

Dwelling in the Image: How Should We Look at Pre-modern Chinese Mountain-Water-Paintings?

Mathias OBERT

National Sun Yat-sen University, Institute of Philosophy

General outline

In the eyes of any educated European, a large part of “the culture and lifestyle” of contemporary Asia cannot help but appear as a Disney-like simulacrum, a sinister travesty of so-called Western civilization. In its ironical hybridity, the obtrusive kitsch and heavy mannerism of virtuosi contemporary Chinese painters such as Cao Jun 曹俊 and Zhang Hongtu 張宏圖 illustrates fairly well to what extent pre-modern Chinese culture in general, and the arts in particular, have already perished. What once was a tradition has by now been entirely covered up and obliterated by a globalized world view of presumably Euro-American origin. Such phenomena do not, or do not only, indicate that the question is just about autochthonous pre-modern painting techniques and styles getting replaced by alien ones. What actually has become even more questionable is our modern gaze. Yet the deficiencies in our looking at objects of culture is ultimately related to a profound existential problematic: the crisis of our contemporary *relation to the world*. As a matter of fact, we ought to strive to regain our lifeworld in an appropriate manner. In a way this implies that we have to train our eyes; we must learn anew how to look, in order to obtain meaningful access to art from former epochs, as well as from outside the Euro-American cultural sphere.

Such an incentive is all the more important today, as East Asia, and China in particular, have undergone more than a century of utterly violent self-denial, self-forgetfulness, self-annihilation and self-colonization. Facing the huge damages and ruins that modern history has wrought in East Asia, fierce nationalist attempts at a “revival” of so-called tradition, to be observed today notably in China, but to a lower degree even in Korea and Japan, will reveal themselves to be utterly ineffective and even productive of self-harm, self-obscurization, and self-destruction. Such shallow traditionalist and nationalist movements are doomed to fail, as long as even the most obvious exercise has not yet been accomplished: first of all, there has to take place a

critical reflection and an open debate on one's own *situatedness in history*, at present, combined with a patient and unprejudiced, though passionate, study of all the available cultural resources.

With respect to such circumstances of our scholarly work, I would like to ask how we should, in aesthetically appropriate ways, look at what quite inaccurately has been termed “Chinese landscape painting” by Euro-American scholars, in other words *pre-modern*¹ mountain-water-painting (*shān shuǐ huà* 山水畫). This major genre, roughly speaking, deals with human beings in nature or rather next to nature. It would even be more pertinent to say that “being a human in the world” is the main issue at stake in such paintings. Besides, this is clearly revealed by such works of art where what obviously is being addressed by means of “empty” traces is the very absence of any human being, as in the case of the famous *Rongxi Studio* (*Rongxizhai tu* 容膝齋圖, 1372, Taipei: Palace Museum), executed by Ni Zan 倪瓚.

The reason for focusing on this specific genre of painting in pre-modern China has to do with fact that this field of artistic creativity has always been considered the very essence of Chinese painting. Also, more than any other genre, mountain-water-painting represents a fundamental challenge to our somewhat “blind” modern gaze, as well as to contemporary conceptions of the picture and the image² that are predominant the world over. This is all the more so because this genre, at first glance, seems to be quite simple and straightforward, apparently putting recognizable objects

¹ It is crucial to rather sharply distinguish contemporary artistic phenomena in the East-Asian sphere of the globe from all which has previously been brought about in these areas, because of the most obvious “culture gap” at work in Asian modernity. This gap does not only mark a disruption with respect to all alien elements that have been received from various foreign colonizers. What is crucial in a still more encompassing way is the fact that a *radical disruption* has occurred at the very roots of what might be called the autochthonous cultural complex as it was, prior to the epoch of Euro-American imperialism and Asian “modernization”. This thoroughgoing disruption most easily falls into oblivion and gets buried in an unserious manner, just like in the paintings of Cao Jun 曹俊 or Zhang Hongtu 張宏圖, under the heavy layer of modern mythology, like in the case of nowadays idle talk of “five thousand years of history”. There still are painters, today, inheriting from and working in the manner of pre-modern mountain-water-painting. Yet these contemporaries’ accomplishments should not be confused with what has been produced and pursued since ancient times and still more recently, yet strictly prior to the modern era.

² In what follows, a clear-cut distinction of the two terms “picture” and “image” sometimes turns out to be quite difficult. Yet what is mostly meant by “picture” is the “pictorial thing”, that is a painting or a similar artefact *showing* something. What manifests itself in the “picture”, appearing under the conditions of “iconic apparition”, properly speaking, shall be termed the “image”. Besides, an “image”, of course, may as well reveal itself independently from any “pictorial thing”, as is the case with “images” we form in our mind, as well as in figurative speech, for instance.

on display in a mimetic and figurative fashion. This genre also has the huge advantage, for contemporary aestheticians, not only of being fairly well documented in textual sources, but also of having induced profound theoretical reflections, throughout pre-modern Chinese history.³ These theories have been extensively discussed during past centuries; indeed, they have deeply influenced the modern understanding, as well as all contemporary misinterpretations, of ancient Chinese painting in general.⁴

According to a millennial occidental bias which has been, and continues to be, extremely influential in Eastern art history and theory of art, painting is primarily concerned with *visibility*. Painting thus gets reduced to mimetic representation or symbolic revelation, ultimately referring to sensible or imaginary *objects*, right from the beginning. Up until the present day, the focus of aesthetics has more or less on questions concerning the image as a meaningful cultural “sign”, hermeneutics of the image’s content, signification or style, as well as problems of perception. Major scholars, from William Acker and James Cahill up to Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, Ye Lang 葉朗 and François Jullien, all start from the unquestioned assumption that the “image-world” of a mountain-water-painting addresses our *intuition*. It is due to this fundamental conviction that such pictures have generally been considered as fairly good equivalents for the European “landscape”, albeit delivering a typically “Chinese” vista or dream-scenery.⁵

³ As to the textual source material, I mainly rely on the anthology *Zhongguo gudai hualun leibian* 中國古代畫論類編 (*Discussions on Painting in Ancient China, by Categories*), edited by Yu Jianhua 俞劍華, revised edition, 2 vols. (Beijing 北京: Renmin meishu 人民美術, 1998) [beneath referred to as LB]. Cf. selected translations in Susan Bush and Hsio-Yen Shih ed., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Yolaine Escande, ed., *Traité chinois de peinture et de calligraphie. Tome I, Les textes fondateurs (des Han aux Sui)*, traduits et commentés par Y. Escande (Paris: Klincksieck, 2003); Mathias Obert, *Welt als Bild: Die theoretische Grundlegung der chinesischen Berg-Wasser-Malerei zwischen dem 5. und dem 12. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Alber, 2007).

⁴ Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art* (London: Heinemann, 1967); Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (New York: Schocken, 1976); Roger Goepfer, *Vom Wesen chinesischer Malerei* (München: Prestel, 1962); R. Goepfer, *Aspekte des traditionellen chinesischen Kunstbegriffs* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000); Nicole Vandier-Nicolas, *Peinture chinoise et tradition lettrée* (Paris: Seuil, 1983); N. Vandier-Nicolas, *Esthétique et peinture de paysage en Chine: Des origines aux Song* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1987).

⁵ Cf. the recent interpretation given by Sabine Hesemann in her contribution on China, in *Ostasiatische Kunst*, hg. Gabriele Fahr-Becker, 2 Bände (Köln: Könemann, 1998), vol. I, S. 162; cf. also Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (München: Fink, 2001), S. 68-71 (Engl. transl.: *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014]). Our understanding of what a picture is must not be based

In opposition, or as a complement, to conventional aesthetics, focusing on the symbolic rendering of visual or imaginary objects, on problems of spatial construction and intuition, as well as on hermeneutics of the iconic⁶ content, I shall try to show that the ancient Chinese cliché of aesthetic picture contemplation as sort of “reclined wandering” (*wò yóu* 臥遊), actually reveals a much more significant and profound insight into the power of art as this formula is usually taken, rather tritely, to mean. For a large part of our everyday existence, we “dwell”⁷ in the realm of the imaginary, we think and feel *through images*. However, we may *live* in artistic pictures, too, as soon as we contemplate them in an aesthetically appropriate way—which may mean something significantly different from just “intuiting” or “perceiving” them. As images exert a profound impact on our being-in-the-world, that is our *existential relation to the world*, aesthetic experience cannot be restricted to mere contemplation of iconic objects⁸ or a cognitive understanding of their purport and meaning. Artistic pictures do not just symbolically reproduce real things; they do not just *refer to* reality, while they are themselves devoid of and cut off from reality. Instead, such images, in their particular way, *participate in* reality. In a double way artistic pictures, too, *are* concrete reality. This is not only true as far as an image, being incorporated by some material object, exists as a real thing amidst other real things. The reason why artistic pictures should be considered “to be reality itself” is that they have a profound impact on our *existence*, as they purvey *situational access* to our world. Art theory should acknowledge the existential and ethical dimensions of aesthetic behavior. As I have extensively tried to show in my monograph *World as Image*, as well as in a number of articles,⁹ by means of a critical inquiry into Chinese textual evidence from ancient

on an unquestioned way in which we perceive pictures, namely our dealing with the symbolic as such. Furthermore, our access to these phenomena should not continue to just focus on the artefact as an *object of intuition*, but rather look upon the *act of aesthetic contemplation* as an existential behavior. Only then will we be able, from an anthropological stance, to pave the way into contemporary aesthetics for that fundamentally different practice of making use of pictures we witness in pre-modern China.

⁶ The term “iconic” shall be used like an adjective related to the “image”. It is an equivalent to “pertaining to the image”, “in the manner of an image”, or “having the status of an image”.

⁷ In other words, “*wohnen*” in the strong sense that Martin Heidegger attributes to this notion, for example in his „*Bauen Wohnen Denken*,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2000 [GA 7]), S. 145-164.

⁸ This term is meant to designate the object of perception we apprehend *as* an “image”, that is what Husserl calls “Bildobjekt”. Thus the “iconic object” has to be distinguished not only from the “iconic subject” (Bildsujet), in other words the issue which is addressed, the object represented or denoted by the image, but also from the “pictorial object” itself, in other words the material support or “pictorial thing” *on* which something appears *as* an image.

⁹ Obert, *Welt als Bild*; M. Obert, „Einige Thesen zum Bildverständnis im vormodernen China,” in *Weltbild-Bildwelt*, hg. Walter Schweidler (Sankt August: Academia Verlag, 2007), S. 193-219;

times up to the late 19th century, more precisely by means of *philosophically instructed* translations of major treatises, combined with sort of a “deconstruction” of our usual manner of looking on, and our habits of dealing with, pre-modern art from China, we may eventually overcome the inveterate restrictions of contemporary aesthetics. Such immanent restraints have been imported by Euro-American cultural imperialism into most of modern research concerning aesthetic practices in ancient China. Therefore, prior to talking about works of art, a careful *philosophical*, as well as *critical*, reading of historical sources should lead the way. Such preliminary or preparatory work has, first of all, to disclose the peculiarities of this cultural heritage to us and prepare our gaze, in order to enable us to approach, experience, and understand, pre-modern Chinese painting in an adequate manner.

