

# *Recognizing the Impact of Daoism on Song Dynasty's Landscape Painting*

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**Abstract:** Daoism, as one of the major Chinese ideologies in Chinese history, devoted in finding the way to build harmony between society and nature. This paper investigates Daoism's impact to Song Dynasty Landscape paintings. The paper is going to compare two representative Song Dynasty landscape paintings, and combining the Daoism's classic Laozi and other documents to analyze Daoism's ideology's impact to Song Dynasty Landscape paintings and its painting skills. By determining the Taoism's influence to the Song Dynasty's landscape paintings, it can help us to understand the influence of religious culture and philosophical thought on artistic artifacts in ancient China, and in turn, to some extent, the influence of recent iterations of Chinese thought on art and even literature. As a result, we find that Daoism has significant and imperceptibly impact in forming the Song Landscape painting style, this could be seen as an example of determine the philosophical ideology impact to the art in ancient China, and might been used as an analogy to exemplify the impact of religion and philosophical ideology to modern Chinese arts and literature.

**Keywords:** Daoism, Song Dynasty Landscape painting, Mi Style, Level Distance, Mi youren, Cloudy Mountains

## 1. Introduction

Daoism, as one of the major Chinese ideologies in Chinese history, pressured the way, or Dao' to build harmony between society and nature. It was established during the Spring and Autumn Period (770B.C-477B.C) and Warring States Period (476B.C-221B.C) by famous Chinese Philosophers Laozi(571 B.C-471 B.C) and Zhuangzi (369B.C-286 B.C) Once the Han Dynasty Confucianism Scholar Dong Zhongshu wrote the article Heaven, Earth, Man that made Confucianism became the official ideology, Daoism became weaken and mostly been replaced by Confucianism. However, Daoism started being popularized during the Wei-Jing Period (220A.D-420A.D), and flourished in the Song Dynasty. This paper will mainly talk about Daoism's impact on the Song Dynasty Landscape paintings. Just as literary analysis has divided the character into two aspects: the liberal humanism which emphasizes the character possess free will, and the Marxism which thinks character as the ensemble of the social relations. This paper will examine the drawing skills which are used in the painting and the objects that are depicted in the paintings as the symbolism, find the Daoism's religious meanings behind them to show the religious impact to Song Dynasty's Landscape painting. The paper will mainly use two of the Song Dynasty Landscape paintings, Guo

Xi's Old Trees, Level Distance, and Mi Youren's Cloudy Mountains, to state the Daoism's idea behind Song Dynasty painting mainly through three aspects, the insurance of body subject in the Landscape painting, the Daoism idea of cosmology that reflected by the Three Distance painting skill, and Daoism's idea about mutable, mystic and reclusive ideology. By determining the Daoism's influence to the Song Dynasty's landscape paintings, it can help us to understand the influence of religious culture and philosophical thought on artistic artifacts in ancient China, and in turn, to some extent, the influence of recent iterations of Chinese thought on art and even literature.

## **2. The Building of Basic Principles on Song Dynasty Landscape Paintings**

Firstly, one of the most important contributions that Daoism laid for the Song Dynasty Landscape painting is that it built the basic principles of the painting. In other words, it ensured the main object of the painting as Nature instead of human. According to the Classic Laozi, Ch 25, it mentioned that:

Way-making is grand,  
The heavens(tian) are grand,  
The earth is grand,  
And the king is also grand.  
Within our territories  
There are four grandees  
And the king occupies one of them.  
Human beings emulate the earth,  
The earth emulates the heavens,  
The heavens emulate way-making,  
And the way-making emulates what is spontaneously so (ziran) [1]

This context illustrates that the Human should follow the earth, or nature, which not only helped insure the main objects of Landscape Painting as nature, but also conveys the idea that humans were the accessory of nature. Take Guo Xi's Old Trees, Level Distance, a short handscroll executed in ink on silk, as an example. At the beginning of the painting, there's two unimpressive fishing boats driving on the chilly river in the foreground, with several low-lying mountains in the background. Not far from the fishboats, there's two withered trees on the riverbank. Across them were several tangled, twisted trees and rocks on the broad plain with a pavilion building behind. Looking across the trees were several people walking from the opposite bank, crossing a bridge to the pavilion, the people included woodcutters, servants and aged men [2] [3]. In this painting, the twisted trees with rocks at the plain in the foreground and the low-lying mountains in the background were the main objects that easily captured the audience's attention. The human and artifacts(fish-boats and the pavilion) in the painting were relatively small and unimpressive when compared with nature creatures.

