

山水

SHANSHUI

On Shitao's treatise on painting

Marcello Ghilardi

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By; Marcello Ghilardi

Reading one of the most important texts in the Chinese pictorial tradition, the *Treatise on Painting*, *Hua yulu* 《畫語錄》 by Shitao (1642-1708 ca.),¹ we find important clarifications regarding the theory of the image and the art of landscape (*shanshui*, mountain and water):

*The inner nature of landscape [shan-chuan 山川, "mountains-rivers"] is had by capturing the universe's intimate structure. Possessing the techniques of brush and ink, one realizes the external aspects of the landscape. [...] The landscape expresses the form and tensions of the whole universe. [...] Before I was fifty, I was not generated in the landscape. This is not to say that I treated landscape as a meaningless thing, but I let it be as an independent thing, on its own. Now the landscape speaks through myself, it is expressed by me. It is generated by me, just as I am generated by the landscape.*²

Only if we understand the structure, the inner principle of totality, can we discover the inner nature of landscape, its deepest quality. The landscape's external form can be grasped and enhanced by technique, by using ink and brush the right way. But the external aspect of landscape is not only the way it appears to the look; it is also the superficial dimension of the pictorial activity. True painting means going beyond the images' exteriority and being able to generate works as living forms; for this reason Shitao writes: "Landscape is generated by me". The painter's action brings forth

a new birth, at the same time being a regeneration of the landscape in the artist's interior, and a regeneration of the artist in the landscape's dimension, in its rhythm and vital flux.

*If one captures what concerns the sea, failing to grasp the mountain's quality, or if one captures the mountain but fails [to grasp] what concerns the sea, then he captures it in the wrong way. This is my way: grasping the mountain as if [it were] sea, the sea as if [it were] mountain. I perceive the modality of mountain-sea. Everything resides in the human being, through the free flowing of brush and ink.*³

Just as for the wise man in Taoism it is essential to see the high in the low, the light in the shadow, and the warm in the cold. For Shitao a good painting can only be created by understanding the quality of the sea that which concerns the other pole of the landscape, i.e. the mountain.⁴ If the two dimensions remain separate, one could not foster the vital generation; every single brush stroke would remain rigid, even if technically perfect. "Mountain as sea, sea as mountain": this is what really counts for the painter to feel. The identical in the different, the different in the identical. Every phenomenon is an unceasing movement that evolves and changes into one another. On the

3 Ibid., 211.

4 It is well known that Shitao was a Chan monk throughout his life. Nonetheless, during his final years he came closer to Daoism – whose roots also enliven Chan buddhism. The theme of mountains and the tendency of retiring alone in the cliffs is a leitmotif in the Daoist tradition, and Chinese ink painting has been influenced by Daoism long before Chan Buddhism spread throughout the country. See Ryckmans 2007, 24-26.

1 On the historical context of early Qing China and Shitao's life, see Coleman 1978, 26-29 and Hay 2001, 2-4, 323-330.

2 Han 2000, 200 (translation mine).



老夫舊有登高興筋力
 幸衰不自由藪杖撇開
 樽酒伴柴月朋然菊蕊
 秋飄零故友驚相見檢
 點新詩亦解愁碧水蒼
 山此可得贈君圖画興

名遊

噫嘻余老健甚矣登覽

之興日蹙而阿節亦竟不相資矣乙酉

重九方先生大潞門堂輟轉輿過值

滄洲道先生來自江上聚對良

溪既而和其所贈詩因想始略

二年彼少壯而今忽彼壯我老

矣流荒夷人煙月無賴

將來片雲衰竹之跡又

豈可以意揣之耶

既而有作用誌鄙懷

清湘村弟若極



sea we get the element of the mountain – by the shapes of the waves, in its mass and strength – and in the mountain we perceive the dimension of sea – by the water of springs, the torrents, the mists and clouds, the humidity on the cliffs. “I perceive in the modality of mountain-sea”: This does not mean that one feels in one instant the sea, and the mountain the next, but more precisely – the perception is modulated at the same time by the sea and by the mountain, it is mountain-sea as one (*shanhai* 山海). The two are never completely independent.