Euro-centric fixation on vision, imagination, conceptualization, and mimetic depiction, lets the ambiguous pictorial thing with its meaningful iconic figuration fall into the ancient Platonic trap. According to a dualistic metaphysics propagated by common-sense Platonism, it is firmly believed in the occident that any image, by essence, cannot help but yield an illusory replica of something absent. Iconic presence as such is necessarily deceptive, with respect to true being. Such a fundamental ontological determination of what distinguishes pictures and images from straightforward reality relies on a certain conception of human consciousness and imaginative power. Even though picture theory recently has become aware of the *performative* aspects of pictorial presentation, yet the relevant theories, after all, still hinge upon the visible *imago* and its apparition in a *cognitive* sense. But does this perspective account for the entire range of possibilities, as to how images happen to be images, and how pictures operate as pictures?

In order to rethink our notion of images and pictures in a critical way, major support is yielded by written documents on painting from pre-modern China, as well as by the corresponding aesthetic practices. As a general thesis I claim that, prior to the 20th century, aesthetics in China has been deeply rooted in the *ethical* dimension of human “being-towards-the-world”.¹⁰ The artistic image has not so much been used in light of visual perception or conceptual interpretation. The experience that

„Ein Weltzugang im Bild. Für eine transkulturelle Phänomenologie des ästhetischen Verhaltens,“ *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 36.2 (Jun. 2011): 125-151; “Imagination or Response? Some Remarks on the Understanding of Images and Pictures in Pre-modern China,” in *Dynamics and Performativity of Imagination: The Image between the Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Bernd Huppauf and Christoph Wulf (New York Routledge, 2009), pp. 116-134; Song Hao 宋灝 [Mathias Obert], “Dan’yu shenmei zhuanhua: you xianxiangxue kan shan shui hua 「淡」與審美轉化：由現象學看山水畫,” *NCCU Philosophical Journal* 30 (Jul. 2013): 155-187.

¹⁰ By this term I refer to a phenomenological stance especially propounded by Martin Heidegger and enriched by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who subsequently interpreted the fundamental issue of the existential openness of our “In-der-Welt-Sein” or “être au monde” in a double-fold way, as the French “être à” both means “being in” and “pertaining to”.

pictures and images are able to initiate a *process of self-transformation*, engaging the spectator's whole *existence*, came into focus at a very early stage. Such self-transformation, though pertaining to the sphere of ethics more than to that of aesthetics, has to be rigorously distinguished from "cathartic" effects merely concerning the spectator's psyche or moral constitution. In addition, as seen from an anthropological point of view prevalent in European picture theory since Plato's and Aristotle's time, man has been conceived of as, by his very nature, being capable of and prone to *producing* images and pictures. With respect to pre-modern China, however, it may rather be stated that man essentially is *having* and *dealing with* images and pictures, that his being-in-the-world purports an existential "dwelling amidst images". While European theory has put much weight on the "poietic" dimension of creating pictures and images, ancient China emphasizes that our *living within the iconic dimension*, be it with respect to our emotions and our fantasy, be it in the arts of painting, brush writing, or poetry,¹¹ be it even in everyday linguistic expression, is crucial for the realization of good life.¹² Veneration of the ancestors and all sorts of religious beliefs, too, are concerned with one unifying reality taking turns at self-manifestation and self-concealment, not with visionary attachments of human beings in this world to some other-worldly realm. Of course, religious beliefs have exerted an undeniable influence on the development of ancient Chinese arts, especially in the case of mountain-water-painting.¹³ Although allusion is often made in a general way to "religious" contexts and

¹¹ François Jullien, *La valeur allusive* (Paris : École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1985).

¹² Hans Belting has pointed to the necessity of connecting an anthropological problematization of image and picture with a cross-cultural view on this issue (Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie*, S. 50-54). However, with regard to those phenomena in pre-modern China, which are as difficult to categorize as they are easy to be misinterpreted, it becomes all the more evident that even this anthropological approach, though founded on the request for an "intercultural" stance, on a rather fundamental level still is led by concepts of the picture and by theoretical alternatives of merely European provenance. Thus it seems not the least astonishing that the apparently more easily grasped so-called primitive picture practices up to now have gained much more attention from contemporary *Bildtheorie* than practices of the highly complex "developed cultures" of the Far East. Those remain almost totally out of focus, although they are much better documented historically as well as theoretically. And whereas Belting's formulation of the leitmotiv of his anthropology of pictures, viz. "we live with pictures and we understand the world through pictures" (op. cit. 11: „Wir leben mit Bildern und verstehen die Welt in Bildern.“) corresponds very well with aesthetic practices in China, still this statement ought to be enlarged beyond the horizon of mere "understanding": actually we just *are within* our images and pictures, whoever we are, and through pictures we *interact* with the world and the other, as well as with ourselves. In accordance with pre-modern Chinese culture, mankind having and making pictures directly addresses the ethical question of what the good life means.

¹³ For further elucidation of this topic: Erik Zürcher, "Recent Studies on Chinese Painting;" *T'oung Pao* 51.4/5 (1964): 375-422; Hubert Delahaye, *Les premières peintures de paysage en Chine:*

“religious” significations of this important genre of painting, this aspect tends to foster a fundamental neglect, on the part of the researcher, with respect to a rather different - not seldom even more considerable - “existential” purport this genre is rooted in, besides religious connotations. On the contrary, this paper tries to put forward and emphasize just those neglected aspects of mountain-water-painting referring to human life in the surrounding world, while not further entering into a discussion of its “religious” dimensions.

Paintings may well *represent* something absent, through iconic similarity or symbolic allusion. Undoubtedly this has also been the case in pre-modern China, especially where, for instance, “pictures of remembrance” and almost “cartographic” rendering of real geographic sites, as well as illustrations inserted in literary works, are concerned. Yet contrary to semiotic concepts of denotation or metaphorical reference,¹⁴ as well as to theories of perception which understand iconic apparition as a peculiar mode of presence,¹⁵ it should not be forgotten that paintings actually always do *present themselves*, first of all. Paintings from ancient China, in particular, do not “pretend” to be what they, in fact, are not, as if they were intended for delivering a *merely iconic reproduction* of some *absent reality*. At least the outstanding examples of this pictorial genre are in a crucial way *self-referential*. The picture is located on *this* side of reality, as it were. The picture *and* its iconic purport *both* pertain to the situation of the spectator and the act of aesthetic contemplation, not to some absent reality depicted.

Concluding this preliminary outline, it may be said that the well-known yet

Aspects religieux (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1981); Stephen Little and Shawn Eichman, ed., *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Kiyohiko Munakata, “Concepts of *Lei* and *Kan-lei* in Early Chinese Art Theory,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 105-131; Susan Bush, “Tsung Ping’s Essay on Painting Landscape and the ‘Landscape Buddhism’ of Mount Lu,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, pp. 132-164; Lothar Ledderose, “The Earthly Paradise: Religious Elements in Chinese Landscape Art,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, pp. 165-183; L. Ledderose, “Some Taoist Elements in the Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties,” *T’oung Pao* 70.4/5 (1984): 246-278.

¹⁴ Regarding the fundamentals of this approach I refer to Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 2. Aufl. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1954); Paul Ricœur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Seuil, 1975); Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976).

¹⁵ Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung. Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigungen*, ed. Eduard Marbach (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1980 [Hua XXIII]); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’Œil et l’esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1995); Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003); Lambert Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz. Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2005).

disturbing practice of inscribing poems and applying colophons or seals on the very body of an already “finished” painting, in the most prominent places of the pictorial surface, is apt to confirm the above statements. This striking feature in pre-modern Chinese art history should certainly not be regarded as the subsequent joining of some “appendix” to a completed painting, by connoisseurs. This custom rather points at the fact that in pre-modern China painted pictures and images developed a *mode of operation* which is quite distinct from European preconceptions or aesthetic practices. It should be questioned whether a frame is a frame in the same way in ancient China as it is in classical European art. It should be asked whether the limits of the iconic field are identical with the pictorial thing, in the same way that they are in Euro-American “landscape painting”.

With respect to such phenomena, not only the conspicuous “void”, allegedly pervading Chinese ink wash paintings, demands much more critical reflection.¹⁶ Also the manner in which aesthetic contemplation itself has to proceed, as well as the function attributed to pictures and images in a socio-historical context, imperatively must be illuminated. From interventions occurring *within* the iconic field and directly interfering with artistic depiction as such, it becomes evident to what extent art in pre-modern China, beyond contemplation, lends itself to sort of a “continuation” or “remaking”, *within the real world*. There is an astonishing “continuity” at work, between the artistic picture and its embedding in the spectator’s lifeworld, encompassing the historical dimension. The pictorial object, which is not to be conflated with the content depicted or the iconic object, properly speaking, functions much like some *site of mutual meeting and communication*, through the ages. As a *shared access to the world*, a painting offers an occasion for *intersubjective community*.¹⁷ Yet not only the artistic picture appreciated and collected, but already the image as such establishes a communion of sorts with the world. In order to understand exactly how this works and what it means, it is necessary to investigate in some detail the structure of mountain-water-pictures, as well as the techniques of painting and aesthetic contemplation of such art works.

¹⁶ Henri Maldiney, in his *Ouvrir le rien. L’art nu* (Paris: Encre Marine, 2000, especially pp. 51-109), seems to be on a good way towards it, yet his combining Heidegger with certain “orientalist” prejudices, imposed on his observations by not very reliable “expert” literature on China, is not thoroughly convincing.

¹⁷ Belting has elaborated on the issue of the picture being a media of “embodiment”, cf. Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie*, S. 143-188. With respect to the picture in pre-modern China, some further aspects can be added to Belting’s investigation: the picture “embodies” not only on the level of the figurative image it mainly consists of, but also by ways of incarnating a certain performativity and effectivity in time. Besides, it is not only with regard to the human body but on the basis of the collectively shared “body” of the social world that a picture functions like an “embodiment”.

Visible forms and the “breathing” image

In a mountain-water-painting, what does the iconic object, in other words the content of perception, aesthetic contemplation as being “aesthetic”, properly speaking, rely on and refer to? What constitutes the iconic object? What makes such a picture become the very “authentic vista” (*zhēn jǐng* 真景) that Jing Hao 荆浩 (around 900) demands in his *Note on the Art of the Brush*?¹⁸ There can be no doubt that this genre, in a way, can be attributed to the general species of “figurative” or “representational” art. We perceive “corporeal forms” (*xíng* 形), referring to real things. However, more important, since antiquity, has been the term *xiàng* 象 which either signifies “meaningful figurative appearance” or “to grant a meaningful figurative appearance”. *Xiàng* stands for an independent figurative object of intuition, being complete in itself and replete with meaning, similar to Latin *species* or *imago*. It may refer to natural apparitions, especially celestial ones, such as omens or portents, as well as to mental images, or the iconic depiction of some concrete object. This use is also exemplified by the basic type, out of six canonical methods, of character formation (*liù shū* 六書), termed *xiàng xíng* 象形, “endowing a corporeal form with a meaningful appearance”. As to the theory of painting, *xiàng* occurs very early on in the formula “drawing meaningful appearances and displaying colored figures” (*huà xiàng bù sè* 畫象布色), put forward in Zong Bing’s 宗炳 (375-443) foundational treatise with the title *Preface to the Painting of Mountain and Water* (*Hua shan shui xu* 畫山水序).¹⁹ However, it remains questionable to what extent the notion of *xiàng* implies the classical iconic difference, in other words the relation between an archetype and its symbolic representation. It also remains problematic whether, according to the logic of a “sign”, the “signification” presumably denoted by, or rather contained in, a *xiàng* can be separated from the fact of its actually appearing. What is “signified” by a *xiàng* cannot be located in some *Hinterwelt*, purged of all sensual, material qualities; much like the apparition of some frightening ghost or a blessing *omen*, the meaning rather pertains to the same world of appearances as the *xiàng* itself.

