山水

SHANSHUI

Chinese and Western Ways of Perceiving Landscape

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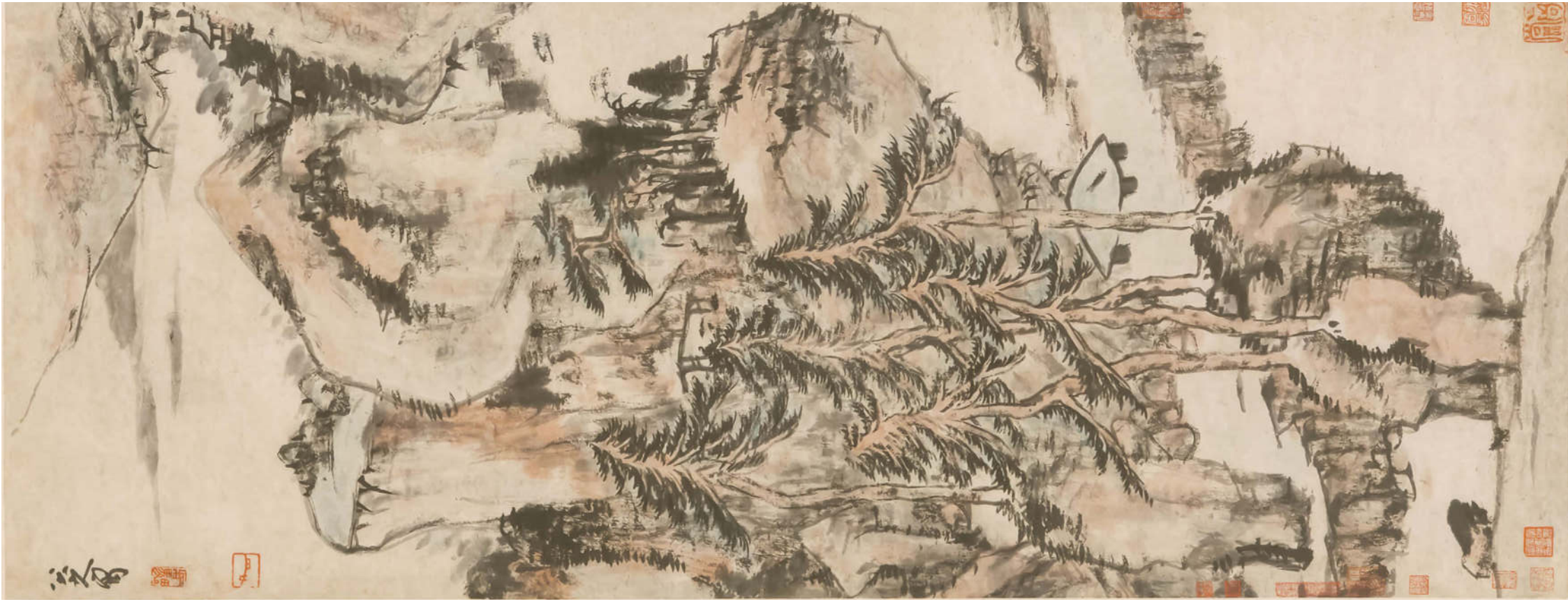
To the Chinese mind, natural landscape is never a mere physical entity. It serves as a spiritual refuge, a mirror of inner consciousness, and a microcosm of the universe. When Song Dynasty painter Guo Xi stated in *Lin Quan Gao Zhi* (林泉高致) that landscape contains sites "suitable for walking, gazing, wandering, and dwelling", he articulated far more than a superficial appreciation of natural scenery. He defined a unique cognitive mode that fully internalizes landscape into personal lived experience. In stark contrast, traditional Western perceptions of the natural world follow an external, analytical, and geometrically systematic mode of observation. These two divergent cognitive paradigms originate from distinct civilizational and philosophical foundations, evolving over millennia to shape unique aesthetic traditions and spiritual temperaments.

The core of Chinese landscape cognition rests on the integrated life philosophies of ruism (*rujia* 儒家), daoismis (*daojia* 道家), and Buddhism (*fojia* 佛家), centering on harmonious human-nature coexistence and the principle of *tianren heyi* (天人合一) (the unity of sky and humanity). The cognitive framework for understanding natural landscape is a harmonious synthesis of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist thought, with each school establishing an independent yet complementary approach to engaging with the natural world.

