An Environmental Ethic in Chinese Landscape Painting

By Shelley Drake Hawks

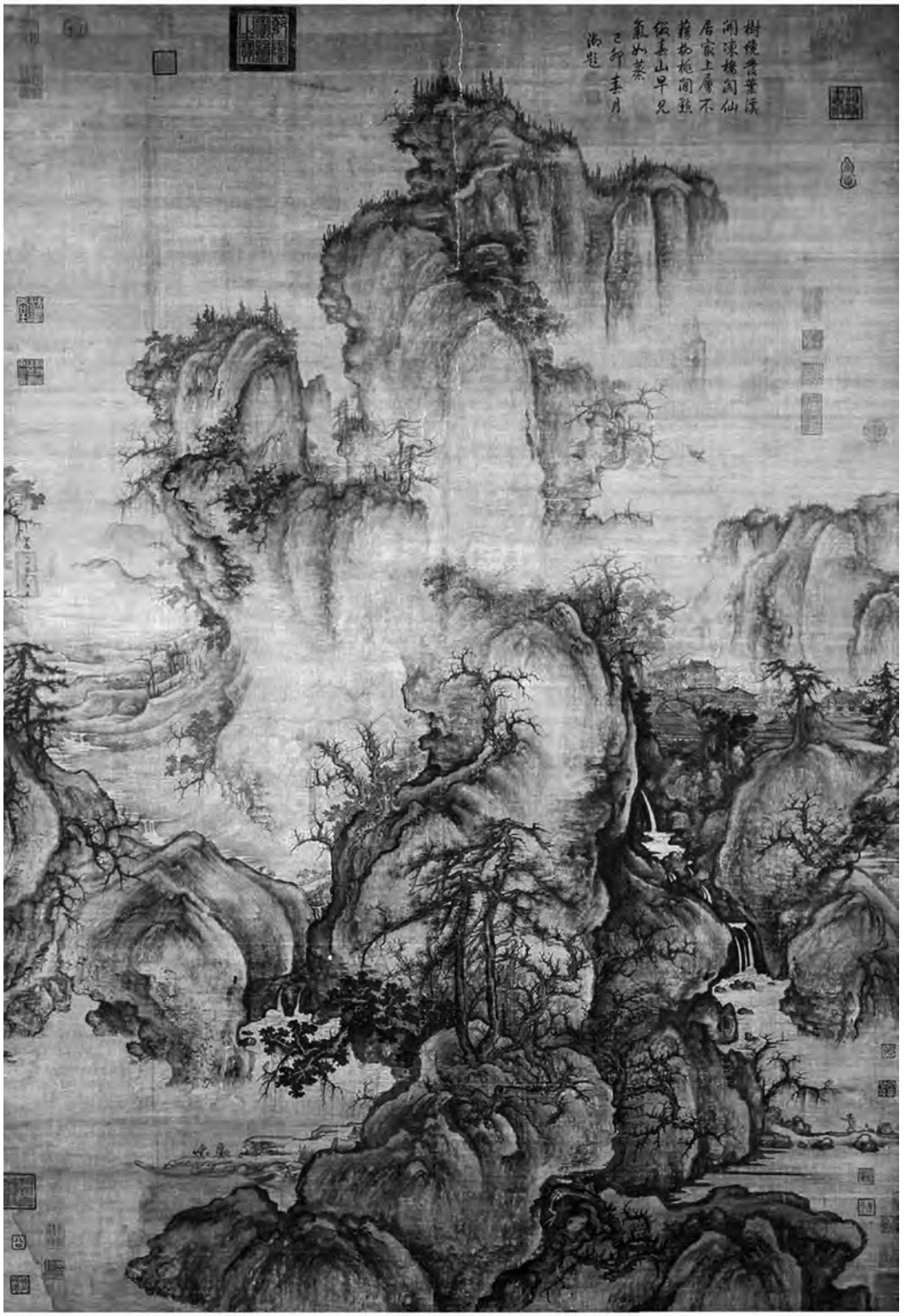
Landscape painting in Western art did not develop into an important category of painting until the seventeenth century. In contrast, landscape painting in China was already a prized art form by the ninth century.[1] In fact, when Chinese art was systematically introduced to the West during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the prominence afforded nature—as opposed to humans—in Chinese art startled Western audiences. One reviewer of a pioneering exhibition of Chinese art at the British Museum on view from 1910–12 exclaimed that "no classical European master ever expressed the structure of mountain and rock as it is expressed here."[2] Another observer claimed that Chinese artists painted rocks and streams "as seriously as Rembrandt painted the portrait of a man." Of the geese in a Chinese landscape painting, a British critic wrote: "The subject seems nothing to us, but [the Chinese painter] proves that it meant all the world to him."[3]