Contrary to popular opinion, considering a picture to be a “copy” or “representation” of reality, as if it had the “likeness of corporeal form” (*xíng sì* 形似), was something that was viewed with suspicion from a very early age by Chinese

¹⁸ *Bi fa ji* 筆法記, LB I, pp. 605-609. Transl. in Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, pp. 63-68; Kiyohiko Munakata, *Ching Hao’s Pi-fa-chi: A Note on the Art of Brush*, *Artibus Asiae* suppl. 31 (Ascona: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1974), pp. 11-16; Obert, *Welt als Bild*, S. 476-492.

¹⁹ *Hua shan shui xu* 畫山水序 (*Preface to the Painting of Mountain and Water*), LB I, pp. 583-584. As to translations and interpretations of Zong Bing’s short text cf. Leon Hurvitz, “Tsung Ping’s Comments on Landscape Painting,” *Artibus Asiae* 32.2/3 (1970): 146-156; Bush, “Tsung Ping’s Essay on Painting Landscape and the ‘Landscape Buddhism’ of Mount Lu,” pp. 132-164; Mathias Obert, „Vom Nutzen und Vorteil der Bildbetrachtung: Zong Bings Theorie der Landschaftsmalerei,“ *Asiatische Studien* 54.4 (2000): 839-874; Obert, *Welt als Bild*, S. 432-443.

aestheticians, although it undeniably has played a certain role in art theory. Yet, all talk about “likeness” in pre-modern Chinese sources has been conflated in the modern era, without much hesitation, with a very euro-centric understanding of “similarity” and “pictorial representativeness”. For this reason, the general view of art historians, according to which formal likeness originally would have dominated mountain-water-painting, so as to be transformed into more “abstract” modes of expression only after the Song 宋 dynasty—that is to say, during the Yuan 元-Dynasty—should be doubted seriously. For the most part, since antiquity, iconic appearance has been clearly distinguished in China, explicitly or implicitly, from the referential function of a simple “sign” or “indicator” for something absent. Thus the artistic image very early on became a perceptible reality in its own right. Furthermore it has imperatively to be kept in mind that the figurative Chinese script is an original creation, based on the “graph-word” (*zì* 字) as an important *linguistic*, not merely scriptural, unit. A “graph-word” should by no means be conflated with any merely external “sign” or “marker”, combining a conventional phonetic unit with an internal meaning, like what has been conceived by Aristotle and what has become the general opinion on the essence of a script in modern linguistics, even in nowadays China. A “graph-word” functions similarly to the occidental “lexeme”. It profoundly pervades or even dominates the spoken language and linguistic expression, *at all levels*. Standing in sharp contrast to purely alphabetic or syllabic scriptural “signs”, a “graph-word” essentially eschews common euro-centric categorizations, as it hinges upon pictorial and phonographic principles which, of course, are to be rigorously distinguished from so-called ideography or pictography, too.²⁰

The written Chinese word has exerted a tremendous influence on the theoretical understanding of images and iconicity in general, as well as on painting practices and the aesthetic appreciation of artistic pictures. The utterly peculiar *iconicity* of the script grants general expression and thinking in the Chinese language with an unequalled dimension of “material” intuition and imagination. The art of brush writing, too, being deeply rooted in just this complex and multidimensional iconicity, has played a fundamental role in the development of painting techniques. From this stance it is not at all astonishing that the term *shì* 勢, primarily signifying “power”, “dynamics”, or “tendency”, has become the most influential notion in all reflection on iconicity. The pulsating black lines, crooks, and dots, of graph-words composing a piece of writing,

²⁰ For a critical discussion of modern linguistic views about the Chinese script cf. Mathias Obert, „Tanzende Schrift. Beobachtungen zur chinesischen Schreibkunst,“ in *Bild, Macht, Schrift. Schriftkulturen in bildkritischer Perspektive*, hg. Antonio Loprieno, Carsten Knigge Salis, Birgit Mersmann (Göttingen: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2011), S. 215-239; M. Obert, „Chinesische Schrift und leibliches Denken,“ in *Buchstaben der Welt. Welt der Buchstaben*, hg. Ryōsuke Ōhashi, Martin Roussel (München: Fink, 2013), S. 161-189; Song Hao 宋灝 [Mathias Obert], “Huayu siwei yu wenzi dongshi 華語思維與文字動勢,” *Chinese Studies* 33.2 (Jun. 2015): 103-132.

are appreciated for revealing the traces of the writing movement, with utmost accuracy and vividness. Written graph-words show the path of the writer's hand in time and space, unveiling most intimate and delicate *forces*, *motivations*, and *hindrances*. As the *course* of the pencil or the brush essentially becomes manifest in any written graph-word, the latter does not represent a mere visual "form", recording some linguistic item on the scriptural level, nor is it just some "calligraphic" figuration in space. The written Chinese character, when apprehended as an image, for several reasons is called a *shì*, that is a "dynamic appearance". First, it is *temporal* by essence, as its entire composition is dominated by regular orientations and directionality. Second, it exposes a *regime of forces* to intuition. Finally, a *shì* is not just a perceptible "sign" which needs to be decoded, be it with respect to its linguistic signification or to its expressive purport. In addition to this, the *shì* of any graph-word also sends an *iconic appeal* to the reader, affecting them with the power of an *epiphany*. Just this very idea of a "dynamic appearance" has been taken over from the art of brush writing and introduced into painting theory, where it applies both to the contents of depiction, like the "dynamic appearance" of natural—as well as painted—mountains, cliffs, rocks, or trees, and to the style of execution, too, referring to the "dynamic appearance" of the brushwork itself, in a painted image.

On this basis it is evident already to what extent, in pre-modern China, phenomena pertaining to the iconic have not primarily been related to problems of indication and manifestation, but instead rely on the idea of some *effectiveness* inherent in the image. Hence mountain-water-painting should be analyzed in light of categories such as "affection", "appeal", or "impulse", before focusing on pictorial imitation or symbolic revelation. A picture's "corresponsive" performativity²¹ has to be distinguished from anything such as "imagination of sense and meaning"²² or "world-interpretation". The image does not disclose the world via some conceptual *imago*, an "image of the world" (Heidegger's *Weltbild*). The way in which the iconic object encountered by the senses actually produces a *Weltaufgang*,²³ meaning an "emergence of the world", allows aesthetic contemplation to catch up with the very lifeworld and the existential situation the spectator dwells in, without the spectator's previously having to form any overall awareness or conceptual understanding of what

²¹ Martin Seel's concept of "aesthetic correspondence" („ästhetische Korrespondenz“) besides "contemplation" („Kontemplation“) and "imagination" („Imagination“) is not sufficient in this case (Martin Seel, *Eine Ästhetik der Natur* [Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1996], S. 111). In so far as his speaking of "correspondence" remains bound to an "aesthetic reflection of life" („ästhetischer Widerschein des Lebens“), it does not reach the fundamental constitution of pictorial art in pre-modern China.

²² Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, S. 136: „Sinn-Imagination“.

²³ I borrow this key term from Heinrich Rombach, *Leben des Geistes* (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), S. 299/301; H. Rombach, *Der kommende Gott. Hermetik – eine neue Weltsicht* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1991), S. 41/130.

he or she perceives. Due to two major features, viz. “breathing” and “depth”, the image incorporates, actualizes, effectuates, our *real* lifeworld.

First, the idea of “breathing” (*qì* 氣; Japanese pronunciation: *ki*) is related to an extensive complex of experiences, pertaining to various fields such as cosmology, medicine, martial arts, as well as aesthetic and ethical reflection. Phenomena getting somehow conceptualized by *qì* or “breathing” primarily encompass human *breath*, *vital agitation*, *relationality* and *transfer*, including an original *self-relatedness* of life. “Breathing” also has become an *aesthetic value*. Mainly centered on features of sensibly compelling effectiveness, thought concerning *qì* has gained broad influence in Chinese cultural history. Against popular tendencies of hypostatizing some obscure *qì*-element, *qì*-matter, or *qì*-energy, in an ontological manner, it seems more suitable, according to its origin and function, to render the term *qì* by the semi-verbal “breathing”, so as to stress that it implies a certain process.

An image setting forth *qì* or “breathing”, functions quite similar to a living gesture or an expression. It may be seen as an utterance in which the iconic difference, in other words the distinction between the iconic content which presents itself, and the object of depiction being absent, has vanished. Much like in modern painterly abstraction where there is no more real object to be identified in the image, generally speaking, an “expression” is the *immediate manifestation* and *lively incarnation* of meaning—instead of its mimetic or symbolic “representation”. Hence the expressively “breathing” image does not only *embody* what gets manifested in it, it also *appeals* to the spectator. Furthermore “breathing” serves as support for a “mutual correlation” or “effective corresponsiveness” (*lei* 類) between different items. The notion *lei* has been largely misunderstood as “kinship”, “kind” or “species”, or “similarity”. However, as Kiyohiko Munakata has convincingly shown,²⁴ when this notion first appears in texts regarding painting, *lei* does *not* indicate ontological affiliation, nor does it stand for anything such as iconic likeness. Rather than following the model of *acoustic resonance*, since ancient times the effectiveness of “breathing” has instead been interpreted as the relation between “affection” and “response” (*gǎn yìng* 感應), as mediated by *lei*, that is “effective corresponsiveness”.

Wang Chong 王充 (27-97)²⁵ plainly demonstrates, with respect to “affection through ‘breathing’” (*qì gǎn* 氣感),²⁶ that not only the actually encountered Other but even the pictorial “appearance of his or her corporeal form” (*xíng xiàng* 形象) may

²⁴ Munakata, “Concepts of *Lei* and *Kan-lei* in Early Chinese Art Theory,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*.

²⁵ Cf. Alfred Forke, *Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch’ung* (Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1907); A. Forke, ed., *Miscellaneous Essays of Wang Ch’ung* (Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1911).

²⁶ Cf. Wang Chong 王充, *Lun heng 論衡 (Weighing the Various Doctrines)*, III.10: *Ou hui 偶會* (Random Coincidences); XIV.41: *Han wen 寒溫* (Cold and Heat); XVI.47: *Luan long 亂龍* (Mistakes Concerning the Question of Dragons).

make a spectator “get affected through ‘breathing’”.²⁷ Due to “effectiveness of images by correspondiveness” (*xiàng lei* 象類), a picture may stir our “breathing”, just like persons or things actually present would do.²⁸ Because what appears in a mountain-water-vista likewise participates in cosmic “breathing” permeating the entire world,²⁹ enacting such correspondiveness through *iconic actualization*, the image contemplated, too, is capable of promoting a “breathing” relation between the spectator and his or her lifeworld.

