

THE CHINESE PAINTER-POET AND AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPT OF REPRESENTATION

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Introduction

After over a century of theatrical efforts to overcome the long tradition of mimesis, it is safe to assert that a new tradition of non-mimetic theatre has secured a place in Western - if I may use this crude and controversial term – theatre history. However, I find that the grammar of the existing spectatorship still remains largely within the realm of mimetic traditions and lacks the capacity to embrace the various theatre genres of today. Alternative lenses and frames of discussion are needed, and I propose that a culturally distinct frame will open up possibilities of perceiving contemporary performances in different ways; more importantly, it will allow us to more effectively say the things we want to say but which the existing frame of spectatorship fails to offer.

In this paper I will turn to Imperial China, and to paintings to provide this frame. I choose to examine paintings rather than theatre for specific reasons. Firstly, the Western concept of mimesis in theatre is seen as being strictly related to the verbal or textual aspects of the drama rather than the performed spectacle. Despite recent changes to mimetic traditions, Aristotle's claim that "tragedy does not depend upon public performance and actors" (*Poetics* vi) is seen as valid even today when practitioners and academics alike argue that the essence of theatre lies in, contrary to Aristotle's words, performance and actors. Davis and Postlewait's assertion that "theatre is only acceptable if it acknowledges and strives to overcome its own confinement within the mimetic traditions of performance" (14) only exposes how strong the tradition of mimesis is rooted in Western theatre scholarship. Such a frame is therefore insufficient to fully appreciate theatres that work beyond mimetic principles, and again, a different lens is needed.

Turning to paintings as a lens through which to look at theatre enables us to focus on the extra-textual aspects of performance.

Secondly, looking at painting, a strictly visual genre, directs us to the issue of ways of seeing, which is, after all, fundamental to the theatre. There is nothing new about stating that ways of seeing govern ways of artistic construction. The fact that this phrase is almost a platitude, however, cannot undermine its importance in understanding art works. Looking at Chinese paintings enables one to look into the unique Chinese ways of seeing that affected their artistic creation as well as reception of these artistic works, as well as to see what different concepts of representation prevailed. Focusing on landscape and literati paintings of the Sung era¹, I will in this paper examine one aspect: the subjectivity of the artist. I will compare it with features of Classical Greek paintings, and Plato's attack on the visual arts in relation to mimesis. Through this discussion I hope to propose an alternative concept of representation with which to look at non-mimetic art works of today.

Visualising the Void

The Chinese, as did Plato, identified the painter with the poet. However, while both equated the two artists the fundamental attitude towards art and the appreciation of their works differ significantly. For Plato, the only person capable of seeing beyond external reality and approaching Truth was the philosopher, who was free from unreliable senses and used intellect alone to achieve this goal.² And, pairing the poet and the painter under the umbrella of mimesis he attacks the poet specifically for this inherent condition:

¹ The Sung dynasty was a unique period during which what is called the Sung literati circle was established and was in full bloom. It was also during this time that idealistic landscape paintings reached its peak both in creative process and reception. These two genres may easily be said to epitomise the visual rendering of the unique Chinese way of seeing. By looking at a painting of this era I will discuss the underlying attitude towards representation and ways of seeing in Chinese aesthetics.

² The most obvious reference to this can be found in *Phaedo* 66a in which Plato argues: "Then he would reach the purest truth in this procedure who approached each thing with the intellect itself alone, not bringing in sight to aid his thinking, nor dragging in any other sense to supplement his reason: he who should try to track down each item of reality, alone by itself, in its pure essence, by using pure thought, alone by *its* self – disregarding, as far as was possible, eyes and ears, and practically all the body, on the ground that it caused confusion."

... the only thing he[the poet] knows anything about is imitation. The result is that what he has to say seems excellently said (...). Such is the power of bewitchment naturally possessed by tools he uses. And yet a poet's words, when stripped of the colours provided by his art, and taken by themselves – well I think you know what they're like (*Republic* 601a-b).