In this sense, the painter’s work is an ethical exercise indeed, in order to understand and live the cooperation of opposites in everyday immanence. What is at stake is not merely contemplation, but more profoundly the possibility of dwelling in the landscape itself. Looking is not an attitude of the eye, it reveals a general behavior, a way of behaving and inhabiting the world. In other words, “there is ‘landscape’ when this conversion of the eye takes place. This is not the conversion belabored by metaphysics, where, as desire awakens, the eye is turned away from the things of this world [...]. The operative conversion of the eye here assumes no break or forsaking”⁵. Another term is used in Chinese to convey the notion of landscape: *feng-jing* 风景, that is “wind-light”.

Whereas ‘mountain(s) - water(s)’ speak to the correlation of High and Low, of the stable and the shifting, of what imposes a solid form and what is formless, or of what is seen and what is heard, this other pair [...] speaks of the association between, on the one hand, the invisibility of passage and penetration (wind) and, on the other, the diffusion of visibility (the light of the sun).⁶

This coupling and correlation display another perspective of landscape. Here we are not facing the relation between high and low, or immobility and dynamism, but we “see” through the wind and the light the invisibility that produces effects and the visibility that shines, or the mutability and the brilliant character of scenery. The manifestation of a landscape is indeed between visible (light) and invisible (wind), it is not detached from the senses, but nonetheless it is not attached to materiality.

One may think of a landscape as *shan-shui* or *fengjing*, in both cases one will find that in the texts and treatises on painting the act of creating and perceiving images is portrayed as an exercise of overcoming the will to fix and define the outline of an object or a territory. What really counts is not tracing a large amount of lines and details, but reducing every strict determination to allow the observer to intervene. The onlooker must *merge with the image*, completing the empty spaces, making it a lively element of nature itself, “between” visibility and invisibility. By painting and looking at images become ethical actions, because they free the forms, allowing the breathing character of nature to circulate in the images themselves, just as in phenomena. The painter does not have to block and define the brush’s strokes, but on the contrary he should make the traces fluid and nuanced. It is a painting without an “object”. It is not by chance that Shitao writes “painting what is concerning the mountain, painting what is concerning the water” (*hua yu shan, hua yu shui* 畫於山 畫於水). He does not write “painting the mountain” or “the water”, but he offers some hints or traces that allow the operative, energetic qualities to be perceived. As François Jullien writes:

⁵ Jullien 2018, 14.

⁶ Ibid., 46.

"Mountains-waters" symbolizes these dualities that hold the world in tension, and the infinite exchanges that result from them. Hence, far from being conceived as a fragment of land subject to the authority of the gaze and delimited by its horizon, the Chinese landscape puts into play the functional aggregate of opposing yet corresponding elements, and it is that dynamism as a whole, whatever the scale, that the brush will be called on to capture. The Chinese painter, in his most insignificant painting, figures the process of things as a whole, the entire, infinitely diverse play of its polarities.⁷

The work itself becomes a process, the image vibrates in a vital tension, but it stays fluid and moving. This tension is not that of a struggle, a fight between the artist and her work or inspiration. To become a master, the Chinese or Japanese artist has to learn a dis-tension: she must eliminate the destroying tension that often inhabits her soul, and fill it with a living and positive tension in the image. In this way, the image will be truly alive, not a copy or imitation, but a fragment of life, a part of nature itself. Its lively character depends on the inner logic, which couples elements and makes the vital energy (*qi*) flowing throughout the landscape dynamic. While the European tradition has developed and fostered a logic of composition, of structured, syllogistic argumentation, the Chinese tradition followed a different path. Thinking, tracing sinograms, painting, or giving birth to poetic figures – all these practices are essentially based on coupling, pairing, combining polar opposites. Light and shadow, fullness and emptiness, Heaven and Earth, and of course mountain and water: these are examples of the general logic of combination of *Yin* and

Yang. These are not ontological principles (*archai*), but two poles, features or patterns by which we can describe the overall movements of Dao. Here we also find the general image of life, which is born over and over again from nature – from the rocks of the mountains and the waters of rivers, lakes, and seas.

