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SHANSHUI

Mountain and Rivers are my
Teachers. The Concept of Learning
from Nature in the Tradition of
Chinese Landscape Painting

Thorsten Schirmer

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By; Thorsten Schirmer

Mountains have shaped my experience of nature since early childhood. Born in Hannover, the nearby low mountain ranges were obvious destinations for frequent weekend and holiday trips. I've developed a talent for writing in the first years of school and at the same time discovered that drawing suited me. By my father and grandfather I was given a positive approach to educational topics such as culture, geography and art, which awakened my interest in foreign countries and cultures. At the age of 12 I discovered the teachings of Kongzi and Laozi, and soon after the Chan (or Zen) Buddhism. I absorbed all information I could find about East Asian culture. With great passion, I devoted myself especially to Chan Buddhism and Daoism, until at the age of 14 I found a book about Chan art that would have a lasting effect on me. The works of Chinese monk painters of the 13th century and their Japanese successors of the 14th and 15th centuries depicted there were a revelation for me. The expressive pictorial language, concentrated on a few forms, and especially the landscape as the subject of this contemplative painting, struck me directly in the heart. Without the slightest doubt, it was clear to me that I wanted to follow this path and paint in this way.

From the very beginning, the landscape was the predominant theme of my paintings, in which I soon specialized completely. I had spent a lot of time in nature from an early age, so I felt inwardly connected to this subject like no other. These memories and impressions gave me the strong be-

lieve of being able to spontaneously translate this theme into the painting style of Chan Buddhism. I have never had the feeling that I work in a foreign tradition. Rather, the artistic way I took when I was just 14 years old felt like a way back home for me. Two years later, with the same inner matter-of-factness, I discarded the brush in order to paint from then on only in direct contact with the painting surface using my fingers.

My encounters with old masterpieces were important to my further development, but essentially I found my sources of inspiration in the landscape itself. In Chan painting, the artist focuses on the interplay of form and emptiness. Mountain peaks and rocks, trees, the sea coast, lakes and rivers, clouds and fog are the essential components that make up a landscape in the tradition of East Asian ink painting. In order to study them, I have to search for landscape impressions. This resulted in intensive travel, which continues to this day.

Like Wu Daozi, I neither paint in the landscape nor do I make sketches. When I walk through a beautiful landscape, I contemplate it. As soon as I see a mountain or rock, no matter what shape and size, I enter into an inner relationship with it. I never get tired of this kind of contemplation. It is essential for the act of painting to understand inspiration as an impulse and not as a blueprint. One is well advised to wait and see what takes shape in the spontaneous painting process on paper.



Yujian, *Mountain village in clearing mist*, ink on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo



Yujian, *Autumn Moon over Dongting Lake*, ink on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo



Yujian, *Returning Sailboat from a Distant Shore*, ink on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo



Rock formation in the Harz Mountains near my hometown Hannover, Germany

All the impressions of mountains in my mind have to be transformed into the essence of form. In our memory all impressions undergo a natural process of abstraction. We remember the essentials, while unimportant details are faded out over time. What remains is a kind of essence, gained from images and moods, which our memory has reduced to the core of what we have experienced. In painting, it often happens that impressions emancipate themselves from the real experience over time and a transformation into a new image takes place.

The way of painting in the sense of Daoism and Chan Buddhism is like sailing onto the ocean. As soon as the leash is loosened and the shore disappeared from view, the mainland loses its meaning, the port from which the journey began is little more than a distant memory, which contours fade in the face of infinity.

During my travels through China, I was able to visit some of the most beautiful mountain landscapes in the country, which made a deep impression on me and gave me a special access to



the understanding of Chinese painting. Of course there are areas of special natural beauty all over the globe, of which I have seen quite a few. However, landscapes such as the Huangshan or the mountains of Guilin correspond to the Chinese soul in a special way and are not by chance among the most popular sources of inspiration for Chinese painters. To visit them, to stand in the same mountains from which my Chinese role models once drew their inspiration, always brings me closer to the roots of my art.

It is always and everywhere possible to contemplate the landscape, whereas the actual theme of Chan painting, the dissolution of the form through clouds and fog, presupposes that these weather phenomena are timed in the right place at the right time. Certain conditions are required to produce the desired effect. If, for example, heavy clouds settle over the mountain peaks, days can pass in which you can't see anything at all, so drifting clouds and fog, which constantly change the image of the mountains, are the best. How such in-



Pine trees and rocks cover the Mingtanshan in Anhui Province.



spiration can affect the artistic work is documented in the following description of my trip to Mingtangshan. Located in the eastern Chinese province of Anhui on the northern edge of the subtropics, this peak, located about 40 kilometers northwest of the district town of Yuexi, belongs to the Dabieshan Mountain Range. Emperor Han Wudi (156-87 BCE) was so taken by its beauty that he had built a temple there, which gave the mountain its name. Thanks to its steep rock faces, which are often cloudy due to the climate, and bizarre pines, the 1563-meter-high Mingtangshan looks almost like a Chinese landscape painting. My visit to the mountain took place in the summer of 2018.

