



"Unity between Human and Nature" in Chinese Mountain and Water painting

Giacomo Bruni

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By: Giacomo Bruni

In Chinese thought, the relationship between man and nature has always played a fundamentally important role, a relationship that requires union and harmony between the two parts, which is based on a holistic view of the universe. *Tianren heyi* 天人合一 describes the relationship between human (*ren* 人) and sky (*tian* 天), which are joined (*he* 合) as a whole (*yi* 一), where *tian* indicates nature, its laws and its Way. This vision is found in the *Yijing*, along with Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist and other minor schools of thought, and always present in China's cultural philosophical substratum.

天地与我并生，万物与我为一¹

Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one. (Legge 1891)

Zhuangzi 庄子 with these words expresses the unity between the rules of nature, the physical nature or earth 地 and man, how they are part of the same vital and evolutionary process, for man and all things in the world *wanwu* 万物 are united and "heaven and earth are the parents of the ten thousand things"² and humans completes them. The conceptions that sees nature, its rules and man as the three fundamental elements of the universe, with man standing between the two, originated in the *Yijing* 《易经》 and were later formalized in his commentary, the *Yi Zhuan* 《易传》, in the theory of *sancai zhidao* 三才之道, the way of the three talents, where

human, heaven and earth are part of the same system, in a continuous mutual relationship. This is how the *Yijing* describes the three talents:

昔者圣人之作《易》也，将以顺性命之理，是以立天之道曰阴与阳，立地之道曰柔与刚，立人之道曰仁与义。兼三才而两之，故《易》六画而成卦。分阴分阳，迭用柔刚，故《易》六位而成章。³

Anciently, when the sages made the Yi, it was with the design that (its figures) should be in conformity with the principles underlying the natures (of men and things), and the ordinances (for them) appointed (by Heaven). With this view they exhibited (in them) the way of heaven, calling (the lines) yin and yang; the way of earth, calling (them) the weak (or soft) and the strong (or hard); and the way of men, under the names of benevolence and righteousness. Each (trigram) embraced (those) three Powers; and, being repeated, its full form consisted of six lines.

A thought that is not anthropocentric but also not naturocentric, where harmony and mutual relationships are the key elements. This concept contains a strong environmental consciousness and a humanistic spirit, which has an enormous influence on Chinese thought in general, and human's main goal to lead a happy life is to achieve this status of communion. Since ancient times, many scholars and philosophers have tried to explain and bring human to understand the necessity of this approach to the world around them, to bring human closer and unite them with nature,

1 《庄子-齐物论》

2 《庄子-达生》曰：天地者，万物之父母也。

3 《易经-说卦》

壬子歲七月五日雲林子寫

屋角東春風多杏花小齋容膝
度年華金梭躍水池魚戲彩鳳
松林澗竹斜簾清談霏玉屑
蕭蕭白髮岸烏紗而今不二韓
康價市上懸壺未足言甲寅三
月四日繫軒翁復携此畫來索
謔詩贈寄仁仲醫師且錫山
予之故鄉也容膝齋則仁仲燕
居之所他日將歸故鄉發斯齋
持危酒展斯畫為仁仲壽當
遂吾志也雲林子識





both physically and spiritually. In a passage from the *Huangdi neijing* 《黄帝内经》, one of the oldest Chinese medical texts, we read:

天有日月，人有两目。地有九州，人有九窍。天有风雨，人有喜怒。天有雷电，人有音声。天有四时，人有四肢。[...] 天有冬夏，人有寒热。天有十日，人有手十指。[...] 天有阴阳，人有夫妻。岁有三百六十五日，人有三百六十节。地有高山，人有肩膝。地有深谷，人有腋腘。地有十二经水，人有十二经脉。[...] 地有草蓂，人有毫毛。天有昼夜，人有卧起。天有列星，人有牙齿。地有小山，人有小节。地有山石，人有高骨。地有林木，人有募筋。[...] 地有四时不生草，人有无子。此人与天地相应者也。⁴