Besides dynamically “breathing” brush lines, there is a second feature which fosters the effectiveness of a painted image: iconic effectiveness depends in a decisive way on what does *not* appear. A subtle vacillating comes about between replete forms appearing and “empty” fields in between. This phenomenon ought not to be confounded with the correlation between figure and background. What commonly is called *liú bái* 留白 or “space left empty”, is all too rapidly identified with mimetic depiction of or symbolical allusion to mist and clouds. At least in the case of a couple of accomplished masterpieces, this “void” has turned into sort of an “in-between”, in other words a peculiar iconic “depth”, operating *amidst* iconic appearances. As this in-between or depth pertains to the iconic expression as such, it supports the effective “breathing” of the image looked at. Neither can this phenomenon be determined by spatial categories, nor does it stand for some invisible realm of being, as even François Jullien³⁰ still somehow presumes, due to an occidental and metaphysical vein.

Inheriting from Guo Xi’s 郭熙 (1023-about 1085) taxonomy of three modes of iconic “distance” (*yuǎn* 遠) in mountain-water-pictures, Han Zhuo 韓拙 (around 1100) introduces his own aesthetic categories which, in fact, re-think his predecessor’s account in a very profound manner.³¹ According to what Han Zhuo expounds, “widely opened distancing” (*kuò yuǎn* 闊遠) denotes a peculiar mode of *depth of vision*, revealing itself next to or between replete visible figures as they appear in the image. This phenomenon ought to be distinguished from any merely spatial quantum, as though it were to indicate some perspectival interval between the spectator and some distant scenery looked at. Instead of expanding towards a distant background, instead of opening up towards an external world, which ideally might be some infinite transcending realm, at least reaching out beyond things depicted, “widely

²⁷ Liu Pansui 劉盼遂, *Lun heng ji jie* 論衡集解, ed. Yang Jialuo 楊家駱, 2 vols. (Taipei: Shijie shuju 世界書局, 1990), I, [XVI.47: Luan long] p. 331.

²⁸ Liu., p. 328.

²⁹ Cf. Kiyohiko Munakata, “Concepts of *Lei* and *Kan-lei* in Early Chinese Art Theory,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, pp. 105-131; Obert, „Vom Nutzen und Vorteil der Bildbetrachtung: Zong Bings Theorie der Landschaftsmalerei,“ S. 857-863.

³⁰ François Jullien, *La grande image n’a pas de forme. Ou du non-objet par la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

³¹ Han Zhuo 韓拙, *Shan shui Chunquan ji* 山水純全集 (*Chunquan’s Collection about Mountain-Water-Painting*), section “Lun shan 論山” (Discussion of Mountains), LB II, p. 664.

opened distancing” effectuates a *delimitation of vision* itself. Where such iconic depth interferes with what actually is displayed in the image, our vision gets *opened up* towards the *bottom or depths of the image* itself.

Next, “confusing distancing” (*mí yuǎn* 迷遠) stands for a vague mode of *proximity*, brought about by the *cancellation* of any distinct vista. Such *phenomenal confusion* or *unsteadiness of appearing* should not be reduced to depiction of clouds and mist which, as it were, just conceal a given scenery in a rather reasonable–*not* “confusing”–manner.³² At last, “gloomily immersed distancing” (*yōu yuǎn* 幽遠), designates kind of an *intrinsic fissure*, at work *within the iconic object* itself. A “subtle vagueness” (*wéi* 微), bare of any appearing content or signification, reveals itself *amidst* concrete things appearing in the image. Fields of “gloomily immersed distancing” generally produce an “intermittent” apparition of the whole iconic object, as this phenomenon irradiates into all clearly visible entities. Things depicted appear as if they were *intermittently inverted* into the nakedness of an unfathomable bottom. In fact, in the spectator this bare iconic depth, quite unexpectedly, evokes the sensation of

³² A fine illustration of the effect of proximity, of pulling our gaze to the foreground, as it gets provoked by “confusing distancing” may be *Fisherman on a Wintery River* (*Xue xi yu fu* 雪溪漁父) by Xu Daoning 許道寧 (11th century, Taipei: Palace Museum). In the middle zone of the image, to the right, the site above the shore seems pushed back into mere nothingness, similar to a hollow amidst the cliffs to its left, hovering above the roofs of some temples, yet lacking any distinctive feature. The same “gloomily immersed” appearance permeates the intermittent depiction of trees and rocks in the foreground, too, next to the houses and the beach. In *Autumn on the Riverbank Beneath Misty Clouds* (*Yan ai qiu she* 烟靄秋涉) by Zhao Gan 趙幹 (10th century, Taipei: Palace Museum) this effect of bringing-close is even more evident. As the cliffs and mountain tops in the distance only manifest themselves in a very intermittent manner, we easily get aware of the scenery occurring in the foreground, next to us. Although the group of minuscule persons we meet here beneath a huge solitary rock with some windblown trees on top, at first glance, appears not to be important at all, we quite rapidly concentrate our gaze on what happens at the bottom of the image, instead of being induced to the immensity of a world we might grasp in an all-encompassing panoramic view, from top of a mountain, like in *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (*Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, 1818, Hamburg: Kunsthalle) by Caspar David Friedrich, or even into cosmic infinity, as when contemplating his *The Monk by the Sea* (*Der Mönch am Meer*, 1808-1810, Berlin: Alte Nationalgalerie). In pictures such as Ma Lin’s 馬麟 *Scholar Reclining and Watching Rising Clouds; Poem by Wang Wei* (*Xing dao shui qiong chu* 行到水窮處), executed on a small fan, as well as his *Landscape with Flying Geese* (*Chun jiao hui yan* 春郊回雁, both middle of the 13th century, Cleveland: Museum of Art), mist and fog or clouds seem to hover above a stretch of water, plunging almost every detail of a distant scenery into extreme vagueness. As a result, the spectator may feel as if being pulled back to the nearby site where a solitary figure appears on the bank. Instead of expanding into infinite depth, here, too, “confusing distancing” actually produces a sort of proximity, on the part of the spectator, by means of *dissolving depiction* as such in utter allusiveness.

an *intimate closeness* which is the opposite of any spatial distance.³³

Such are the paradoxical phenomena of “depth” or rather “deep apparition” which all are located within the image itself, within the iconic object. This is to say, such “depth” does not pertain to what is depicted, but rather to the *event of appearing* itself. “Depth” here by no means indicates what it is usually taken for, an illusionistic rendering of three-dimensional space and spatial remoteness. What Han Zhuo actually seems to be interested in, designates a peculiar *mode of apparition*. In a way this phenomenon reminds one of an artistic disclosure of what Heidegger calls “das Welten der Welt” – “the worlding of the world”, “the world emerging as a world”.³⁴ Due to *iconic depth*, the microcosm depicted turns into the totality of the world as the omnipresent, yet unapparent, horizon of our being-towards-the-world. A switching

³³ In many masterpieces what is commonly taken for mist and clouds or a waterfall actually turns into this fundamentally different iconic quality. At certain parts of the image concrete depiction shifts into the “gloomy” blankness of a radical “void”, lacking any clear indication as to what might actually be visible. For instance, in *Cloudy Summits* (*Yun yan lan sheng* 雲烟攬勝) by Guo Xi 郭熙 (11th century, Taipei: Palace Museum) several distinct vistas are gathered into a single composition. Some seem close to us, some appear far-off; each has to be looked-at from a different vantage point. These detailed-views contain blank fields submerged by utter vagueness and obviously do not represent anything at all. This phenomenon comes afore most concisely in the middle zone of the image, where a small grove on the riverbank, to the right, as well as roofs piled up behind it, get submerged almost entirely by a gloomy vagueness. To the left another site is disclosing itself like some hallucination: a temple accompanied by a Buddhist stupa seems to emerge from a sea of gloomy nothingness, as though not pertaining to the mountain scenery, amidst which it seems like inserted under a different perspective. This site looks like it is pulling close towards us, just because almost no details are revealed. Here, too, “gloomily immersed distancing” turns into an unequalled feeling of intimacy. In *Fishing Boat on a Wintry River* (*Han jiang diao ting* 寒江釣艇), attributed to Li Cheng 李成 (10th century, Taipei: Palace Museum), a “waterfall” forming a large round cavity, as it were, which occupies a very central position in the whole composition, yields quite the same effect: instead of perceiving flowing water or the damp hovering above a pond, we may rather be induced to intuit just the bareness of the iconic ground, without any concrete or allusive meaning. As it wanders from the far-off horizon near the top of the hanging scroll down to the trees in the middleground, our gaze finally arrives at the fisherman next to the bottom. Going through these successive stations, we will feel like a subtle attraction of that very considerable void there beneath the waterfall. Yet as soon as our gaze slides back to this central portion of the image, we may feel like there is resistance of pressure. It seems as if we cannot manage to “get into” this part of the image. On the contrary, sort of an “inversion” occurs to our gaze, right at this place, effectuated by the sheer impenetrability of such iconic depth. As a result, our whole contemplation will be led into sort of a proximity, with respect to the solitary fisherman at the bottom, yet maybe even with respect to our own being-in-the-world.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, „Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks,“ in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1977 [GA 5]), [S. 1-74] S. 30.

takes place just on the point where the image seems no more constrained by any distinct iconic form, in other words in those “voids” or “places left empty”. As a result of iconic depth effectuating an *evasive mode of appearing or presenting something*, the iconic appearance as a whole is brought to intimately correspond with our being-in-the-world. Intermittently *withholding* what is revealed, a mountain-water-vista as a whole is governed by a sort of *temporal oscillation*, manifesting things between not yet appearing and no more appearing. What this vibrant manifestation puts into effect is sort of a “breathing” responsiveness between the image and a clearly *non-metaphysical* “outside the appearances”, viz. the spectator’s *own* lifeworld.

When the spectator gets “affected” (*gǎn* 感) by the “breathing” which runs through each brush stroke in the picture, as well as through the “subtle” vagueness of the whole iconic appearance, aesthetic contemplation effectively shifts from some merely perceptual or receptive act, into sort of an *existential* “response” (*yìng* 應), affecting our being-in-the-world. When faced with paintings of this kind we actually can “respond with the eye and accord ourselves in the inner sense” (*yìng mù huì xīn* 應目會心) to what we see, as Zong Bing postulates.³⁵ Thus our “dwelling in the image” is not brought about by means of iconic depiction of some real environment, inviting us to dwell there, nor does symbolical reference to the hermit’s living in nature evoke some idealized “dwelling place” in our fantasy. It is by no means imagination that has to account for such a “dwelling in the image”, provoked by aesthetic contemplation. This iconic effect is rather to be understood as a fundamental *transformation*, occurring within the spectator’s own *constitution* and regarding his or her *relation to the world*.

Due to an evasive mode of world disclosure, as well as the vividly “breathing” execution of what reveals itself in the image, sort of a “dwelling” *attitude* towards the world and the own self is brought about in the spectator. From being just some distant on-looker he or she actually gets transported into sort of a “dwelling proximity”, affecting his or her own *life disposition*. Such *proximity to the own self in the world* originates in the vividly vibrating lines, as well as in iconic depth, the manifestation of what is contemplated in the image intermittently becoming “bland”, that is “devoid” of any solid content, though, at the same time, vividly pulsating in its very fabric. Through a sort of “counter-turning” (*nì zhuǎn* 逆轉), our vision itself, instead of reaching out beyond what we are looking at, is “taken back” (*shōu huí* 收回) into the site of aesthetic contemplation, which is just the situation we actually dwell in. In order to more adequately understand this ethical dimension attributed to artistic pictures or rather to aesthetic contemplation of such pictures, a brief survey, concerning both painting technique and aesthetic experience, will be elucidating.