Western artists celebrated the human story above all else, while Chinese artists gave trees, plants, birds, rocks, and streams utmost scrutiny. Historically, what beliefs about nature motivated Chinese painters to make landscape such a prestigious art form? During the Song dynasty (960–1279) in particular, many Chinese literati shared a philosophical perspective that is clearly reflected in landscape painting, one that honors the natural environment. In today's China and in much of the modern world, the relentless drive for economic development sometimes makes the natural environment seem peripheral to human concerns. Nature is merely the stage upon which human activity unfolds, rather than something appreciated for its own sake.

Introducing Chinese landscape painting into a world history or a world art course can serve as a platform for discussing environmental ethics. For example, how does a Song dynasty Chinese landscape painting envision humanity's relationship with the cosmos? The tiny scale of humans relative to the mountains in a typical Chinese landscape painting suggests that we humans coexist with many other living things. Humans are integrated into a larger whole rather than celebrated as a towering presence. The Neo-Confucian philosophy developed during the Song dynasty, one of the great eras for monumental landscape painting, cultivated a profound respect for all living things. Neo-Confucianism emphasized humanity's interconnectedness with a wider universe. The following statements are representative Neo-Confucian claims: by Cheng Hao (1032–1085), "The humane person forms one body with all things comprehensively"; and, by Cheng Yi (1033–1107), "The humane person regards Heaven and Earth and all things as one body."[4] A later Chinese philosopher, Wang Yangming (1472–1529), cited this notion of interconnectedness as the reason why humanity should extend love to all living things:

> *Everything from ruler, minister, husband, wife, and friends to mountains, rivers, spiritual beings, birds, animals, and plants should be truly loved in order to realize my humanity that forms one body with them, and then my clear character will be completely manifested, and I will really form one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things.*[5]

The Confucian outlook never presumed that humanity could triumph over nature; rather, the organizing principle was that humans thrived by operating within nature's parameters. For example, the great sage Yu is said to have controlled the floods by "imposing nothing" to obstruct water's natural tendencies.[6] Chinese sages thus looked to nature to find ethical instruction. In *Analects* 9:17, Confucius remarked upon the unceasing flow of a passing stream: "Isn't life's passing just like this, never ceasing day or night?"[7] Confucius's comment suggests that a fully realized life requires limitless resolve, like a surging stream.[8] A famous passage in the *Book of Mencius* illustrates Confucianism's affinity for finding a mirror for human conduct in nature.[9] Mencius draws an analogy between a once-luxuriant mountain robbed of its trees and a human heart insufficiently cultivated. In the case of Ox Mountain, the terrain has become barren because its grasses have been grazed upon too often



Early Spring by Guo Xi, 1072.

and its trees chopped down before new shoots can grow. The human heart is presented likewise: "A child must be nurtured and given the space to develop, or the child's original heart will wither away."[10] This passage inspires a sense of duty to protect the young against life's injuries. It also promotes an ethic of environmental sustainability. The cautionary example of a denuded Ox Mountain suggests that all living things must be kept in balance and that new sprouts reach their potential only when their habitat is respected.[11]

Chinese landscape painting unites Confucian philosophical concepts with Daoist and Buddhist thinking about nature. For example, the life force in both Daoism and Buddhism is represented by water. According to the *Daodejing*, "the highest good is like water": "Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way."[12] Followers of Daoism are urged to become the "ravine of the Empire," suggesting that a great sage, lying low, can introduce mobility and spaciousness into congested situations.[13] Waterfalls or river streams in Chinese landscape paintings evoke a sense of possibility and opportunity because water's fluidity pierces through rocks and opens space for maneuvering. Buddhists also revere the thunderous downpour of a waterfall and the attendant vapor spiraling upward. In Buddhism, the flow of mist and water suggests the circulation of wisdom through the body, mind, and universe achieved through meditation. In Tibetan thanka paintings, for example, the clouds pictured above waterfalls represent the enlightened essence shared by all living beings.[14]