The sky has the sun and the moon, and people have two eyes. There are nine states on the earth and nine orifices in human. There is wind and rain in the sky, and there is joy and anger in human. There is thunder and lightning in the sky and the man produces sounds and noises. There are four seasons in the sky and humans have four limbs. [...] The sky has winter and summer, humans have cold and heat. The sky has ten suns and human have ten fingers. [...] Heaven has Yin and Yang, and humans have husband and wife. The year has three hundred and sixty-five days, humans have three hundred and sixty-five joints. The earth has high mountains, and humans have shoulders and knees. The earth has deep valleys, and humans have armpits and popliteus. The earth has twelve main rivers, and humans have twelve channels [through which life energy circulates]. [...] The earth has grass and plants, and humans have hair. There are days and nights, and men sleep and wake. There are stars in the sky and humans have teeth. There are small mountains on earth

and small joints on humans. The earth has mountains and rocks, and humans have carpus. There are trees and forests on earth and humans have sinews. [...] There are four periods when no grass grows on the earth, and humans have no children. This are the correspondences between humans, heaven and earth.

The isomorphism of human and nature is the most superficial aspect of the concept of harmony where the structure of the human body and its life reflects the structure of sky and earth, what is called *rentian tonggou* 人天同构, men and sky have the same structure, which will find its expression in *Neijing tu* 《内经图》 which is an anatomical map of the internal organs of the human body using the natural elements. Its purpose is to provide a diagram for learning the internal organs and illustrating Taoist health preservation methods, which contains the classic meaning of "internal cultivation". There is always a continuous correspondence between inside and outside, macrocosm and microcosm, in a continuous flow of life, of *qi* 气, which is the expression of the Dao 道, of the Way:

人法地 地法天 天法道 道法自然。⁵

Human follows the earth, the earth follows the sky, the heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows the naturalness.

Laozi 老子 used a consistent approach to encapsulate and expound the laws of life of sky, earth, people, and the entire universe.

These conceptions would be of great influence in later eras in the formation of traditional thought in various fields of knowledge, from medical, philosophical, social, aesthetic, character-

4 《灵枢-邪客》

5 《道德经》

ised by the common idea that the creative and evolutionary principles that characterise the natural world are the same as those that govern the development of man, his social and cultural expressions.⁶

From the post-Han period, the relationship between man and nature became a fundamental element in the artistic-pictorial discourse, which laid the theoretical foundations for the future development of painting, especially mountain and water painting, or as it is generally translated in the West as landscape painting, a period in which this pictorial form became independent and no longer a background for human figures.

Zong Bing 宗炳 (375 - 443) in his Introduction to the Painting of Mountains and Waters, *Hua shanshui xu* 《画山水序》 explains for the first time why one should devote oneself to this genre of painting. Zong Bing's thought is steeped in the Daoist theories of Zhuangzi and Laozi, which had a revival, along with the closely related theories of hermit culture, after the fall of the Han dynasty, about a hundred years before Zong Bing's era. The Introduction to the Painting of Mountains and Waters touches on a whole series of issues that would become fundamental in Chinese aesthetic thought, which would be developed in later epochs and are the subject of speculation to this day. Zong Bing introduced the ecological aesthetic wisdom inherent in traditional thought into painting, and the painting of mountains and water became the most prominent representative of the

6 The *Huainan zi* 《淮南子》, an important collection of texts on various topics from the second century B.C.E., from myths of antiquity to contemporary government, analyses the figure of the perfected ruler in numerous passages, and finds as a philosophical foundation the notion that the rules of politics and government follow the same as those of the natural world



aesthetic/ecological spirit. The natural environment is a perceptive and transcendent world, an ideal form of beauty, and an excellent painting subject, which awakens people's senses, and makes the nature flow from within, allowing them to adapt to the natural rhythms of the world, in order to merge the subject matter with the vitality of the universe for physical and mental pleasure. A process of assimilation that has educational and self-improvement auto-cultivating purposes, moving away from mere material desires and the pursuit of fame, leading to the perception of the Way.