The act of painting

Mountain-water-painting is not so much concerned with representational

³⁵ LB I, p. 583.

depiction and mimesis of the real world, or symbolic denotation of some ideal world, as it appears to be at first glance. It is better understood as an art of *lines and washes*, owing the major part of its aesthetic wealth and power to the *tuning of watery ink stains*, as well as to the *dynamics of the brush stroke*. Much more than delivering some specific sight or an encompassing “world view”, this painting genre takes advantage of its intimate relationship with the art of brush writing. The central concern, just like in brush writing, is the following: how to produce a vivid *shì* 勢 or “dynamic appearance” in the image, both regarding the depicted object shown, as well as the way in which depiction is executed, on the level of the painter’s brushwork and style? Hence the shape-giving act, in other words the *procedure* by means of which the painting is actually executed, by far exceeds in theoretical importance all discussions about the content depicted. In a way it may be claimed that mountain-water-paintings have more in common with modernist “abstract” experimentation than with “realistic” or “impressionist” landscape painting. What is put at display, in both cases, has much more to do with the *iconic texture* and the consistency of the picture making itself, in other words with *how the painting gesture* gets materialized in what we perceive in the image, than with objects depicted, the style of their rendering, or a certain view on *what* may be meant, by means pictorial representation.

In close analogy with treatises on brush writing, from ancient times on, textual sources on painting keenly expound the “breathing” technique of “writing out the limiting lines [of the contour]” (*xiě huà* 寫畫), by adequately *moving the brush*, prior to dealing with observation and imagination. The reason for this astounding preference for body movement, instead of painterly vision, lies in the conviction that the image should directly originate in the painter’s *moods* and *bodily states*, in his or her *life relation to the world*, not in his or her perception or in some mental conception. Guo Xi attributes a key role to the painter’s constitution and disposition which prepares and underlies each endeavor of painting, the painter’s very bodily relation to his or her surroundings being crucial for artistic creativity to be successful.³⁶ A masterly painter should, first of all, *engage with reality’s request for response*. How might this actually work?

Detailed discussions treat particular motion patterns of the hand and the brush tip, as though painting were a kind of *body virtuosity*. For instance, Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470-1523) claims that an expert painter is someone who has achieved “a subtle perfection in handling the brush and twisting the wrist”, someone who “never gets stuck when twisting the wrist and applying the brush.”³⁷ Shitao 石濤 (that is Yuanji 原濟 bzw. 元濟, 1642-1718?), too, urges the learner to “first heed the way in which to move the wrist”.³⁸ Even mimetic depiction of trees, paradoxically enough, is claimed to

³⁶ LB I, pp. 633-634.

³⁷ Translated from Tang Yin 唐寅, “Liuru lun hua 六如論畫” (Tang Yin on Painting), Yu Jianhua, *Zhongguo gudai hualun leibian*, p. 107: 執筆轉腕靈妙耳 [...] 轉腕用筆之不滯.

³⁸ Translated from Yuanji 原濟, *Kugua heshang hua yu lu* 苦瓜和尚畫語錄 (*The Monk Kugua’s*

depend on the *right way of grasping and moving the brush*. With respect to this issue, Shitao carefully elaborates on the painter's hand and arm, holding and drawing the brush, that is on *body performance* during the act of painting, while he astonishingly does not at all comment on the shape of the trees to be rendered:

Moving the brush, and moving the wrist, I generally depict them the same way I depict rocks. Either all five fingers [touching the brush], or four or three fingers always follow the wrist in twisting, and together with the elbow spread out and are taken back, united all together in one single effort. Yet where the movement of the brush has got most weight the latter must touch down to the paper as if it were hovering above it.³⁹

This technique of figurative depiction strongly contrasts with European theories on pictorial imitation or artistic expression. Contrary to what the occidental reader might expect, no further explanation is given with respect to how different types of trees should *look* like. Instead, Shitao exclusively emphasizes the *procedure* of shape-giving which gets accurately elucidated in its various patterns and moments, during *bodily execution*.

In analogy with dynamic features of dance, evoked at the beginning of the text, accomplishment in painting is considered to thoroughly depend on *body imagination* and *body mimesis*, in other words on mimetic behavior carried out by and within the painter's embodied self. The clue of this painting method consists in the artist performing certain *moving patterns*, in order to achieve *static pictorial figures*. Ancient Chinese painting obviously requires the painter to practice "finger exercises", as it were, reminiscent of the scale exercises that musicians have to practice. Prior to external observation and reproduction of visible objects, mention is made of what, in Merleau-Pontian terms, may be called "embodied vision", if not even the Bachelardian "material imagination". First of all, it is the painter's body motion which has to be directly integrated into the constitutive structure of the image.

Furthermore, according to the famous dictum by Xie He 謝赫 (active between 479-502), "breathing and tune, that means lively moving",⁴⁰ perfection in painting is achieved only when the painted lines and washes are attuned in a vivid way and begin to "breathe". Iconic "breathing" can be best produced or guaranteed if the painter's

Recorded Sayings on Painting), ch. 6 "Yun wan 運腕" (Movement of the Wrist), LB I, p. 151: [...] 必先從運腕入手也。

³⁹ Translated from Yuan Ji, *Kugua heshang hua yu lu*, ch. 12 "Lin mu 林木" (Woods and Trees), LB I, p. 155: 大都多以寫石之法寫之。五指、四指、三指皆隨其腕轉，與肘伸去縮來，齊並一力。其運筆極重處卻須飛提紙上，消去猛氣。

⁴⁰ Translated from *Gu hua pin lu* 古畫品錄 (*Record of the Classification of Ancient Painters*), LB I, p. 355: 氣韻生動是也。 Cf. Mathias Obert, „Das Phänomen *qi* 氣 und die Grundlegung der Ästhetik in China,“ *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 157.1 (2007): 125-167.

bodily “breathing” immediately gets incorporated into the image, via a “breathing” brushwork which in turn relies entirely on the right way of moving the brush, during the act of execution. Regarding the essentials of a successful creative act, Jing Hao emphasizes that there is a crucial correlation between the painter’s bodily “breathing”, his or her body motion, and the “breathing” appearances in the image:

There is nothing which is actively pursued; as [the painter] inserts himself into motion, the figures take shape.⁴¹

During the act of painting the painter’s intentionality should let go and thoroughly give way to the bodily performed movement of the brush, the latter thus getting in resonance with the “breathing” movedness of the world. The most famous statement pointing in this direction, due to its apparent paradox, has raised a lot of controversial discussion, in China and abroad. In a context obviously referring to Xie He’s “breathing and tune” (*qi yùn* 氣韻) as the highest standard in aesthetics, Jing Hao’s admonition on how to make a picture “breathe” goes like this:

The inner attitude and intention should move along with the brush; then, without any delusion [being possible], meaningful figurative appearances are obtained.⁴²

According to this stance neither any mental concept nor an imaginative model or expressive intention marks the beginning of the creative act. On the contrary, conventionally pre-formed *moving patterns* which have to be re-actualized, each time pictorial production is going on, in response to a given situation, ought to lead the creative act. A large variety of regulated *ways of moving the brush* literally has to be taken over and get incorporated, by the very shape of the iconic appearances, during each single step of execution. The action of painting itself is conceived of as being literally “embodied” by each actual brush stroke. Thus the painter’s “breathing” body movement itself can be held responsible for the “breathing” appearance of pictorial configuration looked at by the spectator.

A pre-modern Chinese painter’s *moving patterns* are intimately connected with the utterly sensitive and refined use of the hair brush, as this use has first been developed in the art of brush writing. There it produces vividly pulsating lines, crooks, and dots, inscribing the traces of rhythm, tempo, and force. What misleadingly is interpreted as “contour lines”, describing the forms of material objects depicted in a

⁴¹ LB I, p. 606: 亡有所爲，任運成象; cf. Bush and Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, p. 170. For an annotated translation with detailed discussion of this statement cf. Kiyohiko Munakata, *Ching Hao’s Pi-fa-chi: A Note on the Art of Brush*, p.13 and p. 30, note 26.

⁴² LB I, p. 606: 心隨筆運，取象不惑; cf. Bush and Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, p. 170, as well as for detailed discussion: Munakata, *Ching Hao’s Pi-fa-chi: A Note on the Art of Brush*, p. 12 and pp. 23-24, note 20.

painting, in fact, to a much greater extent arises from a free, if not “abstract”, unfolding of just such aesthetic qualities which belong to the brush stroke itself.⁴³ Besides the larger configurations, conventionalized moving patterns also include all the various and often misunderstood “texture stroke methods” (*cūn fǎ* 皴法). These possibly tiny serial brush strokes and crooks have nothing to do with the occidental modelling of light and shadow or any rendering of object plasticity in the image.⁴⁴ An image owes its shape to *motion*, not to visual observation or mimetic construction. Hence Jing Hao’s statement marks a significant discord, with respect to European concepts of picture-making, as the painted image, contrary to its general depictive appearance, does not primarily rely on or render contents of observation or imagination in space, but rather traces of the “breathing” effort of painting *in time*.

As a consequence of this focus on the handling of the brush, it eventually becomes understandable why, at the pinnacle of theoretical reflection on painting in pre-modern China, the painted image is no more conceived of as a human product, an artefact. Ideally being the outflow of universal “breathing”, in other words the continuous motion permeating the ten-thousand things, the image ideally should come forth “by itself” (*zì rán* 自然). It is the human brush stroke in its *non-intentional bodily dimension* which seems most apt to capture and transport the general movedness of the world. Not the painter as a person but the brush stroke as body movement should, just “by itself”, move along with ever moving reality itself, so as to assure a dynamic relationship between the human sphere and the natural world. The intention of such a “depersonalized” painting procedure is to let a bodily “breathing” *response* be given by the painter, to the surrounding world, in order to make the painted image, too, in turn embody with utmost effectiveness the *appealing and affecting power of reality*, so as to eventually disclose this “breathing” movedness to the eyes of a spectator. The bodily painting technique is in quest for capturing the living breath of things, instead of copying their mere visual forms. The painter strives to gather, within the image, the world’s capacity to affect us, on an existential level. The peculiarly *stimulating effect*

⁴³ An adequate example illustrating this remark may be seen in the outlines of cliffs and rocks in *Belvedere Amidst Rivers and Mountains* (*Xi shan lou guan* 溪山樓觀) by Yan Wengui 燕文貴 (11th century, Taipei: Palace Museum). Due to the tip of the brush at times being enlarged by pressure of the hand, at times being retracted into a delicate thread, what might be taken for a simple “contour”, in fact appears vividly inflated or shrunk, according to the rhythmic movement of the hand drawing out the brush stroke.

