

Layered Hills send off Glimmering Light / 小山重叠金明灭

Exhibition text by Xiao Zhiyu

Last year, on the occasion of the exhibition *Anthology of Landscapes* at SIC space in Helsinki (25 September - 20 October 2023), I had the chance to conduct a general research on the history of the conceptualization of the idea of landscape in the Western context. The genealogy of the concept encompasses different meanings acquired through centuries and places across Europe and the United States. From the struggles of the polity in 13th century's Frisian *Landschaften* to the sprout of Capitalism along the declining *mezzadria* system in 14th century feudalistic Italy, to the proliferation of the picturesque movement as an earliest emblem of today's image economy in 17th century England and the birth of national parks in 19th century America, that carried both the weight of colonialism and nationalism, the research traced the complex relations that tie the origins of this concept to the history of European social formations. In this process, I've learned that the idea of landscape, rather than a historical pictorial subject or a specific kind of image, is a way of seeing, holding, and controlling the human-land relationship which, to this day, has been deeply naturalized into our perception through the Eurocentric process of modernisation.

But what would be an alternative way of viewing this human-land relationship? Is it possible to talk about landscape without talking about political control, gender, capitalism, colonization and the nationalization of lands (or at least, not just through the familiar Eurocentric perspective)? And what kinds of landscape would be then behold? To carry forward these questions, I looked into the Chinese history of landscape image-making, from Tang to Ming dynasty, before the contamination of Western modernisation.¹ Interestingly, the corresponding word for landscape in Chinese is composed by the two characters 山水 (*shān shuǐ*), which literally mean mountain and water. This exhibition, titled *Layered Hills send off Glimmering Light* after the opening line of a poem by Wen Tingyun (812 - 870), documents this comparative excursion, which brought me to look back into the culture where I was born.

A founding concept of this research is that of *bó gǔ* (博古), which refers to the act of studying or appreciating classical artifacts somebody's collection. In Qiu Ying's *Appreciating Antiquities in a Bamboo Garden* (figure 1) we can see a typical representation of this kind of themed scenery. Three *literati* are sitting surrounded by servants and artifacts

1 For an easier reading, this period can be considered between the conventional date indicating the start of the Tang dynasty, 618 CE, to that of fall of the capital of Beijing in 1644 CE, event that signaled the end of the Great Ming dynasty.

in an open space, perhaps a garden. While two of them are looking at a page of an ancient fan collection, another is waiting for a servant boy to carry an ancient pot for his appreciation. The scene is half enclosed by two large screens, surrounded by the natural environment that is painted on the screen, which separates the people and their collection from the woods behind them. But why would they need to create a fictitious natural background while they were already immersed in nature? The reason might be not that important, if these out-door screens weren't a frequent subject in *bó gǔ* themed paintings. Some scholars believed that the screens were functional, to protect the fragile antiques collections from wind, some argued it was for purely aesthetic reasons, to decor the environment, while some others argued that the presence of screens might be solely fictional - a rhetorical invention to divide the pictorial space - that was never used in the reality of these scenes. Regardless of what might have been their true use, it is not hard for us to understand the complexity of the medium of the screen, which simultaneously functions as a visual metaphor, an actual space divider, as well as an image device.²

Layered Hills send off Glimmering Light is also the title of the five screens that are placed in the center of the exhibition spaces. Developing the reflections on the complexity of the screen, I intended the exhibition as an event of *bó gǔ*, where, instead of antiques, contemporary art objects are spread out to examine different concepts relating to the Chinese history of image-making. These refers to the idea of nature and its relationship to the social-political role of literati artists, as well as their poetic tradition of Chinese human-land relationship expressed through painting and literature. The images which stretch over the two groups of screens are digitally composed colleges, both made of details of historical paintings that I've encountered in my research. They collapse an atlas of references traced from book to book, which is reported, on the entrance wall of the gallery, in a complete bibliography which details the Chinese historical paintings cited in the five screens, while five titles from from which these images are extracted are present in the exhibition in the form of book paintings³ (figure 2), on the wall text near the entrance one can find the entire bibliography of Chinese historical paintings cited in the five screens. Like an image on screen, here the hills and pavilions are stretched, multiplied, spliced up and moved around on these screens. Collage allows images to be cut out from their original context, defying the consequentiality of logic and time. I see this as a curatorial act that does not only question the structure of established knowledges, but by rearranging in a new order the relationships between each subjects it can also bring together all of the background structures that the subjects are formally part of - it's like a bibliography, the invisible background of hundred books that out of which one book is made. It is exactly the celebration of this intertextuality of the discourses made in the exhibition that stand at stake. The screens spread into the intertextual background for the exhibition: a nature within nature, images within images, just like some sort of scenographic background wall. Maybe all these events of *bó gǔ* were after all just some theatrical play of social-cultural connections.