The painter and the poet in China were also identified with each other. Sullivan is absolutely correct in saying that “[p]ainting and poetry were two ways of saying the same thing” (80). But whereas for Plato the sole device to reach the Truth was the intellect, for Chinese philosophers this was of little use in revealing the Tao – roughly the Chinese counterpart to the Platonic concept. The way to approach the Tao was emptying oneself rather than accumulating knowledge, to “feel the workings of the Universal Spirit” (Yee 73). It was a matter of the mind rather than reason, meditation rather than intellectual training. Plato argued that all that the painter was capable of seeing and depicting was an object twice removed from reality (Truth); for the Chinese, external realities displayed “the beauty of the Tao through their [outward] forms,” and the spirit “resides in forms and stimulates all kinds of life, and truth enters into reflections and traces.” A great painter was able to see this, and therefore, one “who can truly describe things skilfully will also truly achieve this” (Bush and Shih 36). The act and process of painting was therefore a search for the Tao through paint, and although painters dealt with capricious, visible phenomena the ultimate goal was the unchanging, invisible, whether called principle, spirit or Tao. Thus it would be incorrect to understand the act of painting a world of the physical realm as an effort to make a life-like representation of the visually perceived phenomena. Rather, it must be seen as a visual conveyance of a space for the mind.

Great philosophers of China, unlike Plato, very rarely spoke of aesthetics or the arts either in support or against. Nonetheless, for the above reason painters in China, like poets, were often regarded as equal to sages rather than mere artisans, and in the case of landscape and literati paintings this tendency was much stronger. Painting was not a process of mechanical imitation of external phenomena but a physical process in search of the spiritual. To Chinese painters this was not very different from the Taoist process of quiet reception. The

following lines by T'ang critic Chu Ching-hsüan (ca. 840) address the position of the painter in China:

I have heard that men of old said that a painter is a sage. (...) As for conveying the spiritual (*i-sheng*) while determining the material (*ting-chih*), when the light ink falls upon white silk that which has physical appearance is established, and that which is formless is created. (...) If subtleties penetrate to the spiritual, then their quintessence will arrive at the sage-like (*T'ang-ch'ao ming-hua lu* [Record of Famous Painters of the T'ang Dynasty], Bush and Shih 48-49).

This represents a huge difference compared to the status of poets of Plato's Greece; but the significance of identifying the painter (and the poet) with the sage is much greater, and this relates to the creative realm of the artist. That the painter is not a mere imitator means that he is much less subordinated to the objects of his painting: they are not an end but a device, a trigger to the journey into the spiritual world. Therefore the artistic process relies solely on the subjectivity of the artist, and endowed with the mental status of the sage the painter looks into his self – his emotions, his feelings – through the scene in front of him and conveys his emotional response on silk. If Chinese painting is a representational art, it is less a detached representation of appearance than an intimate representation of feeling.

This is why so many landscape painters of China ceaselessly emphasised that “the value of landscape painting lay in its capacity to make the viewer *feel* as if he were really *in* the place depicted” (Cahill 35. Italics mine). This is clearly different from providing the viewer with an illusion of merely looking at the real place, for what matters here is more than the eyes.

This “capacity to make the viewer feel” is possible due to what Ortiz calls poetic space, which the artists create in most of such paintings. As he explains, “[o]bscurity and hidden meaning are an important property of poetry. In poetry and in poetic painting, the obscure is sublime, by virtue of the pain it induces by making one strain to see that which cannot be comprehended” (123). Ortiz is referring specifically to poetic painting, i.e., paintings accompanied by poems as colophons. However, this commentary can be applied to

most landscape and literati paintings with or without poetic colophons, and a close look at Liang Kai's *Poet Strolling on a Marshy Bank* will clarify what I mean.