One strategy for leading a class through a discussion of Chinese landscape painting and the attendant philosophical concepts could be to focus on a single masterpiece, Guo Xi's *Early Spring.* Centering discussion on one painting will probably seem less overwhelming and can offer students more opportunity to consider key concepts. This particular painting represents an excellent springboard for plunging deeper into the subject of landscape painting, not only because the painting itself is a masterpiece, but also because there is a considerable body of writing about it in English.

Before you plan to discuss *Early Spring* in class, ask students to scrutinize the painting carefully on the website of Taiwan's National Palace Museum (http://tinyurl.com/dycqtnv).[15] This is an important

prerequisite for a full discussion because there is a tool on the website for enlarging the image so that its details can be closely examined. Without this magnifying glass effect, the painting cannot be fully appreciated. Explain to your students that it is useful to divide the painting into five sections,

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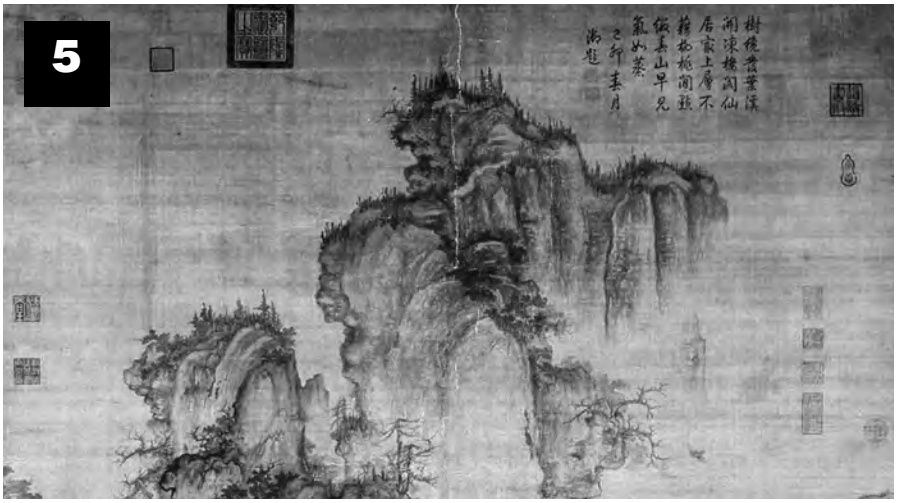
> *the three boulders that anchor the bottom; the center, where a pair of parallel ridges, bathed in mist, circle left; the right section, with its cascading stream and buildings nestled in a gorge; the low, misty valley that reaches into the distance at the left; and the summit, a high, distant peak, zig-zagging upward out of the mists*.[16]



Students should peruse all five sections for details of what is happening within the landscape before responding to the entire picture. Encourage your students to write out a description of the rocks, trees, buildings, water, mist, animals, and people populating the painting. You might provide them with a list of specific items to find, such as "cloud-like boulders," "crab-claw" tree branches, a fisherman poling his boat, two monks ascending a path, an official riding a mule, and a small dog.[17]

The symbolic elements in Guo Xi's* Early Spring *offered praise and auspicious blessings for Emperor Shenzong's reign.

Song Dynasty Emperor Shenzong hanging scroll, color on silk, anonymous court painter. Source: http://tiny.cc/w2z9sw.

Now that your students have had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the visual details of the painting, you can introduce more information about the artist and the historical context in which it was created. *Early Spring* is signed by the famous court painter Guo Xi (Kuo Hsi, ca. 1020–after 1090). At this time, Chinese painters either came from families of court painters whose livelihood was painting, like Guo Xi, or from families of government officials, whose members painted in their spare time as an extension of their interest in philosophy and poetry. Educated circles recognized Guo Xi as a master painter in his own time, and Chinese connoisseurs have recognized his paintings as treasures ever since. *Early Spring* is dated 1072 (see inscription on the painting's left side, midsection). It was once in the collection of the Qing dynasty Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799), who wrote a poetic inscription on the top of the painting (upper right). Like many other rare early works from the imperial art collection, *Early Spring* resides in the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. It was among the masterpieces taken there in 1949 when Chiang Kai-shek's army fled mainland China after the victory of the Communists in the Civil War.