Differently from the Western painting tradition, where oil painting in the format of easel painting has carried the main narrative of art history over and through, changes of painting format were rather common in China. A painting could be initially made on a screen and later transformed into a handscroll, or vice versa. Created to be viewed in sections proceeding from right to left, a handscroll⁴ was initially made of bamboo or wooden sticks,



Figure 1. *Ancient Poetic Gathering in a Bamboo Grove* (竹院品古图). Qiu Ying. Ming Dynasty. Ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing

2 Wu, Hung. *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

3 A series of canvases that attempts to replicate both the appearance and the weight of books.



Figure 2. *373 gr.* 2024. Oil on linen, casted-iron powder. 25 x 17 cm.

4 The term which indicates this form of painting is 横卷 (héng juǎn), which directly translates to horizontal scroll, differentiating it from other form of scrolls which are made instead to be read and looked at vertically.

originally conceived only for written texts. Some scholars believed that the need to illustrate Buddhist narrative events across time and space pushed the transition from a text to an image medium, or for the alternation of the two elements, as it can be seen in *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* (figure 3). It is perhaps this past that marks the textual continuity of both time and space, so characteristic of this medium. Stories and pictures unfold themselves according to the hand movement of the viewer, which imitates the painting sequence and the movement of the painter. According to Wu Hung, the handscroll is also almost an extremely “private medium”, not only because handscrolls were viewed often at private house meetings among the collectors’ friends, but the pace to which its picture moves and the rhythm of reading are also controlled only by one person at a time.⁵ This reminds me of our phone screen today.



Figure 3. *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* (detail) (女史箴图). Attributed to Gu Kaizhi. Six Dynasties period (Eastern Jin Dynasty). Ink and color on silk. British Museum, London.

So when a landscape is represented on a handscroll, does the medium turn it into a text? In what way would it be looked at, in which order, and where to stop? During the Tang and the Song dynasty (618 - 1279), travel was already highly common among *literati*, and this led to the rising of traveling experience as an important cultural expression, as well as the widespread creation of travel narratives. These accounts emerged as a prominent literary genre, providing detailed depictions of landscapes and cultures, accompanied by the personal reflections of the authors, thereby enriching the literary and cultural fabric of the era. In this way, we can see a clear connection between travel, text (whether poetry or travel writings) and landscape representations. One good example is poet Wang Wei (699 - 759), whose name has become virtually synonymous with the fusion of poetry and painting, celebrated by Su Shi’s famous line:

5 Wu, Hung. *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*. University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 56

Relish Wang Wei’s poetry, and see paintings; behold his paintings, and find poetry.

A great example of all these elegant combination in Wang Wei’s poem is *Zhongnan Retreat* (终南别业 *zhōng nán bié yè*):

In middle years I am rather fond of the Tao;
My late home is at the foot of Southern Mountain.
When the feeling comes, each time I go there alone.
That splendid things are empty⁶, of course, I know
I walk to the place where water ends
And sit and watch the time when clouds rise.
Meeting by chance an old man of the forest,
I chat and laugh without a date to return.⁷

6 Here “empty” is a possible translation of the character 空 (*kōng*), which can both mean “empty” or “only”. However, confronting the translation with the original verse 胜事空自知, the character may be better understood as “only”, therefore a more appropriate version of the line could be: “That splendid things known only to myself”.