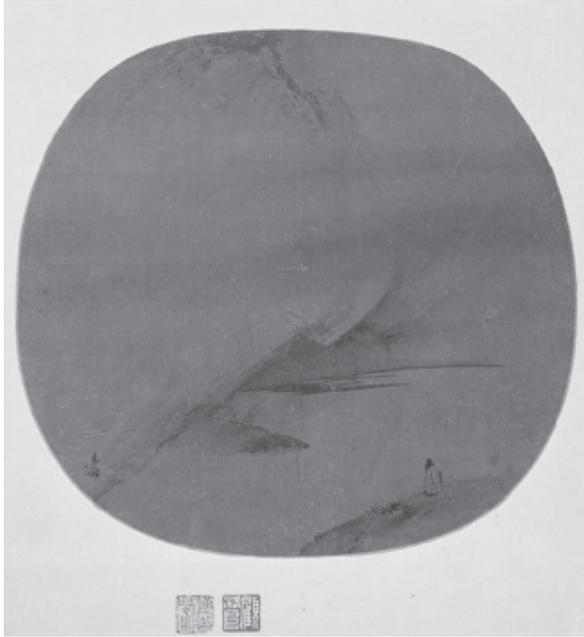


Illustration credit: Liang Kai (fl. ca. 1201-1204), *Poet Strolling on a Marshy Bank*. Round fan mounted as an album leaf; ink on silk; 22.9 x 24.3cm. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The reproduction in this paper being only slightly smaller than the original work, it would be safe to say that there is little difference in appreciation. Looking closely at the painting, we can see that not much detail has gone into its composition. But for the bottom right and middle part of the picture, which indicate the secular elements of the work, the overall painting is almost bare. From these 'naturalistic' representations one can assume that the rest of the painting suggests a river and mountain. Most of the mountain is hidden behind the clouds, and there is not one stroke of ink to even suggest the flowing waters of the river. The clouds, too, are only assumed to be clouds due to one's viewing habits – the preconception that what blocks the

mountains in such paintings are normally clouds – rather than from the actual visual description. If one lets go of this trained assumption, one is let into another layer of meaning of these two elements, and this corresponds perfectly with Ortiz’s view of poetic space. By concealing instead of straining to illustrate, this small painting gains the same sense of magnitude as would a huge hanging scroll. It is like the effect of the great Sung poet Su Shih’s quatrain *Account of a Visit to Lu Mountain* which expresses the immensity of Lu Mountain with just sixteen Chinese characters:

See it stretched before you in a ridge;
 from the side it becomes a peak,
no matter from where I look at the mountain
 it is never exactly the same.
I cannot tell the true face
 of Lu Mountain,
which is simply because I myself
 am here within the mountain. (Owen 622)

Both the painter and the poet reveal the impossibility of capturing the entirety of the mountains either through images or words, therefore easily persuading the viewer and the reader to give up the hope of gaining the picture in its apparent entirety. Through this resignation, both on the part of the artist and the viewer/reader, the presence of the mountain intensifies. As Heidegger discovered through his dialogue with Chang Tzu, “the truth of Being is at the same time a two-fold movement: Unconcealment and Concealment. That is to say, when Being reveals itself, it conceals itself. Consequently, there is in principle no total and complete disclosure of things” (Chan 10).

Other than revealing the ‘Being’ of the mountains through concealment, the cloud gains another function. No longer remaining a simple imitation of ‘real’ clouds it is transformed into an empty space for the viewer’s mind to roam. It is the same for the river. The lines which divide the river from the cloud and the banks at the bottom left part of the painting blur and disappear on the other side, and it is no longer possible to distinguish between the water, the cloud, the sky or the mountain, and the space becomes an infinite void. This empty space was for Sung painters more than an interval between visual

objects. It was a material thing, “the perception of which could enhance one’s understanding of both the outside world and the self” (Ortiz 78). And, landscape being understood as the “gateway to the Void” (Bush and Murck 141), this additional massive void provides the beholder with a wider access to the ‘principles’ of each thing depicted.

This is possible due to a concept shared in all aspects of Chinese art, *anshi* (暗示, aesthetic suggestiveness), a concept which, according to Gu, “comes very close to the postmodern conceptions of unlimited semiosis and ‘openness’” (491). Focusing on poetry, Gu describes how the essential point in suggestiveness is that “it must have the potential of leading the imagination to go from small to large, from things near at hand to things afar, from conciseness to complexity, from limited categories to unlimited implications” (492). Suggestiveness, therefore, is inherently expansive in character. This is significant in two ways, particularly with regard to representation.

First, the concept of representation in Chinese aesthetics acknowledges from the very beginning its limitations; precisely because of this recognition it becomes possible for representation to function as a bridge between what can be represented and what cannot, the physical world and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible. Due to this attitude towards representation in Chinese art, unlike that of the West, the distinction between illusion and reality was of little concern. One can in fact trace the roots of this attitude in the fundamental way of Chinese thinking, which “foregrounds the element of time as now” (Yuan 136). It may seem odd that the notion of time should come into the discussion at this stage, but in Chinese thought the notion of time, space and the human experience are inseparable, and are thus directly connected to the discussion on the relationship between the world and representation. Time, which in Chinese thought is essentially subjective, “‘spreads out’ to more than one possible world. (...) The moments in subjective time (...) can exist in different possible worlds simultaneously” (136). If one considers the experience of looking at paintings, this is hardly difficult to understand. Furthermore, such an expansive concept of the subjective, present time points to a more fundamental attitude towards truth, which differs

significantly from the Western tradition. Yuan summarises this lucidly when he writes:

The aim of Chinese logical reasoning is not to represent any universal truth, but to point out (*zhi*, 指) a particular-world-related truth, or, in other words, the harmony of relations among particulars in a particular field at a single moment (137).