Guo Xi served at the court of the Song Emperor Shenzong (Zhao Xu, 1048–85). The emperor is said to have admired Guo Xi's work so much that he covered the walls of one of his halls solely with Guo Xi's paintings.[18] *Early Spring* must have been among the prized landscape paintings once displayed in the palace in the city of Kaifeng. The painting is a large hanging scroll (158.3 x 108.1 cm/5'2" high x 3'7" wide) made with ink and pale colors on silk. Because we know that the painting was prepared on behalf of the emperor, it is logical to question whether political messages can be discerned in *Early Spring*. At first glance, the painting does not seem to have anything to do with politics. However, we know from extant eleventh-century writings that there were indeed political connotations associated with the image of a single dominant mountain peak in Chinese landscape painting. The summit of a large mountain typically symbolized the emperor's presence. A well-ordered landscape under the warmth of the spring season signaled a thriving, well-managed empire.[19] The symbolic elements in Guo Xi's *Early Spring* offered praise and auspicious blessings for Emperor Shenzong's reign. What evidence is there to confirm this interpretation? Decades after Guo Xi served at Emperor Shenzong's court, his son, Guo Si, edited a treatise on landscape painting based on his father's teachings. Compiled circa 1117, the document is wonderfully titled "The Lofty Truth of Forests and Streams." In it, there are passages like this one, suggesting the hierarchical associations of a great mountain standing high above adjacent peaks and bowing trees:

> *A great mountain is dominating as chief over the assembled hills, thereby ranking in an ordered arrangement the ridges and peaks, forests and valleys, as suzerains of varying degrees and distances. The general appearance is of a great lord glorious on his throne and a hundred princes hastening to pay him court, without an effect of arrogance or withdrawal* [on either part].[20]

Even the human figures and trees in the painting are placed in the composition based on social ranking, with commoners situated on the lowest tier of the mountain and the monks and officials located a bit higher.[21] The two tall pine trees on the boulders at the bottom center of the painting are said to resemble watchmen standing guard at the entrance to the mountain structure.[22]

In Chinese, the word for landscape consists of the words for mountain and water (*shanshui*). According to Francois Jullien, a French sinologist (b. 1951), this dual term (mountain/water) is reflective of the interaction between complementary dualities (*yin and yang*) characteristic of the Chinese

concept of landscape.[23] Jullien argues that the Chinese placed central importance on the activity of breathing as the defining characteristic of life. Whereas the Greeks "privileged the gaze and the activity of perception," the Chinese conceived of reality in terms of *qi*, or breath-energy.[24] The activity of breathing out and in unites humans to the alternating rhythms of heaven and earth. In the Daoist classic *Daodejing,* the universe is pictured as a great pair of bellows engaged in a cosmic process of respiration.[25] Most students will have been exposed to the ancient Chinese concept of yin and yang, the passive and active principles said to alternate throughout nature. In Chinese theory, yin and yang are always in motion. There is always a bit of the opposite principle becoming visible in each.

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This constant sense of metamorphosis is palpable in Guo Xi's *Early Spring.* The painting seems alive with movement as yin turns into yang and vice versa. The painter achieved this feeling of rhythmic motion by alternating areas of dark ink and unpainted surface, massive rock and airy valleys, and dense foliage and light mist. An S-curve, repeated many times throughout the painting, adds to this sense of motion. According to Stanley Murashige, the open-ended shape of the S-curve, neither circle nor straight line, represents "the graphic trace of the creative principle in nature."[26] The S-curve suggests a constantly renewable cycle, like the changing of the seasons. Yet the S never comes back to a full circle because a season never manifests itself exactly the same way twice. Ask students to locate the S-curve as it is repeated throughout the painting. Discuss what effect the S-curve imparts to the painting's overall structure.