From the perspective of *rujia*, landscape functions primarily as a carrier of moral virtue and social order. Confucius established the classic aesthetic-ethical concept of the virtue symbolism (*bide* 比德), asserting that "the wise delight in water, the benevolent delight in mountains". The fluid, adaptive nature of water symbolizes the intellectual agility of the wise, while the stable, immovable solidity of mountains embodies the steadfast integrity of the benevolent. This bide tradition anthropomorphizes and ethicizes natural landscape, transforming ordinary natural scenery into a symbolic vessel for virtues such as benevolence, wisdom, tranquility, and fortitude. During the Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104) further institutionalized landscape within state sacrificial rituals, embedding natural scenery into the orthodox framework of political order. Confucian scholar-officials refined their moral character by projecting their aspirations and emotions onto landscape. Their voluntary retreat into nature often carried an inherent ideological tension: while dwelling amid natural scenery, they remained devoted to state affairs and public governance. For Confucian literati, landscape constituted a private spiritual domain for moral self-preservation, enabling the fulfillment of the classical ideal of upholding personal integrity in times of political adversity.

Daojia infused Chinese landscape cognition with a profound ethos of spiritual freedom and transcendence. Laozi formulated the foundational cosmic principle: "Man follows the earth; the earth follows the sky; the sky follows the Dao; the Dao follows nature/naturalness", elevating inherent natural order as the ultimate universal truth. Zhuangzi expanded this philosophy through the ideal of free spiritual wandering, dissolving the ontological boundary between human subjects and natural objects and advancing the state of "Sky and Earth exist together with me, and all things are one with me." (天地与我并生，万物与我为一), in which humanity exists in complete unison with sky, earth, and all living things. Within Daoist thought, visible landscape is the tangible manifestation of the invisible Dao, representing an authentic, unadulterated natural state untouched by human artifice. To observe and contemplate landscape is to comprehend the universal Dao and return to humanity's primordial spiritual condition. During the Wei and Jin dynasties, the flourishing of metaphysics (*xuanxue* 玄学) merged Dao-

Zhu Da (Qing), *Wusong Mountain*, colour on paper, 112.4×43.4 cm，朱耷（清），《五松山图》，纸本设色，112.4×43.4 cm





Mu Xi (attributed, Southern Song), *Fenggan*，牧溪（传）（南宋），《丰干图》

ist doctrine with the teachings of *Yi Jing* (易经). Intellectuals embraced the ethos of transcending rigid social conventions and embracing natural spontaneity, retreating deeply into forests and mountains. As exemplified by the poet Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (365-427), they sought spiritual liberation from secular confinement through immersion in nature. In this turbulent historical period, natural landscape became a poetic sanctuary for individual spiritual settlement and emancipation.

Fojia, particularly its indigenized Chinese school of *chanzong* (禅宗, jp. *zen*), substantially enriched the spiritual depth and interpretive dimension of traditional Chinese landscape cognition. The scholar Zong Bing (宗炳 375-443) proposed the pivotal idea that landscape reveals the subtle truth of the Dao through its formal appearances (山水以形媚道). Chan doctrine advocates the core worldview that "green bamboo embodies the Dharma body; blooming flowers manifest Prajna wisdom", affirming that Buddha-nature permeates every corner of the natural world, rendering all plants, trees, and scenery spiritually luminous. Under this framework, engaging with landscape is no longer limited to external aesthetic appreciation or Confucian moral analogy; it becomes an intimate inward practice of enlightenment triggered by natural observation. The Tang poet Wang Wei's (王维 701-761) iconic verse—"I walk to the stream's end, then sit and watch clouds rise"—epitomizes the Chan state of unforced adaptation and absolute integration of self and nature. In Chan spirituality, landscape embodies the qualities of emptiness and serene stillness, serving simultaneously as a site for spiritual cultivation and an opportunity for sudden awakening. The aesthetic expression of this worldview finds perfect visual embodiment in *shanshui hua* (山水画) (mountain and water painting) of the Song and Yuan dynasties. The Chan-infused works of painters Mu Xi (牧溪 1207-1291) and Yu Jian (玉涧) employ expansive blank space and restrained, elegant brushwork to construct ethereal realms, visually translating the Chan tenet that form is inherently emptiness.