Painting is a graphic expression of the artist's spirit and an aesthetic relationship between man, nature and society. In this dynamic, Zong Bing introduced the concept of the Dao in the painting of mountains and waters, the Dao is invisible, yet present, through the practice of painting, the form of the natural environment that is represented, and it is a way to reach it, so one must not be a slave to visual perceptions, like reading a metaphor literally, and ignoring its true meaning, which goes beyond the words used. The invisible but perceptible element, which has no form, became a fundamental characteristic, and an essential in the painting of mountains and waters, which in less than a century later got standardized as *qiyun shengdong* 气韵生动, the resonance of the spirit, the first of the six canons of painting of Xie He 谢赫 (5th century), whose expression became, and still is, the main objective of the Chinese painters. Thus, from the very beginning of painting practice, the anthropocentric element of sight became secondary, leaving room for the spiritual and emotional relationship between man and nature. The formation of the artistic conception of mountain and water painting is based on the artist's thoughts and

emotions integrated with the essence of mountains and rivers. The reflection of this unity in artistic production shows that the painter's personality realizes the fusion and resonance of the object and the self, corresponding to the natural environment and natural aesthetic values. This is why the term landscape is not suitable to refer to this artistic expression, since landscape implies an external observer (man), who interacts with it mainly through sight, who is emotionally or aesthetically influenced by the natural environment, but always from the cognitive point of view, which implies an external position on the part of the subject.

In later epochs, the relationship between man and nature in the aesthetics would be deepened and elaborated, leading to the emergence of new concepts that would enrich the theoretical background underlying the practice of mountain and water painting.

The relationship between exteriority and interiority, human and nature, from an educational aspect, can be found from Zhang Zao's 张璪 (Tang era 618-907) concept of *waishi zao-hua, zhongde xinyuan* 外师造化, 中得心源, that is, that nature and pits creative process is the external master, the heart is the internal origin, which means that artistic creation derives from the teaching of nature, and the beauty of nature cannot automatically become the beauty of art. For this process of transformation, the setting of the artist's inner structures and feelings is indispensable. There is the necessity of being in contact with the natural environment, in order to learn and understand its beauty, rhythm, harmony, complexity, variation, and all of which will not only help improve one's artistic and expressive skills, but will also enrich the artist's personality. Knowledge of nature will remain one

of the two main elements in the training of the intellectual artist *wenren hua* 文人画 together with the study of tradition, and creating a training system based on the coexistence of humanistic teachings and the experience of nature. This vision would be reiterated by intellectual artists throughout the ages, from Su Dongpo 苏东坡 (1037-1101) to Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 (1254-1322), Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) who writes:

读万卷书，行万里路，胸中脱去尘浊，自然丘壑内营，成立鄞鄂，随手写出，皆为山水传神矣。⁷

Devote oneself to study, read ten thousand volumes, walk ten thousand li, to rid one's mind of dust and murk, naturally one will internalize the mountains and valleys, one will set limits, one's hand will spontaneously paint, and all the mountains and waters will be full of life.

To modernity, with Huang Binhong 黄宾虹 (1865-1955):

圣人就是一种聪明人，但也得法乎自然，自然就是法。⁸

The sage is a sharp and intelligent man who has obtained the method from nature, nature is the method