Here Wang Wei has given us a glance of the life of a hermit who has retreated from court life, and the underlined couplet is an excellent example of producing a vivid image suitable for painting inspiration, according to Guo Xi.⁸ It framed a serene and mystic moment that is otherwise almost impossible to capture, furthermore, it also semi-veiled the poem’s narration into fiction - where would be the place that water would end while clouds rise from there? Does it really exist, or is it just in the poet’s mind? Did he really retreat from the court life, or is this all just his imagination?

7 Yu, Pauline. *The Poetry of Wang Wei: New Translations and Commentary*. Indiana University Press, 1980, p.171

8 Guo, Xi. *Linquan Gaozhi Ji* (林泉高致集). Northern Song Dynasty, ca. 1080.

Couplets like this, with a kind of openness as a rhetorical technique, also greatly influenced poetic painting. After all, most of the poets were painters themselves. In the Southern Song dynasty, there was a strong

sense of nostalgia towards these ideal imaginaries from Tang and early Song dynasty's poems. The instability of the political situation, the development of commercial centers and the expansion of cities, made the access to "pure" nature become an evermore rare commodity and experience. Just like in 18th century England, where industrialization catalyzed the first sprout of the image economy of landscapes with the *picturesque movement*, in 13th century China the similar social situation generated the proliferation of poetic paintings - which one could describe as an almost arcadian element of nostalgia towards countryside life and the appreciation of secluded retreat in nature. Both could be perceived as a sort of response towards the needs of the market, pushed by the desire of a fictional escape due to the expansion of the city's economy. Significantly, the tradition of poetic painting lasted for over four centuries, until the early Qing dynasty.⁹ A great example of these kind of works are paintings of Sheng Maoye (figure 4). As a representative figure of poetic paintings in the late Ming dynasty, Sheng's images take inspiration directly from verses of ancient poems. They often appear to be misty and ambiguous, and the figures in them hold a sense of uncertainty within themselves too, refusing any simple interpretation.



Figure 4. *Landscapes after Tang-dynasty Poems* (仿唐诗意山水图). Sheng Maoye. Qing Dynasty. Ink and color on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

⁹ The Qing dynasty reigned from 1644 to 1912 CE.

In his book *The Lyric Journey*, James Cahill compares the works of Italian painter Giorgione (1478 - 1510) to those of Sheng, focusing on the similarity of the social effects reponding to their paintings in late Renaissance Venice and in the Suzhou of the late Ming dynasty.¹⁰ Both citizens of Suzhou and the nobles of Venice resonated with the subtle, suggestive artistic interpretations and the challenges of deciphering the mysteries that these painters provided with their works. These allowed the owners to express their taste and cultivation, showcasing their knowledge and eloquence to themselves and their friends. The contemplative self-image these artworks evoked, along with the poetic scenes depicted by the painters, deeply resonated with their own dreams of seclusion and escape from the two bureaucratic and commercial worlds.

¹⁰ Cahill, James. *The Lyric Journey: Poetic Painting in China and Japan*. Harvard University Press, 1996.

Popular subjects of these travel images depicted the protagonist while moving, resting and contemplating the landscape halfway or returning towards their hermitage from an excursion in the mountains. These figures were often depicted as farmers, fishermen, hunters or monks, instead of *literati* themselves, in order to enhance this sense of the unreturnable, arcadian nostalgia, making it much easier for the viewers to project themselves in these images. One would argue that is not very likely for those figures to be contemplative of sceneries which they might be too familiar with, instead, they themselves would likely become the subjects of contemplation and projection.

Guo Xi, through his observations, pointed out a more realistic understanding. Landscape painting was created to satisfy those who "without leaving their banquet seats, can sit and explore the springs and valleys," because "fishermen and woodcutters often find solace in reclusion".¹¹ It also caters to those who, due to affairs of the state, are confined to the cities.