After the Tang and Song dynasties, *rujia*, *daojia*, and *fojia* gradually merged into a unified spiritual system that defined the inner world of Chinese literati. A traditional scholar could uphold Confucian ideals of public service and social responsibility, pursue Daoist transcendence through communion with nature, and attain inner tranquility through Chan introspection. Su Shi (苏轼 1037-1101) stands as the most consummate representative of this integrated spiritual outlook. Throughout a lifelong career marked by political upheaval and exile, he consistently drew spiritual resilience and solace from natural landscape. His Chan poetic verses and dual *Ode to the Red Cliff* 《赤壁赋》 masterfully synthesize the complementary wisdom of the three major Chinese philosophical traditions.

Broadly defined, the Chinese mode of natural environment cognition follows an inward path of internalization and mental contemplation, with distinct expressive characteristics across successive historical eras.

From the pre-Qin period through the Han Dynasty, landscape functioned primarily as a backdrop carrier for mythological imagery—such as the legendary Kunlun and Penglai sacred mountains—or as a vehicle for Confucian moral symbolism, lacking independent aesthetic status. The Wei and Jin dynasties marked a pivotal turning point: widespread social unrest and the prevalence of metaphysical thought led literati to discover the intrinsic aesthetic value of landscape itself. Zong Bing's *Hua Shanshui Xu* (画山水序) laid the theoretical foundation for indigenous landscape aesthetics by introducing the concepts of *chenghuai weixiang* (澄怀味象) (purifying the mind to perceive natural essences) and *changshen* (畅神) (liberating the inner spirit), officially establishing landscape as an independent object of aesthetic appreciation. The prosperous Tang Dynasty fostered unprecedented flourishing in landscape literature and *shanshui hua,* driving innovative progress in the spatial under-

standing of nature. Poets Li Bai (李白 701-762), Wang Wei, and Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元 773-819) emerged as the era's preeminent masters of landscape writing, while shanshui hua matured into a systematically theorized artistic discipline.

The Song and Yuan dynasties represent the pinnacle of traditional Chinese landscape cognition. Neo-Confucianism synthesized rujia, daojia, and fojia principles and revitalized the practice of *gewu zhizhi* (格物致知) (investigating natural phenomena to attain ultimate knowledge). Unlike Western empirical inquiry, Song intellectual exploration of nature aimed not at human domination or conquest, but at intuitive comprehension of the inherent rational order of all existence. Guo Xi's *sanyuan fa* (三远法) (three distant perspectives), a core compositional technique for *shanshui hua,* is far more than a mechanical perspective method; it constitutes a holistic spiritual approach to contemplating cosmic order and human existence. The rise of literati painting transformed *shanshui hua* into a medium for expressing the artist's intimate inner temperament and untrammeled spirit. Artistic creation shifted from *shizao hua* (师造化) (learning from natural creation) to *shixin* (师心) (learning from the inner mind), prioritizing intangible artistic conception beyond formal representation and subtle resonance beyond literal imagery. In this epoch, landscape was perceived as a congenial spiritual companion to humanity—a vibrant, living natural homeland open to wandering, communion, and dwelling.