Living in contact with nature has its origins in the eremitic culture, *yinshi wenhua* 隐士文化 that took shape in the pre-Qin period, particularly in a historical phase encompassing the period of the Springs and Autumns 春秋时代 *Chunqiu shidai* (722-481) and the Warring States 战国 *Zhanguo* (453-221). The latter was a period of violence, characterized by political and social instability, but also one of great cultural richness and creativity, which

led to the birth or theoretical formalization of the Hundred Schools of Thought 诸子百家 *Zhuzi baijia*, including the Confucian and Daoist schools, which left relevant records of hermits of the time. Mountain and water painting developed in this cultural vein, Zong Bing was a hermit, and many painters and theorists of later periods embraced the hermit lifestyle, or if one was unable to do so for social reasons, aspired to it and evoked it through their artistic production. Guo Xi 郭熙 (ca.1020-1090) in *The Noble Message of the Woods and Springs*, *Linquan gaozhi* 《林泉高致》, a text that is also fundamental for the theoretical structuring of mountain and water painting, defines the importance of mountain and water painting precisely because in a flourishing and stable era, it would be a sin to abandon social life and family, so thanks to painting, both artist and observer can experience life away from society, and let the self be transported into nature and enjoy its beauty. In addition to reiterating the concept introduced into painting by Zong Bing of the *wayou* 卧游, or traveling within the mind, which is the ability of the pictorial act and observation of the painting to transport the subject away from the troubles of everyday life, Guo Xi expounds the theory of *sike* 四可, four ways of experiencing the natural environment, which are divided into two groups, one that considers the recreational and pleasant, but momentary, aspect, what we now call tourism, and the other, considered superior, where one loses one's conception of oneself, becoming one with the environment, so much so that one forgets to return home and make nature one's home. He says:

山水有可行者，有可望者，有可游者，有可居者。画凡至此，皆入妙品，但可行、可望不如可居、可游之为得。

⁷ 《画禅室随笔》

⁸ 《国画之民学》

There are natural environments where one can walk, where one can lose oneself with one's gaze, where one can travel and where one can live. All paintings that manage to reach this level are excellent works, but those where you walk and get lost with your gaze are not at the level of those where you live or travel.

One way to eliminate the distance between man and nature is to change the way we look at the natural world.

Direct experience with nature, which in the practical act must be studied up close, from afar, in motion, being part of it, leads to a profound knowledge of its elements, so the pictorial act will not only be the reproduction of external perception, but the representation of the inner beauty *neimei* 内美, which is not static but in continuous variation *bianhua* 变化, which is the process of life, growth and change of nature and human. Huang Gongwang 黄公望 (1269-1354) says:

皮袋中置描笔在内，或于好景处，见树有怪异，便当模写记之，分外有发生之意。⁹

It is good to always have a sketching brush in your leather bag, so that in the event that you find yourself in a beautiful scenery, with the sight of strange and rare trees, you can easily reproduce and note them down, giving the idea of growth and development.

In theoretical thinking, there is therefore a desire to bring us closer to nature, increasing our familiarity with it so that we do not feel





Qian Du 钱杜 (1763-1844), *Writing a book* 《著书图轴》

it as a foreign, different and separate entity, but regards it as our own. Since antiquity, humans and the natural elements were metaphorically associated, in the Huangdi's 黄帝 *Zhaijing* 《宅经》, an ancient geomancy text attributed to the Yellow Emperor, we read:

宅以形势为身体，以泉水为血脉，以土地为皮肉，以草木为毛发，以舍屋为衣服，以门户为冠带。

The morphology of the place where one dwells is the body, the water of the springs is the blood, the earth is the skin and flesh, the grass and trees are like hair, houses and shelters like clothes and the gate is the crown.

Methodology this would later be applied to pictorial theory as well, as in the case by the aforementioned Guo Xi:

山以水为血脉，以草木为毛发，以烟云为神采。故山得水而活，得草木而华，得烟云而秀媚。水以山为面，以亭榭为眉目，以渔钓为精神，故水得山而媚，得亭榭而明快，得渔钓而旷落。此山水之布置也。

The waters of the mountain are its veins and arteries, the plants and trees are its hair, the mists and clouds its vigour and character. The water gives life to the mountain, the outward beauty is given by the plants and trees, the charm and elegance by the clouds and mists. The mountain is the face of the water, the pavilions and terraces are its eyes and eyebrows, the fishermen its vitality, the origin of the water's charm is the mountain, the pavilions and terraces give liveliness, the fishermen the sense of welcome. This is the composition of mountains and water.

