

Preface

The Yellow River is the cradle of Chinese civilization. On the fertile lands along this mother river, tribes settled, clans formed, civilization developed, and art emerged. Chinese painting can be dated back to prehistoric times. The earliest such art was found on pottery made by several early civilizations, unearthed in the Yellow River Valley. For example, the Yangshao civilization around 5000–3000 BC was a great and influential society, its geographic area reaching from today's Hubei Province in the south to Mongolia in the north, and it existed in a transitional period from matriarchal to patriarchal society. Cultivation and agriculture were already extensively utilized by this civilization. Fine pottery pieces that survive demonstrate identifying characteristics of their own. The colorful pottery of the Majiayao civilization in the upper region of the river from early Neolithic times, around 3000–2000 BC, is considered to be the finest of that period and achieved an unprecedented level of sophistication. Also important was the Dawenkou civilization in the lower region of the river, around 2300–500 BC, a typical society of the late Neolithic



A colored pottery pot, Majiayao civilization, found in Lintao in Gansu Province.



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Fuding you (wine cup), late Shang period, (thirteenth to eleventh century BC), height 35.5 cm, internal diameter 26.6 cm, Shanghai Museum.



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period. Collectively these groups are called color pottery civilizations, and many pieces unearthed from the sites associated with them have remarkable, colorful painting and patterns. The composition of the paintings includes human figures, fish and insects, birds and animals, flowers and plants, and abstract patterns. The advancement of this ceramic pottery laid the foundation for the development of the Bronze Age, and perhaps foreshadowed porcelain pottery. Ceramics, bronze, and porcelain were all important carriers of the new art form of painting. The artists were anonymous, many of them tribe women who had just settled on the Yellow River and were still considered to be following a craft, so they had a low social rank. Even those with the finest skills and those who served in the imperial court found it difficult to achieve a personal reputation.

During the Sui (AD 581–618) and the Tang (AD 618–907) Dynasties, a system of official examinations was developed to select mandarins (scholar-officials) to serve the court. Therefore, an elite cultural class was formed in the early stages of Chinese imperial history. The aim of scholars was to do well in the examination, so they would be selected to become mandarins and achieve their political ambitions. To reach this ultimate goal they first had to read and practice calligraphy thoroughly and extensively in order to become a cultured person and “gentleman.” Painting and writing poetry were very important in this endeavor. The greatest Chinese philosopher and scholar, Confucius, said to his fellow students: “ambition must come from truth (The Way); be based on integrity, exercised through kindness, and expressed through the arts.” This suggested



Fuding you (detail).



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that integrity, kindness, and art were integral to true greatness. He also said: “A scholar can not be without truth,” and “Artistic skill is the nearest equivalent to the truth.” This demonstrates a logical, underlying similarity between seeking the truth in a spiritual world and practicing a skill in an artistic field. Thus, the practice of art was elevated to be part of the spiritual process of seeking the truth. For scholars and mandarins, art training was not a simple task just to master a skill but a method to approach The Way (truth).

Consequently, there were two types of paintings: those done by craft painters (usually uneducated) for the sake of art and those by scholars as a part of their training. The latter were part of the ruling class and so spoke for society. Their paintings and books promoted their understanding of painting theory and proper technique. Therefore, they effectively created the criteria by which paintings were judged, but more importantly, because they were more interested in the meaning or theory of painting, they used it as an analogy for seeking the truth. Painting was a means not an end; it was the process not the end product. They judged a painter not only on his technique with pen and brush but also his ability to illustrate he was a great philosopher. From the Song Dynasty (960–1279), gradually scholars came to use the calligraphy of a poem to decorate a painting in order to illustrate its philosophical meaning. The modern artist Huang Binhong (1865–1955) has said that calligraphy and drawing follow the same principle: the key is at the tip of the writing brush. The methods of Han-character calligraphy are fundamental to the techniques of Chinese drawing.

The craft or career painters, even with the very finest painting technique, found that their ability and freedom to express their understanding of painting was limited and controlled by their patrons. They normally painted scenes of real life and religious teaching, including figures, landscapes (mountains and rivers, or *shanshui*), flowers, fish, or insects, primarily for decorative purposes. In contrast, the scholars did not paint to imitate nature



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but as a way to express their philosophical feelings; mind came before nature. Therefore, their landscapes were not mechanical copies of beautiful scenery, rather the spiritual combination of their mind and nature.

Confucius said in the *Analects*: “The mountain fulfils the wise and water gratifies the learned.” While not a direct comment on paintings, this did link the beauty of nature to wisdom and knowledge. It had a profound effect on painting aesthetics, and his followers further developed it: “Those who appreciate the beauty of nature are the wise and the learned.” This provided a new philosophical meaning to living in seclusion, which was admired by the cultured elite.

Another important system of thought in China is Taoism, and *Dao De Jing (The Book of the Way)* is a philosophical work by the founder of Taoism, Laozi. It is also contains important, concise views on painting: “A strong voice appears gentle,” “a grand shape looks vague,” and “great skill seems easy.”