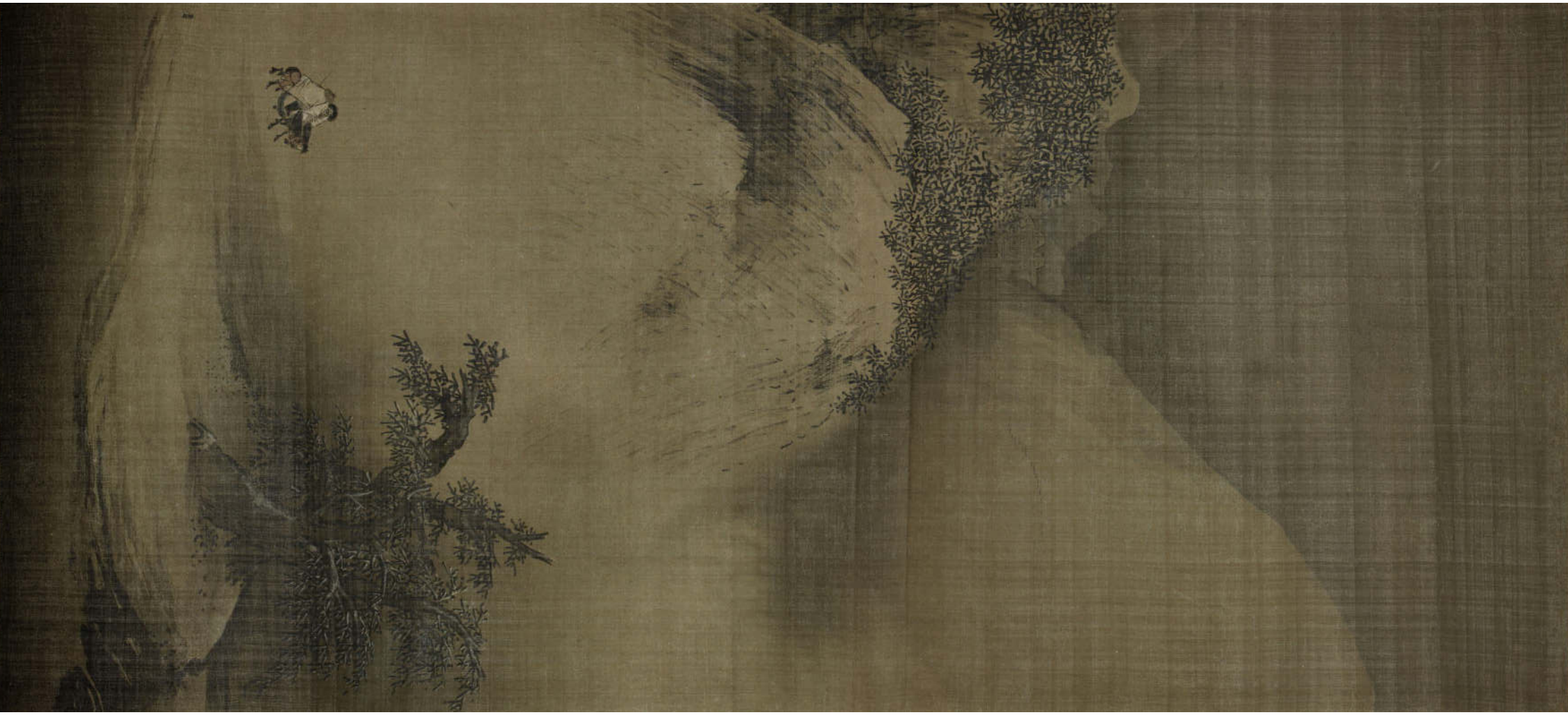
The Ming and Qing dynasties brought pronounced individualization to landscape cognition and expression. Dong Qichang's (董其昌 1555-1636) *nanbei zonglun* (南北宗论) (Southern and Northern Schools Theory) of *shanshui hua* advanced a highly subjective, personally biased classification of traditional painting lineages. The *shanshui hua* produced by the early Qing Four Monk Painters conveys intense solitude, resilience, and unyielding integrity shaped by dynastic collapse and national trauma. The landscape depicted in their works no longer adheres to classical bide moral symbolism or Daoist Dao manifestation; instead, it becomes a thorough internalization of the artist's unique personality and a profound vessel for spiritual sustenance.

In direct opposition to China's inward, mind-centered landscape cognition, premodern Western approaches to natural scenery relied entirely on externalization and visual observation. Ancient Greek rationality, grounded in mathematics and geometry, shaped Western empirical attitudes toward nature. Plato argued that the material natural world is merely an imperfect copy of transcendent ideal forms. Aristotle's naturalist tradition established systematic classification and analytical study of natural objects. In early Western philosophical thought, nature existed either as a derivative shadow of ideal reality or as a passive object detached from human subjectivity.

Traditional Chinese *shanshui hua* adopts scattered visual perspective and the *sanyuan fa* system. Its spatial composition unfolds dynamically following the viewer's roaming gaze, constructing a temporal, experiential space that immerses the audience within the scenic world. In contrast, Western landscape painting from the Renaissance onward strictly adheres to scientific single-point focal perspective, designed to capture a static, instantaneous view of scenery as if seen through a fixed window. It was not until the emergence of the eighteenth-century British "picturesque" aesthetic that Western culture began to appreciate irregular, rugged, and untamed natural beauty. Even so, this new appreciation remained conditioned by formal compositional rules, valuing nature only insofar as it resembled a composed painting.