Achieving union with nature is not an easy goal to achieve, but on an artistic level it is necessary in order to create

works of value that can inspire and influence those who observe them. The relationship with nature encourages the cultivation of self, body and mind, and it helps to understand our surroundings, and in this way we will be able to produce excellent works. Proof of the truthfulness of these conceptions can also be found in the historical evidence of the stiffening and loss of freshness of the painting of mountains and waters by the literate painters of the Qing era, who renounced direct contact with nature to devote themselves to blind study and copying the masters, an attitude that from the very beginning found adversity from artists who pursued an independent way of thinking such as the 'Four Monks of the Early Qing Period, *Qingchu siseng* 清初四僧, who, with a non-conformist spirit, withdrew from social life, recovering the ways of hermit culture, and raging against the formalism and academicism of the time. Shi Tao 石涛 (ca. 1642-1708) is the only one of the four who left us an articulate text on the painting of mountains and waters, *Discourses on the Painting of the Monk Bitter Gourd, Kugua heshang hualun lu* 《苦瓜和尚画语录》 where the most important factors of painting and artistic production in general are discussed. By rediscovering contact with nature and moving away from the crudeness of materiality, by seeking attunement with the vital flow of the universe, Shi Tao is able to achieve unity with nature, as his words tell us:

此予五十年前未脱胎于山川也；亦非糟粕其山川，而使山川自私也。山川使予代山川而言也，山川脱胎于予也，予脱胎于山川也。

When I was less than fifty years old, I had not yet been born into mountains and rivers; I did not believe they were something useless, but let them exist

independently of me. Now the mountains and rivers speak through me, the mountains and rivers are generated by me, and I am born of them.

Conclusion

The desire and need to bring humans closer to and unite with nature has inevitably led to influence Chinese thought in general and thus also the conceptions related to technical and practical production in the field of art and in the formation of aesthetic thought. Being one with nature, the union both physical and mental, the immersion by human in the natural environment, the desire to express the life that flows in all things, their continuous variation in the life cycle, to show the invisible of the spirit and the life breath, has inevitably guided the evolution of painting techniques and the approach towards the subject to be painted, making the sense of sight a secondary perceptive tool, and one of the means of approaching the environment, but not the only one, let alone the main one. The same applies in the expressive and pictorial act that is not based on the representation of external form and appearances, manifesting external beauty. A very famous verse by Su Dongpo, which will be repeatedly quoted in later epochs, says:

论画以形似，见与儿童邻。¹⁰

Who discusses painting in terms of the resemblance of form, has a vision that approaches that of a child.

In a quick comparison with traditional Western painting, we see how the artist's mindset is almost diametrically opposed, in China, the Albertian idea of the world seen through a window, of the construction of the painting following linear perspective,

10 《书鄢陵王主簿所画折枝》

is rejected, which just goes to reproduce the artist's optical and static perception, which therefore implies his external position, man looking and reproducing, taking, modifying, acting on the natural environment, without any kind of empathy towards it, to express himself, to improve, enrich himself, considering nature a passive element at the service of humanity. It goes without saying that this approach has led to the decay of the natural environment and to a temporary and fictitious prosperity of humans, who finds themselves in contemporary times reaping the bitter fruits of the exploitation of nature. In this very perspective, the painting of mountains and waters has a role of social and environmental critique, which is defined not as a negative and conflictual approach regarding our destructive activity toward nature, but as a positive and conciliatory critique that leads us to love nature, to empathize with it, and automatically to lead us to protect and safeguard nature by understanding its actual value, beauty, and importance in order to sustain our life, the sky, the earth, and the ten thousand things that flourish.





鴻雁歸時水拍天
平岡老木為金烟
借君餘地安漁艇
着我寒江種白蘋
癸亥高海華并
井西
祁

春寒料峭夜雨連綿
燕子不來杏花
零落矣
癸亥高海華并
井西
祁