⁴⁴ In paintings such as *Mountain Trees on the Riverbank* (*Xi shan lin sou* 溪山林叢) or *Storied Mountains and Dense Forests* (*Ceng yan cong shu* 層巖叢樹) by Juran 巨然 (both 10th century, Taipei: Palace Museum), it is not easy to tell whether the uniform threads and filaments filling large parts of the iconic field are meant to describe the surface of rocks, trees, grass, and water, respectively, or if these delicate graphic patterns should not rather be perceived in a next to “abstract” manner, being the traces of some dynamism which permeates the whole image looked at.

an image may produce on the spectator, during aesthetic contemplation, can only be guaranteed if the process of reality, running through the painter's bodily "breathing" and right into the bodily "breathing" of each single brush stroke, in such a way is allowed to perpetuate itself into the very *act of image formation*, so as to finally reverberate throughout the painted lines a spectator looks at.

At last, this bodily painting practice reveals a dimension of self-formation and self-cultivation, as the painter gets involved together with his or her entire bodily existence, during the creative act. Such painting exercises not only presuppose a fully "breathing" *engagement* of the whole person. Eventually they may as well serve as a means for developing *self-awareness*, for constituting one's *embodied self* in its life relation to the world of visible things. The same holds true for aesthetic reception of pictures. Throughout Chinese history, the act of painting and that of aesthetic contemplation have both been regarded as exerting a hygienic, salutary effect on the self, as both are apt to unleash a complete and valid access to our life environment. From this perspective it becomes very clear, too, why painting in ancient China was by no means restricted to professional painters. Instead, especially mountain-water-painting, since its early stages, reveals a vigorous pursuit of self-transformation, encompassing body and mind, via the aesthetic experience. This idea of aesthetic self-cultivation, of course, reaches beyond the mere production, as well as consumption, of "art works". Anyone in quest of such self-transformation may actually *do* painting, though not claiming to be a professional artist. How, then, should we look at ancient Chinese mountain-water-pictures?

The aesthetic experience

The European spectator strives to behold the *totality* of an iconic composition, all at once. By way of a quite unnatural mode of non-selective and authoritative *simultaneous capture*, the occidental spectator, in a methodical manner, imposes the status of "deceptive reproduction", the mimetic "as if", on the specifically iconic apparition. Yet such ontological presumptions systematically prevent mountain-water-vistas from unfolding their transformative effectiveness, right from the beginning. As the image-world, when contemplated in this way, instantly tilts back into some futile copy of the real world, turning into just an indifferent or illusory "view", "breathing" instantaneously withdraws from iconic representation. In this manner the spectator gains no more than a merely imaginative possession of some *possible world*. The "miniature" album leaf and the painted detail on a fan may well be of very moderate format, so as to be captured by the eye at a glance. Yet taking these aesthetic objects as an overall view of some scenery depicted does not sufficiently take into account that, even in a small picture, particular features are enhanced by means of strokes and washes, while plenty of other "details" are completely omitted, though pertaining to the same field of vision. This approach also fails to take the dynamics of brushwork into consideration, believing that what is represented can actually be identified at once.

In addition, iconic resistance to any *simultaneous capture* of the entire image must be taken into consideration all the more in the case of a hanging wall-scroll of middle and large size. Undeniably such resistance dominates our contemplation of hand-scrolls of considerable horizontal extension, sometimes reaching up to a dozen and more meters. All these different types of mountain-water-painting do not fit in with European overall observation and its reductionist *unifying capture* of iconic composition. By the way, the simultaneous beholding of an *iconic totality*, in other words of an aesthetic image in its unified composition and effect, should not be confounded with looking at some vista whose intention may well be to express the whole of the universe or the cosmos, by means of symbolic depiction. While that may be considered by some to be the very purpose of famous works such as Guo Xi's "Early Spring" (*Zao chun tu* 早春圖, 1082, Taipei: Palace Museum), as a matter of fact this large hanging scroll, in a crucial way, eludes any attempt of the eye to simultaneously grasp it in its totality. For what is depicted obviously breaks apart into several distinctive fields or focuses of contemplation, instead of introducing us to any homogeneous spatial scenery.

Instead of detached and synthetic intuition of an integrated iconic totality, an idea which has been so essential to European painting since the early Italian Renaissance, a mountain-water-painting essentially *disintegrates* into only loosely related or even just neighboring parts, and it enforces such disintegration and disruption upon our contemplation, too. Although such seemingly representational sceneries, at first glance, may be visually, that is spatially, congruent, as a matter of fact, the plural vistas covered by the whole image cannot be brought into coherence, in a systematic spatial way, by intuition. The image does not yield anything like the perspectival construction of the three-dimensional visual field, albeit our inadvertently perceiving it in this manner. Mountain-water-vistas essentially request a gaze from *nearby*. Our attention cannot help intermittently jumping from one point of interest to another. We are not able to embrace the whole prospect with the eye in any adequate manner, in other words unless we sacrifice significant contents of the image and dismiss just that very overall structure for the sake of which we originally tried to capture the image. Here aesthetic contemplation crucially relies on the "breathing" *temporality of the wandering eye*. Existential world disclosure, as produced by the image, cannot be rigorously related to what appears in it, through "aesthetic reception" or "hermeneutic deciphering". For the "breathing" *effectiveness* of the image relies on its "breathing" brush strokes, as well as its peculiar iconic depth, not on things shown. It is only by, as it were, "hyper-perceptual" and "anti-hermeneutic" means that a mountain-water-painting endows us with an access to *our* world, instead of disclosing a possible world-view which, by definition, would be obliged to remain alien to us and our own lifeworld. We are called upon to engage in the actual process of *this* world, just from the very site we find ourselves in, while looking at the image. Any part, any detail of a well-done picture may induce such an alteration in the spectator's being-in-the-world, the situational partiality of image perception leading the way right into *proximity to our things and places*. The sites looked at turn into our own existential

situatedness in the world. In the image we become aware of and encounter our own lifeworld. Eventually our attitude *vis-à-vis* the world has changed from distanced intuition into sort of “being with” and “dwelling in”, as soon as we have been contemplating the image in an aesthetically appropriate manner.

More than any other form, of course, the extended and disrupted panoramas of hand-scrolls are apt to clarify these essential characteristics of a mountain-water-painting. Due to their considerable lateral expanse, which display several sights that may be very loosely linked to each other, hand-scrolls have to be unrolled and looked at *successively*. They have literally to be “gone through”, piece by piece and step by step. These scroll-views simply cannot be perceived at a single glance, allowing the view to grasp the totality of some unified iconic configuration. In this case, aesthetic contemplation relies on kind of *rambling* through the iconic object, accelerated or slowed down at random. Although the succession of separate sections from right to left may be conventionally fixed, this still neither implies such a regulated and irreversible temporal order of perception like, for instance, when watching a movie, nor does it mean that there is any constraint to successive hermeneutical completion of meaning, by means of additive perception and accumulative comprehension, in the way generally demanded by a written text.

When mountain-water-paintings are contemplated in an aesthetically adequate manner, the main interest should not consist in a request for depicted things or denotatively symbolized significations. Neither is iconic appearance as such nor is the style of artistic creation what a connoisseur should look for. Iconic effectiveness is released by an empty “depth”, surfacing, as it were, from amidst iconic representation of depicted things, as well as by the dynamical “breathing” brushwork. Thus the spectator’s disposition towards his or her lifeworld is *transformed* by means of aesthetic contemplation, so as to let him or her engage in the actual process of the world, just from the very site the on-looker resides in while intuiting the picture.

However, only our “looking with the body”, instead of any merely perceptual reception and capturing of the iconic appearance, can accomplish such aesthetic triggering of self-transformation. Contemplation of pictures, too, amounts to *body mimesis*. We should “go with” the vivid “breathing”, re-enacting the vibrant brushwork within our bodily moving states, that is by means of bodily enhanced “emotions”. Through “performative contemplation”,⁴⁵ we “co-perform” the central features of the image, *assuming* and *perpetuating* its dynamics within our entire existence. During aesthetic reception, we *commit* ourselves in a *responsive* manner, as we link our bodily existence to that of the painter, as well as to the actual world surrounding us.

Although for sure there are paintings which apparently or overtly pretend to render some “real” scenery, the *performative momentum* crucial to mountain-water-

⁴⁵ Dieter Mersch has given the outlines of an analysis of this performativity of pictures in his *Ereignis und Aura. Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), S. 289-298.

painting does not result from its iconic content. In an astonishing way, the image does *not* make anything *visible*. It neither displays what has been observed previously by its creator, in a “realistic” manner, nor does it manifest absent things to a third person, being a mimetic substitute for something which actually has been perceived by somebody, nor does it express subjective feelings or reveal some metaphorical or even metaphysical meaning. The image does *not* take the spectator to some imaginary place in “nature”, as it often is presumed to do. The transforming power of the image arises at that very moment, when it succeeds to take the spectator just *back* to him- or herself.

Aesthetic contemplation of any detail of a mountain-water-vista may lead the way into our own perspectival being-situated, in relation to *our* world. Only a *fragmented gaze* which engages our *bodily situated perspectivity* in the face of the visible world will actually manage to set free the “breathing” effectiveness of the image and to disclose the real world for us, that is the very world we actually reside in. Instead of capturing some visible object in its integral structure and signification, we have on the contrary to *expose ourselves* to the image, in a very bodily way. By means of body mimesis we, on our part, have to get involved in the “breathing” lines in the image. We have to engage ourselves in its vividly vibrating “depth”.

We actually ought to “enter” the image, as many popular anecdotes would have it. Yet due to the above described constitution of the image, as well as due to the peculiar method of image production by means of body movement, any point of iconic appearance may be suitable for such an entrance, by means of bodily “breathing” correspondiveness. Hence the conventional metaphor of “reading a picture” is utterly misleading. It is only on a secondary level that the mountain-water-painting may contain some “message”, to be understood through close reading and hermeneutics. Yet the image, in the first place, is *not* composed of “signs”. It must be emphasized that the whole denotative meaningfulness of depiction is *subordinated* to a fundamental transformative effectiveness, exerted within and through the image. As soon as we actually *assume* in a responsive way what *happens to us*, through iconic apparition, the image, as it were, leaves behind all those things and sites it reveals to us, so as to open up, as it were, towards *this side of the picture*, that is towards *our own* existence.

These statements actually can be confirmed by textual evidence. Zong Bing’s theoretical foundation of the newly-born mountain-water-painting is built upon this conviction: Due to “affecting through effective correspondiveness” (*gǎn lei* 感類) which connects visible things such as real mountains and water with the “breathing” movedness of the world, in the same way *painted* mountains and water embody this effective correspondiveness. Images, too, *correspond with* the actual world. This makes a spectator, looking at a picture, reach the same *life union* with the world as when he or she gets affected by real things in nature. According to Zong Bing, *reality residing in the image* ought not to be taken as some denoted, symbolized, or metaphorically evoked, objectivity. The image is not a symbolical substitute for visible entities; rather it *opens up* towards effective reality as such. During aesthetic contemplation the iconic prospects reveal particular sites which actually *partake* in the real world. For the world

actually may *exist as an image*. Of course this conception of “the world as an image” has to be rigorously distinguished from any Schopenhauerian or even Heideggerian “world-view”, “world-representation”.