Within Chinese landscape epistemology, humans are active participants and integral components of nature's creative transformation. *Shanshui hua* practitioners strive for spiritual communion with mountains and rivers, ultimately aspiring to the

Liang Kai, (Southern Song), *Snow Landscape*, ink on paper, 109.4×49.7 cm，梁楷（南宋），《雪景山水图》，纸本水墨，109.4×49.7 cm





Dong Qichang (Ming), *Nine Peaks in Cold Verdure*, ink on silk, 123.7×46 cm，董其昌（明），《九峰寒翠图》，绢本水墨，123.7×46cm

supreme aesthetic and spiritual state of *wuwo liangwang* (物我两忘), the complete dissolution of boundaries between self and the natural world. Conversely, traditional Western thought positions humans as external observers, investigators, and even conquerors of nature. For centuries, the Alps were regarded as ugly, savage, and threatening wilderness; only the Romantic movement re-evaluated such landscapes, celebrating them for their sublime, awe-inspiring power.

Chinese landscape cognition is ultimately teleological: it seeks moral elevation, spiritual settlement, and cosmic enlightenment, pursuing intangible spiritual realm and inner transcendence. Traditional Western natural inquiry, by contrast, prioritizes empirical understanding of objective reality, mastery of material environments, or verification of divine creation, focusing entirely on the accurate representation and rational interpretation of physical scenery.

In the contemporary era of escalating global ecological crisis, China's ancient *tianren heyi* worldview offers invaluable spiritual and practical wisdom for humanity. Human beings ought no longer position themselves as legislators or conquerors of nature, but as humble interlocutors and guardians of the natural world. Re-examining the millennia-old Chinese tradition of landscape cognition enables modern people, amid pervasive technological rationality, to recover the poetic sensibility and spiritual calm of empathizing with all living things and communing with the fundamental spirit of the cosmos.

中国人的山水认知方式

文：蒋述卓

山水，在中国人眼中，从来不只是物理的存在。它是心灵的栖息地，是精神的镜鉴，是宇宙的微缩。当宋代画家郭熙在《林泉高致》中提出“山水有可行者，有可望者，有可游者，有可居者”时，他道出的不仅是对自然形式的欣赏，更是一种将山水内化为生命体验的认知方式。相比之下，西方传统中对山水的认知，更像是一种外在的、分析的、几何化的审视。这两种截然不同的认知图景，根植于各自文明的哲学土壤，历经岁月的洗礼，形成了独特的审美传统与精神气质。中国山水认知的核心是儒道佛的生命哲学，强调人与自然的和谐共生、“天人合一”。中国山水认知的哲学根基是儒道佛思想的融合交响，分别呈现出不同方式。

在儒家看来，山水首先是道德与秩序的象征。孔子曰：“知者乐水，仁者乐山。”水灵动变化，象征智者的通达；山厚重不迁，象征仁者的沉静。这种“比德”思想，将自然山水人格化、伦理化，山川不再是蛮荒的存在，而是承载着“仁”、“智”、“静”、“寿”等德行的精神符号。汉代的董仲舒进一步将山川纳入国家祭祀体系，使之成为政治秩序的一部分。儒家士大夫通过“寄情山水”来修养心性，但他们的归隐往往带有“身在江海，心存魏阙”的矛盾，山水成为他们实现“穷则独善其身”的道德自守空间。
道家为中国山水认知注入了灵魂性的自由气息。老子提出“人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然”，将“自然”推至最高法则。庄子更是以“逍遥游”的精神，打破了物我界限，“天地与我并生，而万物与我为一”。在道家眼中，山水是“道”的显现，是未经人为玷污的本真世界。认知山水，便是体悟大道，回归生命的本然状态。魏晋南北朝时期，玄学兴起，道家思想与《易经》结合，士人们“越名教而任自然”，纷纷走入山林，如陶渊明般追求“久在樊笼里，复得返自然”的解脱。此时的山水，成为逃避乱世、安顿个体生命的诗意栖居地。

佛教，尤其是本土化后的禅宗，极大地丰富了中国山水的精神维度。宗炳讲“山水以形媚道”，禅宗讲“青青翠竹，尽是法身；郁郁黄花，无非般若”，认为佛性遍及万物，一草一木皆可通灵。对山水的认知，不再是外在的欣赏或道德的比附，而是“即景悟道”的内在体验。王维的诗句“行到水穷处，坐看云起时”，透露出的是随缘任运、物我两忘的禅意。山水在禅宗这里，被赋予了“空寂”、“清静”的意味，它既是修行的道场，也是顿悟的契机。宋元时期的山水画，