Another important aspect to keep in mind regarding Chinese landscape painting is that in these traditions art is not an absolute creation, on the basis of a divine model of original Creation. Without the notion of a transcendent God, the conception of an original "productivity" (in Greek: *poiesis*) did not arise from which all the other forms of creation came down. In East Asia, creation is indeed a modification, a transformation (in Chinese: *bianhua* 变化, *zaohua* 造化): it is always a process, the Tao, at work. On this basis the artist has to model and shape his own work, attuning it to natural dynamics. The purest form of action, even for that particular action that is artistic production and aesthetic experience, is the particular activity, which dissolves every imposition by a subject. The perfect action is the action without a subject: no-ego (*wuwo* 無我), no-mind (*wuxin* 無心) are the terms usually adopted in Chinese and Japanese art, when mediated by the Buddhist experience of meditation (*zuochan* 坐禪). A Chinese expression from Taoist thought teaches similarly: *wu wei er wu bu wei* 無為而無不為, "no action, so that nothing is not realized"⁸. In other words: everything will be accomplished in the absence of a strong acting subject, an imposing subjectivity. The individual expres-

⁸ On the notion of *wu wei*, see Loy 1985; Slingerland 2007. In such an expression, but more generally in the notions mentioned a few lines before (no-ego, no-mind), lies the core of an ethical proposal that should be further exposed and discussed. On the connection between ethics and Daoism, see an intriguing approach in Nelson 2009.

⁷ Jullien 2009, 122.

喜多々
屋宇幸
有微雲
山語亦別画
亦生三意外有
意能多画氣
不遠人修



竹瓦園野色
含影漾江流
石濤



sion of the subject must merge in the global flow of the process, in order to obtain the maximum effect. So, not only the form of ink and the movement of brush are transformed, but so too are the artist's and the onlooker's identities. Life itself is transformed. The image does nothing but offer to the eye this truth, exposing it in a visible figure.

The real mistake is trying to fix the image, the life, the world itself; in this way, no image can be perceived as vital. Chinese landscape painting gives way to what we could call an aesthetics of transition, or an aesthetics of passage. Animation is seen in the processes of nature, in impermanence, in the val-

ue of continuous flowing of all the elements of reality. Images can display the animating *qi*, flowing in all the aspects of the world, and are thus a true expression of its vitality. At the same time, they can convey the intention (*yi* 意) of the artist, after her detaching from any personal, subjective, individual tension. *Yi* is rather the impersonal and global way that flows throughout every natural element, more than the personal intention: the artist has to refine his own understanding and ability to feel it, to be in accord with it and to be able to follow its movement between emptiness and fullness, definition and dissolution.

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He works as a translator and consultant for various publishing houses, for which he has also edited collective volumes and texts by Cassirer, Jullien, Merleau-Ponty, Nishida, in addition to the treatise of Shitao, *Discourses on Painting* by the monk Bitter Cucumber (Milan, 2014); he has published numerous essays in miscellaneous volumes or in national and international journals. Among his volumes: "Cuore e acciaio. Estetica dell'animazione giapponese" (Esedra, 2003); "L'enigma e lo specchio. Il problema del volto nella pittura contemporanea" (Esedra, 2006); "Una logica del vedere. Estetica ed etica nel pensiero di Nishida Kitarō" (Mimesis, 2009); "Filosofia nei manga. Estetica e immaginario nel Giappone contemporaneo" (Mimesis, 2010); "Arte e pensiero in Giappone. Corpo, immagine, gesto" (Mimesis, 2011); "Il visibile differente. Sguardo e relazione in Derrida" (Mimesis, 2012); "Filosofia dell'interculturalità" (Morcelliana, 2012); "Il vuoto, le forme, l'altro" (Morcelliana 2014); "The Line of the Arch. Intercultural Issues between Aesthetics and Ethics" (Mimesis International, 2015); "L'estetica giapponese moderna" (Morcelliana 2016), "La filosofia giapponese" (ELS/Morcelliana 2018), "La radice del sole" (Longanesi, 2019), "Il simbolo di Europa" (Mimesis, 2020), "Arte e meditazione" (RCS, 2020), and an artbook about his pictorial research: "Nella distanza della luce / In the Distance of Light" (Mimesis, 2014).



*What I call painting does not
exceed the joy of careless
sketching with the brush. I do
not seek for formal likeness;
I do it simply for my
amusement.*

Ni Zan