A painting is capable of effectively providing us with access to *our* reality. This pictorial access may even work better than our everyday encounter with things outside the painting. The superiority of iconic effectiveness over perception of natural objects, claimed by Zong Bing,⁴⁶ is due to “effective responsiveness”, as embodied by the painting in a concentrated “breathing” mode. The image *is* reality *before* vision; it *is* reality as lived-out—not as looked-upon. A mountain-water-painting made on an interior wall, a screen or a silk scroll, neither introduces some particular sight from nature into the spectator’s living room, nor does it intend to reveal anything like a “world-view” or some conceptual vision. It does not endeavor to imaginatively recollect some natural site, nor does it help us acquire knowledge about the world. What motivates aesthetic contemplation in Zong Bing’s case is the aspiration for a good life. In picture contemplation he seeks for a *life access* to the world. Hence he finally praises the advantages of “reclined wandering” amidst painted images, first mentioned by him:

While sitting here I thoroughly penetrate outward nature, not leaving the sprouting green fostered by heaven, and, solitary, I respond to uninhabited wilderness. [...] I just release the spiritual [relation] – who else has got a better way to release the spiritual [relation]?⁴⁷

Effective responsiveness as mediated by the image discloses the world and brings us into an essential relation to it. In fact, such effectiveness can hardly be equaled by anything external to the picture, by any reality remaining on the level of mere visual perception and sensation.

For the same reason, some six centuries later, Guo Xi states that, beyond wandering through an image, the spectator may aspire to “dwell” (*jū* 居) in it.⁴⁸ What this actually means is elucidated by Guo Xi in an extremely concise manner. First he concedes that aesthetic contemplation may affect our self-awareness and “mood” (*yì* 意), going beyond mere apprehension or understanding of what is revealed in the image:

The mood a painting provokes in the spectator is of the same kind as the picture contemplated – just like when one actually abides amidst these mountains. Such is awareness in painting, yet being external to the iconic vista.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ LB I, p. 584.

⁴⁷ LB I, p. 584: 坐究四荒，不違天勵之藂，獨應無人之野。[...] 暢神而已。神之所暢，熟有先焉。

⁴⁸ Cf. his *Lin quan gao zhi* 林泉高致 (*Sublime Mood Between Trees and Sources*), section “Shan shui xun 山水訓” (Instructions on Mountain and Water), LB I, p. 632.

⁴⁹ LB I, p. 635: 看此畫令人生此意，如真在此山中，此畫之景外意也。

There is not only some prospect displayed to vision. Transgressing mere perception of visible objects and apprehension of meaning, the intuitive impression an image produces on us *affects* our consciousness and mood. The image contemplated grasps our mental state and transforms it, thus letting us become aware of our *lifeworld*. In this liminal stage, detached picture contemplation has already turned into *proximity* to a world in which we actually *can* “abide” (*zài* 在) in self-awareness.

So far there still seems to remain a fundamental gap between the contemplating subject and the iconic object. However, as Guo Xi’s following statement clearly shows, an image may eventually lead to *practical consequences* which exceed imagination and self-awareness. An image looked at may actually *grant* a site for living. In the superior stage, Guo Xi definitely leaves mere vision and mental activity behind, postulating that aesthetic contemplation may involve our *acting*, by transforming our *existential*, that is *practical*, relation to the world. This more drastic self-transformation may be experienced like this:

The inner attitude and intention a painting brings about in the spectator is of the same kind as the picture contemplated – just like when one is actually setting out for that very place [revealed in the image]. Such is sublime perfection in painting, reaching beyond mental activity.⁵⁰

As the image eventually affects the spectator’s *intentionality*, it does not just produce a certain state of mind. The effectiveness of the image is such that we are made to really *wish to act*, according to what we perceive in the picture.

The perfective expression “to actually abide amidst” (*zhēn zài* 真在) from the first stance, by now, has undergone a most subtle shift. The core of the second statement has been changed into the apparently more cautious formulation of a future tense: “to actually set out for” (*jiāng zhēn jí* 將真即). At first glance, this “preliminary” or “inchoative” expression seems to indicate some less radical effect of picture contemplation: by now, we do not “abide” there, we have not yet arrived at the location we are beginning to head towards. However, quite the opposite is true. There can be no doubt that Guo Xi’s second stance is intended to overcome the first one, pushing the whole argument to its apogee. “Preparing to go”, in his eyes, must mark a higher achievement of aesthetic behavior than the prior “abiding in”. In fact, this sentence makes Guo Xi’s insight into what performativity in aesthetic contemplation actually signifies even clearer. The seemingly innocent, yet rhetorically extremely pertinent way in which Guo Xi expresses his thought, most accurately tackles the crucial point. The future tense precisely determines that very *existential* transformation that may befall the spectator, during the culmination of aesthetic contemplation. Leaving awareness and imagination altogether behind, he or she may be literally *put to motion* by the image. Instead of just *fancying* to find him or herself at some place in outer nature

⁵⁰ LB I, pp. 635-636: 看此畫令人起此心，如將真即其處，此畫之意外妙也。

which must remain absent and unreachable for the spectator, as it only gets evoked by an iconic “representation”, the iconic “as if”, by now he or she actually “will” (*jiāng* 將) “proceed towards” (*ji* 即) a site which is revealed by means of the image. Yet what kind of site is this?

To begin with, the place on display in the image had turned into a site which intrinsically depends not only on iconic appearances, but also on our awareness of them. In addition, this *iconic site* turns out to be our own *site of existence*. The site of the image has somehow stepped out towards us, so as to disclose our own *life environment*, in other words the very environment that our own existence is concerned with and engages in. The reason for this ultimate claim lies in the observation that a mountain-water-picture may effectively touch our *intentional disposition*, soliciting us to *act* within the real world. Thus there is an existential dimension inherent in our being affected by the image. The image’s “breathing” effectiveness leaves our perception and conscious awareness behind, as we are literally “attracted” by what we see. As we experience the corresponsive power of this attraction, the image not only connects with but rather shifts into our own embodied situation in the world. The world of mountains and water, though only appearing as an image, at first glance, is actually “present” with such intensity that it affects our *practical relation to place and time*. While looking at the image we cannot help but get involved and engage in the very *perspective* whence we accede the world as such. Yet this world is none other than “the world having become an image”.

Aesthetic picture contemplation provokes an engagement in and commitment to our *situatedness*. We get involved with the very situation we actually dwell in, *vis-à-vis* the surrounding world. The image offers us just that site we already belong to, yet by now turned into a “place to live in”. That means we not only become aware of, but actually *assume*, our own situatedness. The reason for this is that any aesthetic experience of our being-in-relation with an iconic site imperatively is dominated by a certain stance and perspective. In the case of mountain-water-painting, however, according to Guo Xi’s analysis, it is the aesthetic experience itself that actually puts us just into this very perspective of our intuiting the image. The image comes forward, it is *here* that it calls upon us, *such as we are*, prompting us to actually *do* something, *viz.* “to set out for...”.

During the aesthetic experience and by means of it, we re-discover or re-attain our existential *orientation* in and towards *our* world. As Guo Xi states, such transformative effectiveness is what the “sublime perfection” (*miào 妙*) of the image consists in. Of course, this disclosure of our being-situated in a “surrounding world” (*Umwelt*), in the strong sense Heidegger has attributed to this mode of being, necessarily abandons any imaginary location “represented” in the image, as well as our imaginative awareness of such a place of merely iconic presence. Anything which occurs to *us*, of course, must be considered as being “external to the vista” (*jǐng wài* 景外). Yet the transformational outcome of aesthetic picture contemplation eventually marks an even higher degree of “exteriority”, as the image eventually turns into a

foundational site for our own temporally structured being-towards-the-world. Beyond contemplation or apprehension, we are brought to engage anew with our own existence which has to be lived-out in a temporal manner. Hence the ultimate transformation effectuated through aesthetic contemplation is very pertinently claimed to lie even “outside mental activity” (*yì wài* 意外).⁵¹ This is the point where aesthetics turns into ethics.

On the grounds of an occidental “metaphysics of presence”, a mimetic representation may, under certain conditions, reproduce some absent reality with such a high degree of likeness and “realism” that the outcome eventually leads to confusion between iconic and actual presence. As a result, “the spectator, as it were, merges into the depicted image-world and believes to be at the site depicted”.⁵² However, the effectiveness of the mountain-water-image is rigorously different from any such experience of immersion. The transformational event described by Guo Xi may better be conceived of in terms close to the Heideggerian “establishing a world” (*eine Welt aufstellen*).⁵³ During the aesthetic experience, the “worlding” of the actual world *occurs to us*. As soon as we are *affected* by the image, as we are brought to *desire* what we see and *induced to move* towards it, we actually are putting *our own* world-open structure of existence into practice. Mountain-water-painting obviously frustrates all those prevailing attempts which either would reduce it to figures of mimetic representation and literary metaphor, with respect to some actual “Chinese scenery”, or point at a merely psychological suggestiveness of such images, being imaginary “substitutes” for some idealized reclusion in nature. A mountain-water-painting does *not* deliver any iconic surrogate for reality. On the contrary, our own site of existence and our own dwelling, that is reality in its most real and most eminent mode of being, is at stake, in this genre of painting.

According to Guo Xi’s testimony, the point where the coalescence occurs

⁵¹ Besides a couple of other masterpieces, the already mentioned *Fishing Boat on a Wintry River* (*Han jiang diao ting* 寒江釣艇) attributed to Li Cheng 李成 (10th century, Taipei: Palace Museum) may be considered as being particularly apt to induce such a thoroughgoing transformation, affecting the spectator’s existence, his or her being-in-the-world. As we contemplate the fisherman in the foreground, dwelling in utmost tranquility amidst wintry trees, steep cliffs and an enormous waterfall, apparently frozen to blank emptiness, we may get the vivid impression that this hermit is just our own “iconic avatar”, so to speak. However, instead of nourishing a desire to live where he lives, we may rather vividly experience his “dwelling” as such, becoming aware of his dwelling amidst a “surrounding world” as such, so as to get into a mood of tranquil dwelling within just a similar surrounding world. We eventually may form the intention to actually become “dwellers” at the very site where we already find ourselves, contemplating the image.

⁵² Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz*, S. 107: „Der Betrachter taucht sozusagen in die dargestellte Bildwelt ein und glaubt selbst am Ort der Darstellung zu sein.“

⁵³ Heidegger, *Holzwege*, S. 30.

between image-world and actual world, is *not* located in some artificial iconic realm; the shift comes about strictly “outside the image” and “outside imagination”: it takes place within our own *life performance*. A mountain-water-picture aims at *ethical transformation*, not at imaginative immersion. Instead of re-presenting reality through some “vision of the world”, the painted image, by means of iconic corresponsiveness, actually *calls for* reality. The image *is* reality as such, it *is* the world, and the world *is* the image. This key point marks an essential digression from what European art history, history of ideas, as well as picture theory in particular, are most familiar with.