尤其是牧溪、玉涧等人的禅画，那大片留白与简逸笔触所营造的空灵境界，正是禅宗“色即是空”思想的视觉呈现。

在唐宋以后，儒道佛日益融合于文人的精神世界。一个士人可能既怀有儒家的济世理想，又在山水中寻求道家的超脱，并通过禅宗的观照获得心灵的安宁。苏轼便是最好的例证，他的一生在仕途的波澜中，总能从山水中找到精神的支撑，其“庐山烟雨浙江潮”的禅偈与前后《赤壁赋》，完美融合了三家的智慧。

考察中国人对山水的认知方式，总体上是“内化”与“心观”的路径，但在不同历史时期则有不同的显现：

先秦至汉山水多作为神话（如昆仑、蓬莱）或道德（儒家比德）的载体，处于背景地位，山水并没有成为独立的主体。魏晋南北朝社会动荡，玄风大盛，士人发现山水本身之美。宗炳的《画山水序》提出“澄怀味象”、“畅神”之说，标志着山水作为独立审美对象的自觉。唐代国力强盛，山水诗画繁荣，对山水的空间认知有了新的提升，李白和王维以及柳宗元成为山水文学最杰出的代表。山水画有了理论的规整。宋元是中国山水认知的巅峰。理学融合儒道佛，强调“格物致知”，但宋人格物不是为了征服自然，而是为了“观万物之理”。郭熙的“三远法”（高远、平远、深远）不仅是透视法，更是观照宇宙人生的心法。文人画兴起，山水成为书写胸中“逸气”的载体，从“师造化”转向“师心”，追求“象外之意”、“韵外之致”的境界。山水成为人可游可亲的友人，山水是充满生命气息、可游可居的精神家园。明清个性化色彩明显。董其昌的“南北宗论”崇南贬北，个人色彩浓烈。清初“四僧”的山水，则充满了国破家亡后的孤高与倔强，个性色彩极为强烈，山水并没有轮回到比德、媚道的原圈，而是心灵与人格精神的内化，山水是人心灵与精神的寄托。

与中国的“内化”与“心观”路径不同，西方对山水的认知，在近代以前，主要走的是一条“外化”与“目视”的道路。西方文明的源头古希腊，则孕育了以数学、几何学为基础的理性精神。柏拉图认为理念世界才是真实的，自然只是其摹本。亚里士多德开创的博物学传统，则倾向于对自然进行分类与分析。自然在西方早期，要么是理念的影子，要么是认知的客体。

中国山水画采用散点透视或“三远法”，画面空间随视线流动而展开，观者仿佛在画中漫步，这是一种时间性的、体验性的空间。西方风景画自文艺复兴起，严格遵循科学的焦点透视法，旨在创造一个透过“窗户”看到的、固定视点下的瞬间景象。直到18世纪英国“如画”风景观的兴起，西方才开始欣赏一种带有不规则、荒凉美的自然，但这仍是一种经过构图法则筛选的、“画面般”的美。

在中国山水认知中，人是自然的参与者，是“造化”的一部分。画家要“与山川神遇而迹化”，最终达到“不知我之为山川，山川之为我”的物我两忘境界。而在西方传统中，人更像是自然的旁观者、探索者甚至征服者。阿尔卑斯山在很长时期内被视为丑陋、危险的蛮荒之地，直到浪漫主义时代，才因其崇高感而被重新发现和赞美。中国人认知山水，最终是为了提升人格、安顿心灵、体悟大道，追求的是精神的“境界”。而西方传统认知自然，更多是为了认识客观世界、征服物质环境，或验证上帝的荣光，追求的是对“实景”的把握与再现。

今天，在全球生态危机日益严峻的背景下，中国“天人合一”的山水智慧，无疑为人类提供了一种宝贵的启示：我们不应仅是自然的立法者和征服者，更应是其谦卑的对话者和守护者。重新审视那条流淌于我们文化血脉中的山水认知长河，或许能帮助我们在这个技术理性的时代，找回那份与万物共情、与天地精神往来的诗意与从容。

Hong Ren (Qing), *Winter Snow*, ink on paper, 140×60 cm，弘仁（清），《冬雪图》，纸本水墨，140×60 cm