This line of thought is evident in Chinese paintings. One must then put particular focus on the fact that what is important in Chinese thought and aesthetics is less representing the universal truth *per se* than *relations*. This then leads to the second significance: the expansive characteristic necessarily implies that the work in itself is incomplete. Be it painting or poetry, the suggestiveness of representation is ultimately directed at the receiver, and it is only with the full participation of the receiver that the work is complete. Participation is, of course, the active relationship between the work and the perceiving subject. Representation in Chinese art, therefore, does what anti-mimetic art in the West only strives to do, by contributing to the participatory aspect of the process of perception.

The viewer is thus endowed with the freedom to picture in his mind as many layers of mountains and curves of the river as he wishes and wander through them to his heart's content. Just as the poet Lu You (1125-1209) recalled that “[a]ll day was like travelling through a painting” (Ortiz 5), the viewer looking at the painting would share the experience of ‘strolling on a marshy bank’ and much more.

Chinese painting is, therefore, like poetry written with images. Moreover, it is an intentionally uncompleted poetry leaving space for the viewer to fill in his or her perceptions and ideas. Although the painting denies the viewer the naturalistic depiction of the scenery, precisely through this refusal the painting invites the beholder to immerse himself in the feelings that nature in reality arouses. Because of this intentional concealment the viewer is provided with a blank page on which he, now as a poet or painter in his mind, can paint or sing his own images and emotions.

Although Plato's concept of mimesis and the painter/poet did not allow what Chinese artists took as an obligation, i.e., capturing

the invisible through the visible, there was a stage in Western history when this was viewed in a different context. This was during the Renaissance when the concept of the painter and the arts went through a significant transformation. In some ways like the aesthetic tradition of China, during this era it was believed that painting and the arts could, despite the aggressive Platonic stance asserting the contrary, reveal Truth that was normally not grasped by man. This understanding led to the raising of the status of the painter to a level similar to that of the sage-like painters and poets of China, and it was due to the Neo-Platonic view of the Universe and an altered understanding of man and the artist that such an attitude could take hold. According to Neo-Platonists the Universe was “a vast symphony of correspondences in which each level of existence points to the level above,” thus “by virtue of this interrelated harmony [one] object can signify another and [by] contemplating a visible thing we can gain insight into the invisible world” (Gombrich 152). In order to understand how this works one needs also to have an understanding of the position of man in the Neo-Platonic system, which, like the universe, “composed of the material world (nature) and the immaterial realm (...), is composed of body and soul, the body being a form inherent in matter, the soul a form only adherent to it” (Panofsky 136).³ The soul in turn is divided into the Higher and Lower soul, the Higher comprising Reason and Mind. While Reason is related to the bodily experiences and needs, the Mind participates in the *intellectus divinus*. The Neo-Platonic man is thus, as Ficino puts it, “a rational soul participating in the divine mind, employing a body,” (qtd. in Panofsky 137) and “the Mind, ‘seeing with an incorporeal eye,’ (...) thus transforms itself into a ‘tool of the divine’” (140).

Here we can see that sight is once again the issue in determining man, as it was in Plato’s discussions. It seems quite clear that the Neo-Platonists not only inherited Plato’s stance - that the gods granted to man not only the physical level of sight but also that of inner vision, enabling him to see the Truth - but also reinforced it, sight becoming “by virtue of its speed and immediacy a favoured symbol of higher knowledge” (Gombrich 147), and this tendency was also to be seen vividly in the field of painting. While Plato detested the painter

³ The following description of the soul and the Neo-Platonic man is also based on this reference.

because he deemed the painter to be only capable of the physical realm of sight and blind to the realm of the soul, for the Neo-Platonists the painter was endowed with “prophetic powers to see beauty” that could “help the faithful to see the spiritual realm” (154).

Leonardo da Vinci was also one who ceaselessly praised the faculty of sight of the painter and his superiority to any other artists in this respect. Heralding sight as “lord of the senses” (22) he equals painting to philosophy:

If you scorn painting, which is the sole imitator of all manifest works of nature, you will certainly be scorning a subtle invention, which with philosophical and subtle speculation considers all manner of forms (...) Truly this is science, the legitimate daughter of nature, (...) to be more correct, we should say the granddaughter of nature (...) because all visible things have been brought forth by nature and it is among these that painting is born. Therefore we may justly speak of it as the granddaughter of nature and as the kin of god (13).