¹¹ Guo, Xi, *op. cit.*

In Confucian tradition, an ideal official embodies a tension between the allure of secluded retreat and the imperative of court duty. While he may rhetorically muse on withdrawing himself to the mountains, his profound commitment to serving the emperor and, thereby, the empire and its people, anchors him firmly in his official duties. This reflects the deeper

essence of seclusion at court (朝隱 *cháo yǐn*), where true hermitage is a state of mind preserved within the halls of power, rather than a physical departure from them. Through painting and poetry, one *hermitizes* himself at court, while performing a special form of travel, called 卧游 (*wò yóu*). The origin of this term, that can be translated into traveling while laying down, can be traced back to the Southern Court Period scholar Zong Bing (375 - 444), stemming from his *Introduction to the Painting Landscape*. Zong Bing discussed *wò yóu*, original meaning reflecting on how it expressed daoist conduct for the longings of old age: “When old age and illness come together, fearing it may be difficult to visit famous mountains, one should clear the mind and observe the Dao, mentally journeying while lying down”. He continues, “All the places I’ve traveled, I have depicted within my chambers. When playing the zither and performing music, I wish to make all mountains resonate”.¹²

12 Zong, Bing. *Introduction to the Painting Landscape* (画山水序). Wei-Jin Northern and Southern Dynasties, c. 5th century.

Much like we are captivated by the mental voyage offered by a book as we read, one can easily envision a comparable immersive experience for the viewer of a painted landscape journey. One travels from one point to another, crossing times and places, like Strassberg points in his analysis of travel writing: “The Chinese diarist’s attempt to describe an epic journey is constructed as an aggregate of fragmentary perspectives, without an overarching structure, dramatic plot, or thematic development. As the text is savored section by section, ‘grand views’ momentarily appear like sudden visions of mountains shrouded in mist”.¹³ In this context, it is possible to draw a parallel between text and landscape painting. The landscape handscroll transforms into a narrative of exploration through the act of looking. The reading experience of Minna Törmä’s descriptive words of the details of Qu Ding’s *Summer Mountains* (ca. 1050), in her book *Landscape Experience as Visual Narrative*, had offered a very similar but reversed experience, as if I was on a journey in the *Summer Mountains*, walking there myself, just by reading the text.¹⁴

13 Strassberg, Richard E. *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China*. University of California Press, 1994, p. 50.

14 Törmä, Minna. *Landscape Experience as Visual Narrative: Northern Song Dynasty Landscape Handscrolls in the Li Cheng-Yan Wengui Tradition*. Tiedekirja, 2002.

Whether reading or looking at a handscroll, the act of *wò yóu* - mentally journeying while lying down - often refers to an extremely private and meditative moment. As in a text, the distinction between the description of an actual and that of a fictional journey sometimes might not appear evident. I don’t mean to suggest that the same kind of confusion happens when looking at a landscape painting, as it is usually not that hard to distinguish what is an image and what is reality - but not when one is asleep. When one travels in their dreams, they see images and then translate them into words.

Li Bai (701 - 762), a preeminent poet of the Tang dynasty, intricately intertwined in his poetry the entrancing states of drunkenness, dream and nature, using mountains, rivers, and the moon as active participants in his emotional landscape:

I wish to dream of Wu and Yue,
Flying through the night, crossing Jinghu Lake under the moon.
The lake moon shines on my shadow,
Escorting me to Shanxi Stream.
The place where Xie Gong once stayed still remains,
Clear water ripples and monkeys’ cries resonate.
Wearing Xie Gong’s clogs, I climb the azure ladder.
Halfway up, I see the sea sun,
And hear the heavenly roosters crowing in the sky.

The winding path twists through countless peaks,
 Lost among flowers, leaning on rocks, suddenly night falls.
 Bears roar and dragons chant, echoing in the rocky springs,
 Deep in the forests, startling the lofty peaks.
 Clouds darken, signaling rain,
 Water gently ripples, mist arises.
 Lightning flashes and thunder roars,
 Hills and ridges collapse and crumble.
 The cave's stone doors,
 Suddenly burst open.
 The vast blue expanse, bottomless,
 Sun and moon illuminate gold and silver terraces.
 Rainbow garments and wind as steed,
 Cloud lords descend in a flurry.
 Tigers play the zither, phoenixes drive chariots,
 Immortals gather, like hemp they stand.
 Suddenly, my soul shudders and spirit trembles,
 Awakening in a start, with a long sigh. I find myself on my pillow,
 The ethereal mist and clouds of moments ago, gone.¹⁵

Just like daydreaming with a handscroll alone in the room, the scenes in the poem unfold as the poet's oneiric travels. In both cases, the landscape is inside, whether it is in the inner space of dreams, or in the intimate space of a room.