The final, and arguably most important, take-home lesson from Guo Xi's painting is the invitation for a kind of partnership between humankind and mountains. The relationship being sought is one of compatibility, participation, and interconnectedness. According to Guo Xi's own words, cited by his son in "The Lofty Truth of Forests and Streams," the mountain lives only in the act of wandering. He adds: "The mountain's form changes with every step."[27] These comments suggest that the mountain is only conceivable from multiple standpoints, as if one were wandering through it. Indeed, the Chinese viewed the landscape painting as if they were mentally traversing through it. If we look carefully at the bottom, middle, and top sections of Guo Xi's painting in this way, we will see an illustration of shifting perspectives, a typical feature in Chinese landscape painting. The bottom three boulders with accompanying trees seem to be viewed as if we are standing above them; the middle register looks as if we are viewing it straight on; and the top portion, the regal summit, seems to be viewed from below. We are constantly adjusting our eyes to take in a fresh point of view. Guo Xi called this exercise "viewing the form of a mountain from each of its faces."[28]

Unlike the aspiration central to Western landscape painting—ie, to paint a particular location from a fixed standpoint—Chinese landscape painting aimed to incorporate the essence of thousands of mountains, the accumulated sights of a lifetime into one composite landscape. Thus, to look upon a landscape painting in the Chinese tradition was to feel connected to the full scope of places and living things. In a Chinese landscape painting, mountains, foliage, rocks, and streams in the painting were not mere objects; they often were invested with human-like qualities. In "The Lofty Truth of Forests and Streams," Guo Xi's son speaks of the water of mountains as "blood," foliage as "hair," and rocks as "bones," which hearkens back to earlier theories by Chinese critics as to what makes a good painting, like the *Six Laws of Chinese Painting* written in the fifth century CE. [29]

In today's technologically driven age and urban society, we risk losing a strong sense of connection to the outdoors. Chinese landscape painting enlivens our sense of partnership with nature and reminds us of the wisdom of the ancient Chinese saying *tian ren heyi* ("the heavens and humanity together in harmony").[30] Ask your students how this differs from what they have experienced or know of in the West. ■

NOTES

1. For more discussion on the early development of landscape in China, see Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting: The Cleveland Museum of Art* (London: Prentice-Hall International, 1975), 3, 9.
2. Zhaoming Qian, *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art: Pound, Moore, Stevens* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 12.
3. Ibid., 71.
4. The two quotations are cited and discussed in Rodney L. Taylor, "Companionship with the World: Roots and Branches of a Confucian Ecology," *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 48.
5. Ibid., 54.
6. *Mencius* IV, Part B: 26. trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1970), 133.
7. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., trans., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation, Analects* 9.17 (New York: Random House/Ballentine, 1998), 130.
8. Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Early Confucianism and Environmental Ethics," *Confucianism and Ecology*, eds. Mary E. Tucker and John H. Berthrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 68.
9. John H. Berthrong and Evelyn Nagai Berthrong, *Confucianism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 17.
10. *Mencius* VI, A: 8, trans. D.C. Lau, 164–65.
11. Ivanhoe, 68.
12. *Daodejing*, 8, trans. D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (London: Penguin, 1963), 64.
13. *Daodejing,* 28; Ibid., 85.
14. See explanation in Ian Baker, *The Heart of the World: A Journey to Tibet's Lost Paradise* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 403.
15. For an enlargeable image of Guo Xi's *Early Spring,* go to http://tinyurl.com/dycqtnv.
16. Stanley Murashige, "Rhythm, Order, Change, and Nature in Guo Xi's *Early Spring*," *Monumenta Serica* 43 (1995): 340.
17. Ibid., 339–40; see also Alfreda Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent* (Cambridge and London: Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 2000), 34, 36.
18. Murck, 198.
19. Ibid., 36. See also Robert L. Thorp and Richard Ellis Vinograd, *Chinese Art & Culture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006), 248.
20. Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, trans. and eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1985), 153.
21. Murck, 34.
22. Murashige, 341.
23. Francois Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting,* trans. from French Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 2009), 122.
24. Ibid., 134–35.
25. *Daodejing,* 5, trans. D.C. Lau, 61.
26. Murashige, 352–53.
27. "The Lofty Truth of Forests and Streams," Murashige, 349.
28. Ibid.
29. "The Lofty Truth of Forests and Streams," Bush and Shih, 167.
30. For more on the affinity between traditional Chinese attitudes and modern environmentalism, see Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 212–215.

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