Besides his painting, Guo Xi has used the size of Mountains, trees and humans in his Linquan gaozhi (The lofty message offorests and stream) to emphasize the idea that human are the accessory of Nature in the Landscape Painting. He said that Mountains have three degrees of size. A mountain should appear larger than a tree and a tree should appear larger than a man. If a mountain is not greatly larger than a tree then it is not large at all. The tree which is not greatly larger than a man is not large at all [4]. In comparing the size of a human figure against a tree you begin with the head. A number of leaves can be approximated to a human head. A human head can be made in the size of a bunch of leaves. Such are the three degrees of size [5]. Guo xi Three Degrees of size theory could firmly preserve Daoism's ideology that Humans are the accessory of Nature. Thus, it is quite expected to say that Daoism's ideology about the relationship between human and nature ensures the body subject of Song Dynasty Landscape painting as Nature instead of human.

### 3. Nature & Human Spiritual

Although on the open side, the main object of Song Dynasty Landscape painting is nature rather than human. However, the inner core of the Landscape painting was to use nature as metaphor to symbolize the spirituality of humans. This idea of using nature to symbolize the human spirit was the combination of both Confucianism and Daoism. The tradition of enumerating Nature as the virtue example to imply the doctrine for humans, and using Nature creatures as virtue models to glorify humans, was based on Daoism's classic Laozi, or the DaoDejing. For instance, In Ch39, it said:

Of old there were certain things that realized oneness:  
The heavens in realizing oneness became clear;  
The earth in realizing oneness became stable;  
The numinous in realizing oneness became animated;  
The river valleys in realizing oneness became full;  
The lords and kings in realizing oneness brought proper order to the world.  
Following this line of thinking,  
We could say that if the heavens had not become clear,  
They may well have fallen to pieces;  
We could say that if the earth had not become stable  
It may well have collapsed;  
We could say that if the river valleys had not become full  
They may well have dried up;  
We could say that if the lords and kings had not brought proper order to the world  
They may well have stumbled and fallen from power.  
The highest renown is to be without renown.  
They do not want to be precious like jade,  
But common like stone. [1]

In the Classic Laozi, it used nature as a metaphor to tell what an appropriate Chinese ruler should be and what is the good virtue for man. In the original version, at the end of the Chapter 39, it said “The highest renown is to be without renown. They do not want to be precious like jade, but common like stone.[3]”, which means the highest compliment for a man's spirit was to be as hard, pure and common as stone. Not only Daoism has used nature to imply human spirit, Confucianism has also personified the nature creatures to convey ideas. Since the Han Dynasty, the famous Confucianism Scholar Dong Zhongshu has already started connecting humans with nature. In the article Heaven, Earth and Man, Dong has emphasized the superiority of the human body by connecting the human origins with heaven. It states that:

Look at the human body. How superior it is to that of other creatures, and how much like Heaven!...The ears and eyes in their brilliance resemble the sun and moon; the nose and mouth, in their breathing, resemble the wind. The part below the neck has fullness and lowlines, comparable to the soil of the earth. The body is like Heaven, with matching numbers, so life spans are linked to Heaven [6].”

In the Song Dynasty, Confucianism's idea about nature was reversed. Song Scholars trying to personify nature in landscape painting to convey their personal characteristics. As Guo Xi has mentioned in his article Lin Quan Gaozhi, that “The mountain takes the water as their blood, the grass and trees as their hair, the smoke and clouds as their beauty... The water takes the mountain as the face, the pavilion as the eyebrows and the fishing as the essence Spirit [5].” Song Landscape Paintings were committed to use nature to convey personality and virtues. Taking Guo Xi's evaluation to Northern Song Dynasty Painter Fan kuan's work, Mountain & Brook Traveler Picture,

as example, Fan Kuan's extremely simple and frank painting style is seen as a reflection of his cheerful and open-minded character. Just as Wen fang has evaluated, although the subject matter of Fan Kuan's paintings is commonplace and ordinary, his spirit is indeed grand and sublime as a mountain [7]. Hence, it would be convincing to say that Daoism and Confucianism had a great impact on the Song Dynasty Landscape paintings' idea of using nature to metaphor the human spirit and virtues.