During the Warring States Period (475–221 BC), the king of the Song kingdom invited a group of painters to his palace. Almost all of them were overwhelmed in his presence, stood idle and shaking in the court. Only one was very relaxed and even arrived late, he painted without any hesitation and went home after a routine show of courtesy. The king was very impressed and sent a servant to visit him immediately, who saw him sitting naked at home without any worry or expectation. The king said he was a true artist.

Another sage applauded as a spiritual leader of Chinese artists is Zhuangzi (ca. 369–286 BC), who wrote in *Knowledge Wandering North*: “Nature possesses the best beauty,” and he promoted the ideal to “go with nature,” “inner tranquility,” and



Food vessel with snail shape and beast skin pattern, early Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century BC), height 14.7 cm, diameter 18.4 cm, Shanghai Museum.



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“concentrate without distraction.” In *An Essay about Tianzi*, Zhuangzi stated that a true painter should not feel constrained by tiny details. He should act according to what he felt in his mind and paint freely. Taoists promoted the philosophy that simplicity was best. Laozi had said: “What you see is not what you learn. That is the way of the world.” Zhuangzi had a very similar view: he said in *Heaven and Earth* that “Only five colors dazzle the eyes.” According to him (*Constrained in Will*), “Simplicity is essence without disguise.” He strongly believed that “nothing could compete with the beauty of simplicity” (*The Way of Heaven*). Both Laozi and Zhuangzi promoted the philosophy of simplicity without the unnecessary “five colors.” So “sitting naked” was an illustration of inner tranquility and free spirit. This view inspired freehand painting with ink-and-wash to become the ultimate style of Chinese paintings.

The invention of photography in 1839 caused a panic among many painters in the West, where the primary purpose of painting was to imitate nature rather than express it. They saw an apparatus that could do the job better than they could. Paul Klee (1879–1940) said that art started to express the spiritual world rather than the material from the moment photography was discovered. From the mid-nineteenth century, Western painting started to embark on a new trend of Modernism. Photography arrived in China ten years later but never had the same impact on Chinese painters, although the cultural elite and the ruling class in China admired Western painters for their ability to copy natural objects and use perspective. The royal family of the time, including the grandmother of the emperor, Cixi, had a tremendous curiosity about the newly arrived technology, but they never viewed it as alternative to painting. Traditional Chinese painting was fundamentally an abstract art form: a combination or harmony between the world of nature and human emotion, a product of “heaven (nature) and man.” Chinese painters did not try to illustrate the visual effect of colors and patterns as their Western counterparts did. Few were concerned



with colors, perspective, anatomy, surface feel, and relative size. They did not want to make a true copy of the natural world, but took elements from it to build their own world.

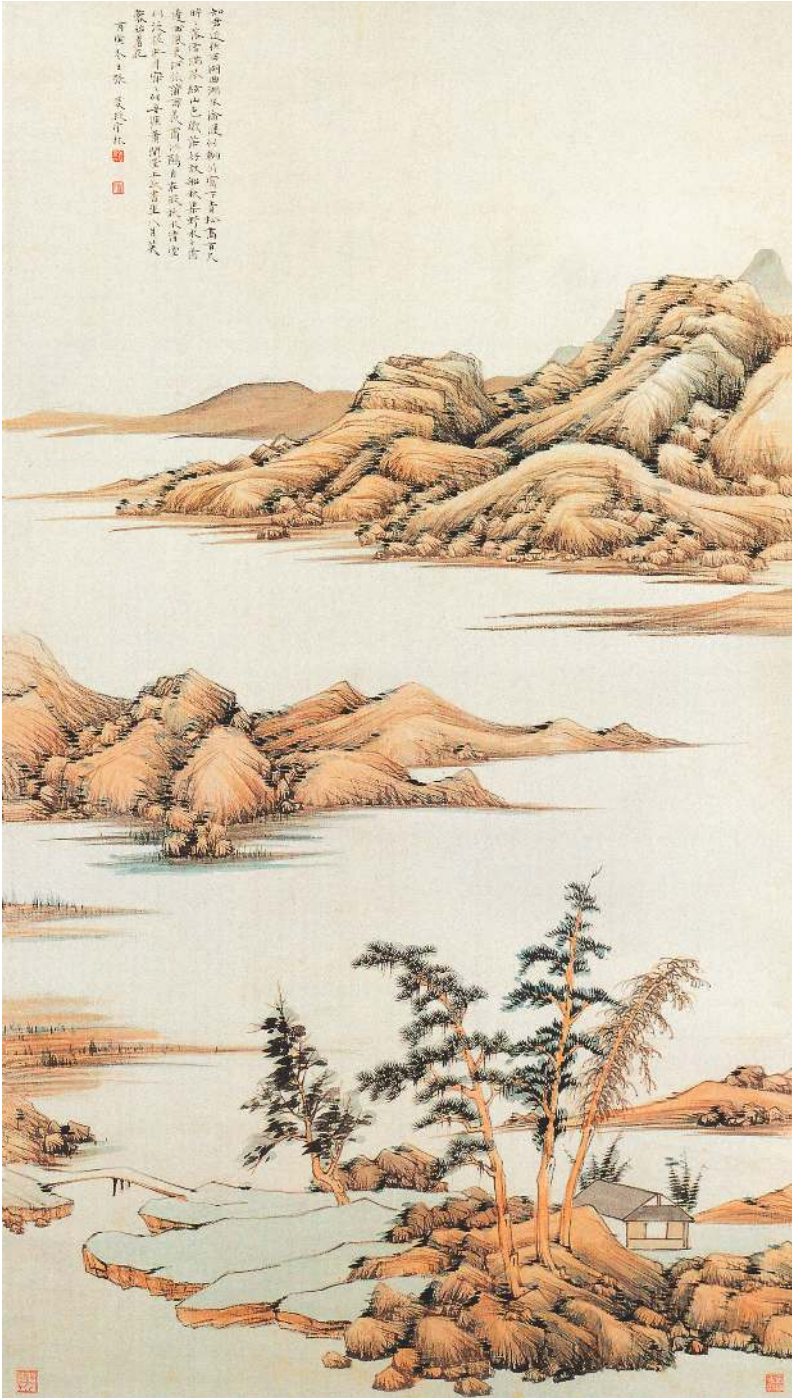
Chinese artists considered nature to be a subject that they worshiped. They created images to demonstrate the multiplicity of nature, such as remote mountains and running streams. The seventeenth-century German philosopher Leibniz used *Naturliche Theologie* (nature theology) to describe this unique Chinese attitude towards nature. In his *Dao De Jing*, Laozi saw nature as the ultimate force: “Humans are governed by earth; earth is governed by heaven; heaven is governed by *Dao* (The Way); *Dao* is ultimately governed by nature.”

