's poetry as belonging to the category 山水诗 *shanshui shi* (“mountains

¹ The Great Preface to the *Book of Songs*, 《诗经》 *Shijing*.



and waters poetry”) as opposed to Tao Yuanming’s 田园诗 *tianyuan shi* (“fields and gardens poetry”).

Born into a powerful family that, at the beginning of the fourth century, had been forced to flee Luoyang under the incessant assaults of the “northern barbarians,” cross the Yangzi, and settle near Jiankang—modern-day Nanjing—then the imperial capital of the Eastern Jin, Xie inherited both status and exile. He was born in the family estate at Shining, a few *li* from Guiji (today’s Shaoxing in Zhejiang), where he received from his tutor Du Mingshi an excellent education, deeply imbued with Taoist thought. Returning to Jiankang, he led a gilded and turbulent life. Frequenting literary and philosophical salons—those “pure conversations” 清谈 *qing tan*—he soon became the darling of the young elite of the capital.

Between 402 and 405, he assumed his first offices as high-ranking advisor to influential figures such as Liu Yi 刘毅 (d. 412), who would rise

to become commander-in-chief of the imperial army. This career path, however, sowed the seeds of his misfortune. For Liu Yu 刘裕—a brilliant strategist of humble origin who distinguished himself through relentless campaigns—seized supreme power, overthrew the Jin, and inaugurated the [Liu] Song dynasty in 420. This dynastic upheaval caught Xie utterly off guard. Worse still, at the premature death of Liu Yu in 422, Xie, no longer in favor, aligned himself with the losing side in the ensuing succession struggle.

Banished to the southernmost reaches of the empire, he was appointed Commander of Yongjia (today’s Wenzhou), a region populated largely by Yue peoples (ancestors of modern Vietnam) who spoke no Chinese. Setting out in August 422, Xie arrived two months later, exhausted and ill. In his first poem from exile, he confides that, bedridden, he lifted the curtain only to gaze upon the surrounding landscape. Once recovered, he hurled himself into the

辛丑春
月廿二日
董其昌
畫



董其昌 《仿米芾山水图卷》 Dong Qichang, *in the style of Mi Fu*

sublime scenery: roaming for days on end, he could not cease from exploring this world of mountains and waters that inspired both wonder and awe. From these encounters arose a new kind of poetry, charged with the immediate emotions of discovery—poems that reflected upon his own worldly life while at the same time offering him an intimation of the Dao 道.

In Nanjing, his glittering verses had been prized for their metropolitan polish. But the profound rupture of exile imposed upon him a new and powerful theme, one that would become the very

essence of 山水诗 *shanshui shi*. For the first time, with such intensity and beauty, poetry staged the dialogue between a man and nature. After a year, in the autumn of 423, Xie was recalled to the capital. Held in high esteem by the emperor, he was entrusted with the direction of the vast imperial library, a task he fulfilled before retiring permanently to the ancestral estate at Shining. Marked indelibly by his experience at Yongjia, he undertook a monumental project: draining lakes, diverting waterways, planting trees, and raising pavilions upon the hills—a demi-urgic reshaping of the landscape according to his taste. From this



endeavor was born a monumental work, the *Rhapsody on Dwelling in the Mountains* 《山居賦》, a poem of ten thousand characters, regarded as one of the most beautiful fu in the Chinese language.

Yet Xie's fortunes once again turned. Accused by a long-standing enemy, a local administrator, of annexing imperial lands, and further charged with plotting rebellion—since he had raised a small private guard—he was condemned to exile in Nanhai (modern Guangzhou), where he was executed in 433.

Throughout this final, protracted journey toward death, he continued to compose shanshui poems, culminating in a last verse written on the eve of his execution, in keeping with the tradition of Buddhist literati.