#### **4. Atmosphere and Spatial Recession from Daoism's idea**

Moreover, the Daoism idea of cosmology also reflected on one important Song Dynasty Landscape Painting skill, Guo Xi's Three Distance method. The Three Distance method is a painting skill created by Guoxi that helped create the atmosphere and spatial recession in Landscape painting. In Guo Xi's *Linquan gaozhi* (The lofty message offorests and stream) , it said:

Mountains have three types of distance. Looking up to the mountain's peak from its foot is called the high distance. From in front of the mountain looking past it to beyond is called deep distance. Looking from a nearby mountain at those more distant is called the level distance. High distance appears clear and bright; deep distance becomes steadily more obscure; level distance combines both qualities. The appearance of high distance is of lofty grandness. The idea of deep distance is of repeated layering. The idea of level distance is of spreading forth to merge into mistiness and indistinctness [5]

In fact, Guo Xi's Three Distance painting skill has created three different kinds of viewpoints for the audience to view the Landscape painting. Each of the viewpoints has its own viewing perspective. This could help viewers to travel freely in their imaginary world through different viewpoints, moving from one distance to another, as if through an infinite universe [7]. Which corresponds to Daoism's idea of the cosmic that creates a sense of deep and profoundness. In Guo Xi's *Old Trees*, Level Distance, it mainly uses the level distance to create a sense of spatial recession for the viewers. As Ping Foong has mentioned in the article, Guo xi had used the contrast of light and dark ink in the main motifs in the earlier and later sections of the scroll to alter the viewer's relative sense of distance from them, giving an impression of receding distance across the lowlands [3]. The use of level distance in this painting shows the space and spatial recession based on the extending and stretching background.

#### **5. The Three Distance Method in Cloudy Mountains**

The idea of profounding cosemics will be more clearly once viewing Mi Youren *Cloudy Mountains* , handscroll, ink on paper. It has used both the level distance and the deep distance painting skills in the painting to depict mountains in the misty weather. In the background of the painting, Mi Youren uses the deep distance to shape the feeling of rolling mountains horizontally. Then he used the level distance to create a sense of layering from the farthest mountains to the nearest riverbank. Mi also used the Mi style in his painting to create the sense of spatial recession, which will be mentioned in the later paragraph. As a conclusion, viewers could easily switch their viewpoints from the horizontal view to the view from far and near, just as they move from a horizontal universe to another far and near universe. Both of them had created a sense of deep and profoundness, which corresponded to Daoism's idea of the cosmic.

What is more, Daoism's mutable, mystic ideology could also be found in the Song Dynasty Landscape Painting. In Daoism Classic *Laozi*, it pointed out that the Dao, or the Way, is mutable and mystic:

The Tao gives birth to One.

One gives birth to Two.

Two gives birth to Three.

Three gives birth to all [1]

This idea of the Tao, or the way changes and gives birth to everything was corresponding to the Misty Landscape style, or the Mi Style, which involved the use of large wet dots of ink applied with a flat brush to create a sense of misty and mysterious to the painting. As Yu Zicai and Zhou Yanggao has mentioned in their book *Shan Shui Cunfa Shiyao*, the Mi Style's main characteristic is to Use a large number of side strokes and horizontal dots to form the canvas. The whole painting should use the hemp-fibre texture strokes first to draw the outline of the mountain, trees and clouds. Then adding the side strokes and horizontal dots on the painting to create a sense of mutable on the size, virtual and real, and wet and dry aspects [8].

In Mi youren's *Cloudy Mountains*, Mi used huge amounts of side strokes and horizontal strokes to create the immutability of size, reality of the trees and mountains. For instance, comparing with the backside trees in the *Cloudy Mountains*, Mi Youren use a much thicker ink on the front trees to draw the dots, which helped Mi to create a sense of the spatial recession in the painting, blurring the distance between trees. By using the thick ink to draw the dense dots on some of the mountains and the rest part with low density dots, Mi also blurring the size and reality of the mountains, making the whole scene sinking in the clouds. The uncertainty of the mountain size in *Cloudy Mountains* helped adding a sense of mysteriousness to the whole painting. With the cover of the clouds, viewers could only see the peaks but not the complete picture of the mountain, which left viewers a room for imagination the grandness of the mountain. Everything becomes mutable and changeable, just like Daoism's idea of the way to give birth to everything [9].

## 6. Conclusion

To draw a conclusion, this paper has illustrated Daoism's three main impacts on the Song Dynasty Landscape paintings. Firstly, Daoism's ideology has insured the main object in the Song Dynasty landscape painting as nature instead of human. Combining with Confucianism's ideology, it also left a foundation for the Song Dynasty painters to use Landscape and nature as metaphors to convey the human spirits and virtues. Secondly, the idea of deep and profound cosmicism in Daoism could also be found through Guo Xi's famous Three Distance painting skills. The three viewpoints that Three Distance painting skills have created can be thought as three independent infinite cosmos for the viewers to appreciate the paintings. Finally, Daoism's mutable and mystic ideology has also been used in the Song Dynasty Landscape paintings, which brought a sense of mystery to the whole painting scroll and left a room for viewers to imagine. Hence, Daoism, as one of the major ideology during the Song Dynasty, has imperceptibly affect the Song Dynasty Painting styles.

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