This logic of Taoism from humans through *Dao* to nature was clearly demonstrated when artists painted landscapes. They were touching the *Dao* through which they ultimately immersed into nature. Nature was not only great and worthy of respect but also appealing and inspirational: it should be respected and eulogized. But that the rules of nature could be understood and acted upon changed how nature functioned. In the ordinary world, nature was often hidden behind the chores of daily life, so a painter needed to see through to nature clearly and access its true form in order for his mind to resonate with it. The talent of a good painter was also a force of nature, through which true nature would appear clearly, and people could feel the vigor of life and the warmth of the spiritual world in paintings.

Although scholars had political and, in many cases, administrative responsibilities, they could not forget the lure of nature, and painting a landscape provided a way for them to enjoy what they missed. Guo Xi (1020–1109), a painter in the Song Dynasty, indicated in his *Spirituality by the Stream in the Forest* (*Linquan Gaozhi*) that intellectuals admired the forests and streams simply because they were the places to which they would like to belong and could not reach. He stipulated that if a landscape was “walkable,” “visible,” “accessible,” and “livable,” it would



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Imitating Ni Yunlin's Autumn Water and Lucid Sky by Zhang Daqian (182 cm × 79.5 cm).



be a masterpiece. He wrote: “All the painters should bear this in mind when they paint and all the art critics should remember this when they judge.” It was very rare for an ancient Chinese painter to concentrate on the details or on a small part of landscape; but from the Tang and Song Dynasties onwards, painters included mountains and streams and also roads leading to the top of the mountains, streams by a road that intersected with another road, buildings on mountain ridges, people on roads, and boats on water. The Chinese like to say they “read” a painting; they appreciate both its content and its spiritual meanings.

Guo Xi also discussed in detail the composition of a painting. He wrote, “A thousand miles of mountains couldn’t tell the complete wonder; ten thousand miles of rivers still leave out the beauty. A simple outline on paper is no different from a map.” In his view, landscapes should display the overall view in essence, the “great shape” and the “grand view.” This was a further development of the Taoist theory that “a grand shape looks vague.” He also compared a painting with a human body:

“To a mountain water is the artery; grass and plants are hair; mist and clouds are colors of life. A mountain becomes alive when it has water; it becomes vivid when it has grasses and plants; and it becomes dainty and charming when it has mist and clouds. To water, the mountain is the face; the buildings on ridges are the eyes; fishermen by the river are the soul. Water becomes charming when it has mountains to decorate; it becomes pure when it has buildings; it becomes spacious when there are fishermen. This is the essence of composition for *shanshui* [landscape].”

When humanity and moral values were applied to a painting, it would obviously affect the way a painter viewed the world. Guo Xi illustrated this: “There are three types of remoteness for a mountain. Viewing from bottom to top, it is remoteness in height; viewing from front to back, it is remoteness in depth; viewing from nearby to faraway, it is remoteness in horizon.” Remoteness in height, in depth, and in horizon directs our view from a point in



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Ink and Colored Shanshui
by Huang Binhong
(102 cm x 39 cm). Many art
critics consider Huang Binhong
to have had a very similar
influence on Chinese painting
as that of Impressionists on
Western painting. He completed
the transition of the traditional
shanshui to the modern.