However, although Neo-Platonic painters and thinkers sought to capture the invisible realm of the soul through vision, there is still a significant difference between the attitude of the Neo-Platonists and the Chinese. This difference lies in the Neo-Platonic supremacy of sight. As Gombrich explains, even the claim of the prophetic poet is “made in analogy to the artist, (...) the deviser of visual symbols” (157). This attitude of the Neo-Platonists is extended to the physical realm of the senses, and da Vinci, stressing how the eye is the least delusive of the senses, for this very reason argues the superiority of painting over poetry:

Painting presents its essence to you in one moment through the faculty of vision by the same means as the *impressiva*⁴ receives the objects in nature, and thus it simultaneously conveys the proportional harmony of which the parts of the whole are composed, and delights the senses. Poetry presents the same thing but by a less noble means than by the eye, conveying it more confusedly to the *impressiva* and describing the

⁴ According to Kemp, this is “Leonardo’s own term for a ‘receptor of impressions’ which he saw as a staging-house between the sensory nerves and the *senso comune*” (da Vinci 313).

configurations of the particular objects more slowly than is accomplished by the eye. The eye is the true intermediary between the objects and the *imprensiva*, which immediately transmits with the highest fidelity the true surfaces and shapes of whatever is in front of it (23).

Unlike Chinese landscape and literati painters, who were required to look into their minds as well as observing nature in the process of painting and therefore took painting as a process of near meditation, da Vinci, while elevating the sense of sight to the divine, also imbues it with a strong scientific quality. For him, it was through the perfection of the visible realm of painting that the invisible realm of the divine and of Truth could be approached. These two qualities fused together, and the painting thus completed provides the spectator with a glimpse into the world of Higher Truth. This is the paradox of Neo-Platonic painting and sight: for although it was now accepted that the painter through his art could convey what Plato had declared impossible, it was still through an elaborate representation of the visible that this was achieved. The strong belief in the 'in'sight of the painter conversely reinforced the visual aspect of painting.

This induces two effects which are significantly different from Chinese paintings. One is that it maintained the mimetic tradition of Classical Greece and the formulation that to see was to understand. The second effect is the consequence of the first, which is that the finished art work was a complete one, and left the viewer in the same position of passive spectatorship. Thus, as in Classical Greek paintings, the element of intimate feeling both of the artist and the spectator that is so important in Chinese paintings is here largely neglected. The faculty of sight in man and particularly the vision of the painter may have gained its just position, but subjectivity had little place to lodge.

Conclusion

In Chinese aesthetics, unlike the tradition of mimesis, there was never a belief that the world could be understood by seeing. Like Plato the Chinese were very aware of the limits of physical sight, but while for this reason Plato condemned the painter and the poet as being obsessed with appearances the Chinese sought ways in which to convey what

could not be grasped by the naked eye via visual media. Instead of choosing observation of the world and thus producing a division between the “I” and the “Other” they chose an organic contact in which there was no clear separation of the man from the rest of the world.

Such an attitude toward ways of seeing led to significantly different ways of artistic creation and reception. Rather than straining to deliver life-like representations of the visible world they endeavoured to deliver what they believed to be its “principles,” the Truth that was not granted to mere physical sight. In this process the subjectivity of the artist was actively involved, and it became one of the core factors of the creative part of painting. Empty spaces and intentional blurring or blinding of a clear view of the chosen subjects were thus a common element in paintings, which on one hand revealed the impossibility of grasping Truth through sight and on the other hand created a space in which the subjectivity of the artist could reside. The different attitude to ways of seeing and the emphasis on the element of feeling leads also to differences in the role of the spectator. Unlike the ‘mimetic’ viewer, the viewer of Chinese landscape and literati paintings was not in the ‘comfortable’ position of passive reception. Just as the painter had to see beyond what is seen in order to ‘see’ the invisible, the spectator too was demanded to go through a process of active seeing. Just as the painter’s intimate feelings and sensations were imbued in his art work the spectator too was provided with a path through which to travel beyond the painted scenery and into the invisible world, and an empty space in which to paint this own emotional response. The spectator’s role was, in this sense, one of re-creating.

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