At last, only the approach of transformative aesthetics, the idea that iconic “disclosure of the world” actually refers to the spectator’s *own* lifeworld, not to any objectified world beyond the image or the site of its being contemplated, only this idea as described above makes fully intelligible that “strange” Chinese habit of persons other than the artist subsequently applying seals and inscriptions onto the iconic field itself. Doesn’t any “world view” presumably displayed by the image necessarily get altered or even destroyed by such rude interventions? Yet aesthetic contemplation may provoke such kind of “interaction” between the spectator and the image, just because both of them actually *belong to the same reality*. While later inscriptions commonly are considered as being guided by aesthetic motivations or the vanity of collectors, after all that has been discussed above, such activities in fact make it obvious that, in ancient China, a spectator has to quite bodily *engage with* and *take possession of* the image-world disclosed to him or her via aesthetic contemplation, just because the latter is immediately interlaced with the spectator’s own lifeworld. Do not such active, creative responses to the appeal of the image indeed testify to the strong effectiveness of the painted picture? The responsive interfering with the pictorial object, by means of adding seals and poetic lines to the iconic object itself, in fact accomplishes what performative contemplation of the image has initiated: this fashion establishes an actual *life situation* within the world which encompasses the image and the pictorial object, as well as a socio-historical community between the artist and all other spectators in the past, present, and future. Such intrusive acts, meddling with the iconic field itself, provide the above discussed existential effectiveness of works of art with a most prominent testimony. By way of opening up an intersubjective, diachronic, or even inter-medial—as it implies the exchange between painting, poetry, the art of brush writing and the art of seal carving—dimension of founding a community between historical persons, what thus manifests itself, within the image, is just the very *encounter with the real world*, as it gets provoked and fostered by iconic effectiveness.

Although severely interfering with the composition and configuration of the original image, such conventions of connoisseurship obviously do no harm to iconic effectiveness. On the contrary, every additional act—inscription, as well as stamping—rather makes evident to what extent the image *primarily* is meant to convey a vivid *appeal*, a request for an active response. Any spectator should actively *accede to* the perspectival situatedness brought about by the image and ultimately merging with just his or her own situation in the real world. Any spectator, after experiencing such

an existential transformation of his or her existence, may leave *responsive traces*, such as seals or inscriptions, in an image which, by now, has turned into reality itself. By responding in this committed and active manner to the appeal of the image, the spectator actually *has* accepted and assumed that very request. In doing so, the spectator in turn also appeals to future spectators, inviting them to indulge in the same effectiveness of the image, too, by means of aesthetic contemplation. By existentially engaging with the image, via the creative act of inscribing on it, a spectator actually proves that his or her entering the world disclosed in the image means no less than his or her actually being brought to “dwell” in the socio-historical lifeworld as such.

Concluding remarks

To summarize the preceding observations, it may be stated that in pre-modern China painting and aesthetic contemplation are both performed in a *responsive* manner. A painter enhances the “breathing” brush stroke by his or her bodily “breathing”, thus striving at a kind of a transfer of the world’s “breathing” onto the image. By means of a peculiar bodily painting technique, effective *corresponsiveness* gets incorporated right into the structure of the image. Instead of aiming at mimetic depiction, meaningful world-interpretation, or personal expression, an ancient Chinese painter seeks to make reality’s *movedness* perpetuate itself in the pulsating vibrations of lines, washes and shades, as well as in a void iconic depth which lets all appearances vaguely float *between* emergence and withdrawal. As to mountain-water-pictures in particular, these main iconic constituents initiate a vivid *corresponsiveness*, mediating between the image, the world, and the spectator’s gaze. As a consequence, the spectator, even before grasping any depicted content or iconic meaning, gets affected in his or her bodily “breathing” relation to the real world. Contemplating the image *transforms* the spectator on an existential level. He or she is induced to take existence itself back into its very *situatedness* within a life environment. The world as shown or rather as actualized by the image is nothing other than the world the spectator actually dwells and lives in.

A pre-modern Chinese mountain-water-painting does not intend to show or unveil anything. Instead, by displaying, as it were, quite conventional prospects, it primarily aims at *establishing reality*. A precondition for achieving this effect by aesthetic, that is iconic, means, of course, is the spectator’s *bodily engaging* with the appeal of the image, which is his or her responding by way of getting involved his or her entire *existence*, right in the aesthetic behavior as such. For this reason, aesthetic practices can only be understood as pertaining to *ethics*. Any reduction of aesthetic practices to mere perceptive acts or apprehension of meaning is not sufficient. Such conventional approaches must fall short of the very essentials of pre-modern Chinese aesthetics. Only an *aesthetics of transformation*, transgressing beyond the limitations of a theory of artistic production or an aesthetics of reception, can yield insight into this non-European sphere of aesthetic behavior.

A pre-modern Chinese mountain-water-picture may be called “performative” in the sense that, mediated by intuition of meaningful appearances, the vibrantly “breathing” traces of the brush, as well as iconic depth, both induce a peculiar mode of “inconspicuous apparition”. As a result, the image provokes an *event*, viz. the *existential transformation* of the spectator. This effect essentially transcends any merely perceptive or even aesthetic “receptiveness”, with all its inherent psychic and mental work. As a dynamic power flows through the image, the visual constitution of what appears to our senses unfolds an *effectiveness* reaching beyond vision and intuition, as it corresponsively inter-acts with our being-in-the-world. Contrary to what classical European aesthetics, and the occidental tradition of landscape painting in particular, would have us believe, the images of pre-modern Chinese mountain-water-painting are “performative” in much the same way as the temporal configurations performing arts draw their life from. Those images can only be perceived by way of corresponsive *body mimesis*. They imperatively require an aesthetic mode of encountering art which is akin to music or dance, instead of merely being related to vision or comprehension.

Finally, at least in some eminent cases and to a considerable extent, it may be stated that an image *is* reality itself, that it can even be *more real* than objectified everyday reality.⁵⁴ Our “dwelling in the image” and, more generally speaking, our “living in images”, by now, can be understood more thoroughly, as kind of an “existential” (*Existenzial*) in the Heideggerian sense. In fact, this idea subverts the usual order in which we conceive of our relation to the world. Or rather, the common hierarchy between the ethical and the aesthetical, by now, ought to be inverted: As a means of establishing our existential “being-in-the-world”, our vision, or rather our aesthetic contemplation, essentially delivers an ethical dimension. Of course, “ethical” here should be taken in a broad Heideggerian sense of our being situated in the world and acting together with and towards the Other, instead of just alluding to moral attitudes and moral behavior. Thus we do not “dwell” in a given world, so as to then, only *afterwards*, when encountering images, enter into the realm of the imaginary. This entering the image would be no more than a mere extension of our primordial “dwelling” disposition, as though “dwelling in the image” were meant in a merely figurative or metaphorical sense. Quite the opposite is true: our “living in images” has to be considered as an *indispensable mode of performing our existence*. Outside the realm of the imaginary, without images, we just cannot “exist” at all: outside the image there is no world; our being-in-the-world is intimately related to the imaginary. We do not “enter” at random, as it were, into some image, so as to just feel like being “inside” the image. It is rather the other way around: iconicity englobes and pervades our “living” and “dwelling” as a whole, right from the start. “Dwelling” in images

⁵⁴ Maldiney seems to share this opinion, developed by him with respect to the painting *Six Persimmons* (*Liu shi* 六柿) by Muqi 牧谿 (1210?-1269?), as well as mountain-water-painting in general (Maldiney, *Ouvrir le rien. L'art nu*, pp. 73/85/92).

and pictures should be conceived of as mediating our being-towards-the-world in an encompassing manner. As soon as we actually “live” and “dwell”, we perform such dwelling in a way which is, as it were, *haunted* by images and the imaginary. Hence it is nothing other than the image as such that lets our being-towards-the-world become sort of a “dwelling”. Therefore, instead of saying that, as humans, “we have images” it is more appropriate to claim: in our existence and openness towards the world we are “being held into” the world *by images*. In a way images *are having us*.

Dwelling in the Image: How Should We Look at Pre-modern Chinese Mountain-Water-Paintings?

Mathias OBERT

This paper investigates how ancient Chinese mountain-water-paintings actually work and aesthetically appropriate ways of responding to such pictures. Since antiquity, western aesthetics, which has now become global in scope, has focused on questions concerning the symbolic depiction of real or imaginary objects, visual perception, personal expression, and hermeneutics of the image. In order to complete these perspectives, this paper is concerned with the ethical signification of works of art, as well as with the ethical dimension of aesthetic behavior. What is argued for is an “aesthetics of transformation”. Broadly speaking, we do not only “dwell” and “live” in the realm of the imaginary; we also “live” in artistic images. Beyond mere contemplation, we also engage with artistic images in existentially decisive ways. The aesthetic experience of ancient Chinese mountain-water-painting, in particular, is apt to disclose to the spectator situational access to the real world he or she is actually living in. The real-life situation referred to by a picture should not be conflated with some purely imaginary world perceived in the picture, as such a world would necessarily be restricted to the deceptive and fictitious presence and validity of a mere iconic “as if”. By examining the aesthetic practices of pre-modern China, combined with a critical study of art-theoretical text sources, this article makes the following claim: an eminent mountain-water-picture actually leads the spectator back into his or her own lifeworld, transforming mere intuition or aesthetic contemplation into the existentially relevant disposition of “dwelling”. The ethical result of aesthetics thus consists in a life relation to the surrounding world. This disposition of “being-towards-the-world” is enacted by the spectators at the very site and in the very situation of their looking at the picture. A detailed analysis of the peculiar structure and characteristics of the image, the act of painting, as well as ways and goals of aesthetic contemplation, supports discussion concerning what exactly is meant by such an existential “dwelling in the image”.

Keywords: mountain-water-painting aesthetic behavior picture contemplation
aesthetics of transformation

居於圖像中：如何觀看古代山水畫？

宋灝

本文的關懷在於探究古代山水畫的運作模式究竟為何，而且我們應當以哪種美學態度與美學工夫來應對山水畫。依循長達幾千年支配著歐洲的思想傳統，美學一直以來聚焦於造形藝術如何象徵或再現某些現實物和想像物，並探討諸種視覺、個人表達、圖像詮釋等方面相關問題。為了彌補這種美學現況，本文採取「轉化美學」的立場，來闡明藝術作品以及美學工夫為何都包含一種倫理學向度。人類不但「居處」、「生活」於想像界之中，而且人類也「生活」在藝術的意象之中。我們不僅觀照畫像，而且我們甚至以指定我們整個存在的方式被其所感動。與其說藝術品透過假象將觀者引到某種僅具「宛如」、欺騙式的境界，倒不如說尤其是對於山水畫的美學體驗足以給觀者在自身處境中開闢通往其實際所生活其中之現實世界的甬道。本文探索古代中國美學工夫的基本模式並對相關畫論資料進行批判性研究，以便證成核心主張，揭示至少傑出的山水畫作品如何將單純的凝視、靜觀轉換成一種「居處」上的生活態度，也就是成功地將觀者實際引回至其本身所在的生活世界。美學工夫的倫理學成果在於，經由美學體驗觀者可以為自己實質地奠定與周圍世界的生活關聯。藝術體驗所開啓的這個世界關聯其實被觀者在其正在觀畫之所在和處境具體「活出來」。透過深入分析重要畫論資料的方式本文闡明山水畫的特殊結構及其獨有的圖像身分、作畫的創作模式及美學觀照的目標和模式等議題，來詳細討論「居於圖像中」對人的存在所具有的意義。

關鍵詞：山水畫 美學工夫 觀畫 轉化美學

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