A Journey to Mingtangshan

Dense morning fog lies over the rice fields as we pass the first hills. Beyond the city limits of Luan, we have taken the highway in the direction of Yuexi and are now already in the foothills of the Dabieshan Mountains. Violent summer thunderstorms have passed over the country during the night, the humid air is warm and announces another hot and humid day. But the sun is still fighting against the last rain clouds, which follow the nightly storm as a rearguard. The road is new and almost empty, so we make rapid progress. Whitewashed farmhouses nestle beyond the narrow fields into the fresh green of a bamboo forest. Clouds rise from the valleys, nourished by the rain of the night. They promise me the chance for the best painter's weather. While in the West this term means a clear day with lots of sun, in China it is the exact opposite. Clouds and fog are the weather conditions appreciated by painters for the perfect impression of a mountain landscape. So I hope that the clouds will stay until our arrival. But when we finally leave

the highway, the sun has already prevailed. The valley in front of the Mingtangshan describes a wide arc, which we follow uphill until the first view of its summit opens up to us. The clouds are still dancing up there, so my hope for painter's weather is getting new nourishment. The Mingtangshan rises steeply above the surrounding mountain ridges, which seem to gather around the ruler's throne like a court. We pass a small tea plantation and finally reach a parking lot. Dense mountain forest welcomes us, the temperature is already beyond the 30-degree mark, and the high humidity makes the climbing an extremely sweaty affair. So we decide to shorten the way to the summit with the cable car, whose station soon appears in front of us. We don't have to wait long for a cabin, because there are only a few hikers on the road this morning. Soon we float up, while passing tall Huangshan pines and huge rocks. Once at the top, we are greeted by a light breeze that cools us gently and keeps the clouds moving. We take a path under the crowns of countless pine trees. To the left, the deep valley yawns, bizarre pine branches reach out into the void. Suddenly the road opens up a view of our actual destination. A path clings to the rock face, which drops abruptly into the abyss, decorating the peak like a headband. At first glance, it seems to defy gravity and is anything but trustworthy, but solid pillars anchor it in the rock, just like the roots of the pines, whose heads proudly stretch over the abyss. With some respect, we enter the construction. As we follow the path around the first summit, clouds rise up again from the valley. The path in front of us disappears into nothingness, suddenly mighty pines confront us, which are immediately swallowed up again by the emptiness. Now it is "painter's weather" at Mingtangshan.

The change from moment to moment completely captivates me. With every step, the picture changes. Rocks appear, shapes change from deep black to light gray, only to finally dissolve completely.

Where the veils of clouds break up for seconds, rocks float weightlessly in empty space, pines grow rootless out of the nothingness. Everything around me seems to be in motion, the image of the landscape changes from moment to moment, its fragments are coming and going. The Mingtangshan gives me a moment of magic, the magic of which creates a world that looks like an image of the sacred mantra from the Heart Sutra: "Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form," the clouds, rocks and pines seem to recite as the game of transformation continues. I am completely devoted to looking, not to miss a second of this miracle. I cannot say how long I spend in this contemplation. Time seems to have been suspended, has lost its effect on me. Only the present remains in my consciousness, in which I drift from image to image, like the veils of clouds over the rocks and pines. As the forms regain their clarity, we follow the path further around the summit. Suddenly we stand on a glass floor that offers a view into the abyss. Clouds drift through the valley deep below us, crashing against the foot of the rock face and the lower mountain ridges that surround the Mingtangshan.

Finally we reach an inn that sticks to the rock like a swallow's nest. Filled with all these impressions, we decide to take a break. The abyss below us is filled with emptiness, the opposite path leads straight into nothingness. The recitation of the mantra, it seems, will also guide our way back.

The processing of inspiration

Under the impression of this experience, I began a series of paintings, on which I worked almost for one and a half year. The essential thing about my approach was that I did not try to process the concrete impressions of my Mingtangshan visit. These found their way into my work on a more abstract level. The interplay of form and emptiness, triggered by the ideal conditions of the weather in combination with the spectacular mountain landscape, were a rare treasure of inspiration for me. In such moments, when the colors fade and nature takes on the flowing tones of the black ink, when form dissolve and emptiness takes its place, I can feel an almost magical connection between the real landscape and my painting. On Mingtangshan I felt a perfect congruence between the outer and inner world, like I as wandering through my own paintings. I first had such an experience in 1990 on Jiuhuashan, a sacred Buddhist mountain in the south of Anhui, and later on other mountains inside and outside China. Each time, it seemed to me like homecoming, a strong feeling from which I could draw my creative energy over a long period of time.

In addition to this spiritual experience, I was inspired by the Huangshan pines at Mingtangshan. Here, too, I was not interested in depicting individual trees in concrete terms, but in adapting the pine as a type. While the rock symbolizes the positive force *Yang* and the clouds the negative force *Yin*, the pine stands in China as a symbol of life energy. The motif becomes a proxy for human existence in the eternal play of transformation of *yin* and *yang*, form and emptiness. What the Mingtangshan has also taught me are the different forms of transformation



Clouds are rising up to the mountain top of Mingtanshan





The play of form an emptiness.







of the trees. I saw strong pines with black silhouettes, looking like powerful signs of life, while the rock around them dissolved into nothingness. I saw tiny silhouettes in the distance, clawing into the stone of the mighty peak. I saw pine trees grow up out of nothingness and take shape, while others fade from solid ground into the void. I saw pines rising from the dense mountain forest like a ruler over his subjects and proudly presenting their crown, but also lonely pines with barren branches standing on the edge of the abyss. I included all these aspects in my paintings. Each of these forms preached to me in its own way.

To accept mountain and water as teachers means to be in harmony with them, to contemplate their countless manifestations. If the inspiration is strong and the intense pure, if I am ready in the process of painting to give up every will and wish, if the ink

takes shape in this way unintentionally, then perhaps in a magical moment the true, essential image of the Mingtangshan succeeds. It becomes true and essential by expressing the words of the holy mantra: "Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form."