In Wen Tingyun (812 - 870)'s poem *Deva-like Barbarian* (菩萨蛮 *púsà mán*) the starting line "Layered hills send off glimmering light" casted a blurry glimpse into the interiors of a lady's bedroom while she is dressing up. The light of flickering burning candles is casting through the semi-transparent hills and mountains that are layered together, as if it were the snow peaks sending off golden brightness during a sunrise. The line might describe the screens that furnished the lady's bedroom, as, despite the events of *bó gǔ*, the use of screens is was more common for indoor spaces and associated with sleeping.

The early screens, in fact, were often built as an integral part of the bed. They surrounded the bed leaving only one side open or mobile (figure 5), at a time when the bed was often the center of social interaction. In this way, people would often find themselves surrounded by landscapes, whether they were conversating or asleep. Several of the screens mentioned in the late Tang dynasty collection of *ci* - poems¹⁶ of *Among the Flowers* seem to belong to this kind of space, as saying being "in bed" is often described as being "among the flowers", "in the screens" or "within the screens". Later on, even when the bed and screens were becoming two separate pieces of furniture, the relations between them was still close, as it can be seen in pillow screens 枕屏 (*zhěn píng*) and bedscreens 卧屏 (*wò píng*). The former were small screens painted with landscapes often placed right before the head on the bed (figure 6), while the later refers to larger screens that were usually placed by the side of the bed for privacy (figure 7). It is perhpas because of their relationship to the bed that there are many traditional stories in China about screens and their power to preserve the reality and fiction they process, and that often take place while protagonists are asleep. In relation to handscrolls, screens offer a different experience for mind traveling, as Minna Törmä explains: "Screen paintings may furnish the environment for both sleep and reverie, but they function in a more passive way than a handscroll. An image on a screen



Figure 5 *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* (Detail) (女史箴图). Attributed to Gu Kaizhi. Six Dynasties period (Eastern Jin Dynasty). Ink and color on silk. British Museum, London.

15 All the translations of poems are translated from Chinese by the author with the help of ChatGpt, unless noted otherwise.

16 词 (*cí*), is a type of lyric poetry in the tradition of Classical Chinese poetry that also draws upon folk traditions.



Figure 6. *Looking in a Mirror by an Ornamental Box* (绣槛晓镜图). Wang Shen. Northern Song Dynasty. Ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Figure 7 *Man Sleeping on a Bamboo Couch* (竹榻小憩图). Unidentified artist. Yuan to early Ming Dynasty. Ink and color on silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

creates a proper and a soothing atmosphere which penetrates the mind, even if one is asleep. A handscroll demands a more active role from the viewer, though he may be likened to a daydreamer”.¹⁷

17 Törmä, Minna. *Landscape Experience as Visual Narrative: Northern Song Dynasty Landscape Handscrolls in the Li Cheng-Yan Wengui Tradition*. Tiedekirja, 2002, p.89

The way the surfaces of the handscroll and screen intertwine themes of the labile distinction between fictional and real, the materiality of painting and the power of the image is well expressed in a poem titled *On a Broken Screen*, written by Yao He (777 - 843) in the early 9th century. The poem can be read today as a prophetic signal of our relation with images, which has evolved over centuries through many different screens, from those of traditional Chinese image-making, to the silver screen of the movie theater and the small digital screens of our phones. It is when the screen breaks that the viewers are brought to reflect on these surfaces, which Giuliana Bruno considers the space where images manifest their material elements.¹⁸ In the poem, the author is not only describing a landscape, but he is also rhetorical, as he ends with a question which makes the reader a participant of his thoughts. It is this final question that connects all the topics of this research and invites to focus on the materiality of surfaces:

18 Bruno, Giuliana. *Superfici. A proposito di Estetica, Materialità e Media*. Johan e Levi, 2016, p. 9.

The old painting people of the time spurn,
Against the wall it leans, forlorn.
Dew dripped, the mountains split,
Wind blows through, autumn spreads across the silk sea.
Snowflakes fly into the room,
Watery drops fall by the bed.
Still, more splendid than common flowers and birds,
Can you mend and make it whole again?