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Classical Chinese Landscape Painting and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature

MATTHEW TURNER

I

Where should we look for an aesthetic experience of nature? Many are drawn to grand scenery. The American national park system is a testament to our preference for such natural phenomena, as the great parks are organized around such natural features. The sequoias of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, the Yosemite Valley, and the Grand Canyon are all natural features to which tourists flock in order to have some kind of experience. But what kind of experience is this? The answers are diverse: some seek aesthetic experience, some seek religious experience, some seek a kind of cognitive experience—and other kinds of experiences that are as diverse as human purposes (and for some, not all unrelated).

My purpose in this essay is to focus on the element of aesthetic experience. Recently there has been a significant amount of work done in philosophical aesthetics regarding the aesthetic appreciation of nature.¹ Such work has focused on the criteria for the proper aesthetic experience of nature, as well as the extent to which aesthetic judgments of nature can be objective or not. Here there is an embarrassment of riches: there has been such a wide range of suggested possibilities that it is difficult to fault the general direction of the research or fault it for failing to be comprehensive.

However, I believe that there is a domain within these accounts regarding the aesthetic experience of nature that, though often alluded to, has not yet been fully addressed. We know what could count as the object of an aesthetic experience of nature—it would have to be something natural, of course, and our first suggestion would be either scenery or some other suitably determined natural setting: a forest, a park, a meadow, etc. There are good grounds to take this route as well, for it is clear that our practice of appreciating the natural environment consistently brings us to these kinds of

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places. But there is a distinction to be made between the scenic and unscenic elements of nature. It is clear that we do aesthetically appreciate scenic nature, but it is not as clear how we might aesthetically appreciate unscenic nature.² My purpose here is to suggest some devices that might give us the means of doing so.

My strategy is to employ the resources of classical Chinese painting. The Chinese attitude toward visual representations of nature is such that it provides us with a way to look at Western attitudes toward the objects of nature in a different light. These specific methods of visual representation, along with their theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, direct our attention toward certain important and valuable elements of nature. I will begin by developing a philosophical motivation for thinking that utilizing conceptual resources from different traditions is helpful—particularly with regard to questions surrounding the aesthetic experience of the natural environment. Then I will provide an account of some of the elements of the Chinese approach to painting—both theoretical and art historical—before extrapolating the consequences these theories have for our attitudes toward nature.

II

In a 1973 work Jay Appleton advanced what he called the “prospect-refuge” theory of landscape appreciation, which is a biological-evolutionary-based theory.³ His central argument may be outlined as follows. It is an evolutionary benefit to both be able to see and avoid being seen. When in command of a wide area of terrain, one is aware of what might be trying to get one. If one is hidden, one can escape predators. Appleton argues that these simple biological features provide grounds for why we might take pleasure in certain features of landscape. Organisms respond to pleasure and pain as motivators for behavior, so a biological-evolutionary explanation of the source of aesthetic experience locates its source in this kind of experience of pleasure. Appleton contends that traditional Western landscape painting provides evidence for his thesis insofar as these paintings exploit the devices of prospect (seeing) and refuge (avoiding being seen). Thus, we can conclude that there is a biological-evolutionary ground to our aesthetic experience of landscape itself because the works of art that people have preferred have exploited these very same features of prospect and refuge.

Some have objected to Appleton’s thesis, charging it with being far too narrow to accommodate the wide range of aesthetic experiences of the natural environment in which we live. Perhaps the most striking objection is one raised by Donald Crawford in an early review of Appleton’s book. Crawford claims that this prospect-refuge theory fails to account for differences in landscape appreciation.⁴ Many different people in different cultures prefer different features in landscape. Consider, for instance, different

tastes in gardens—between those who prefer showy gardens with lots of growth and flowers and the subtle and restrained aesthetic of the Japanese garden. I believe that it is plausible to claim that we can trace the source of *some* of our experiences of pleasure to evolutionary roots, but it is also clear that there are certain kinds of pleasure that are primarily conditioned by us being a member of a certain culture (for example, the pleasures of atonal music). But most experiences appear to be neither wholly determined by biology nor culture—take, for instance, the pleasure of watching a baseball game. One might plausibly claim that there is something in strategy and competition that appeals to deep-seated biological predispositions to be prepared for competition, but there is a level to appreciating baseball that belongs to baseball itself. To claim that it is *merely* the biological response that contributes to this experience is to inappropriately reduce the actual experience of the game. This phenomenon, and many others like it, shows that there are many elements of our experience that cannot be clearly called cultural or biological.

Crawford recognizes this point, claiming that “[i]n spite of these differences in ‘taste,’ however, it is not difficult to find an underlying unity of concept in prospect-refuge terms.”⁵ The point is that while, say, the Chinese and European traditions have represented landscape in art differently, they nevertheless still exploit the same fundamental features that are common to all appreciation of landscape. The extent to which we find this reply acceptable will depend, I think, primarily on how plausible we ultimately find explanations coming from the standpoint of evolutionary biology.

What follows from this exchange is that we should take it as a datum that some aesthetic experiences are culturally conditioned (in Appleton’s terms, that our aesthetic experiences incorporate a level of cultural symbolism, as opposed to merely natural symbolism).⁶ As noted, it would be difficult to precisely delineate those experiences that were fully biologically conditioned from those that are fully conditioned by our respective cultures. But in the process of coming of age in a particular culture, we come to learn what that culture values and, more importantly, what symbols that culture uses to represent those values. One can indeed look at philosophical aesthetics in this way. As we come to accept the terms of the theories that explain our practices of aesthetic appreciation, we come to adopt a particular view toward that appreciation.

Current accounts of the aesthetic appreciation of nature are incomplete insofar as they take their impetus primarily from a culturally bound set of issues that overlie the ground of aesthetic experience. That is, our discussions are infused with the cultural symbolism with which we are familiar.⁷ By saying this, let me be clear that I am not advocating a general skepticism or relativism about aesthetic judgment and experience; rather, I am advocating the modest thesis that as members of a particular tradition, we

have (reasonably) worked within that tradition to develop its resources. By stepping outside of that tradition, we can become more aware of the multifarious dimensions of our potential aesthetic experiences.

I now want to turn to addressing classical Chinese painting, since it will do two things in support of my central thesis. First, it will provide additional support to the claim I just made regarding the cultural boundedness of aesthetic theory and appreciation; and second, it will provide resources for appreciating nature ourselves. By looking at the way in which Chinese artists specifically captured the elements in their own idiom, we can come to value nature aesthetically in fresh ways.

The relevance of such an approach can be further supported by meeting one likely objection that may have arisen. True, it might be claimed, Chinese landscape painting has some interesting ways of representing nature. But one point of contemporary environmental aesthetics is to show how the appreciation of nature differs from the appreciation of art. By assimilating Chinese art and environmental aesthetics, there is a risk of conflating two concerns that many have taken pains to distinguish. The response: it is a legitimate objection from the point of view of environmental aesthetics, but the Chinese tradition, as I understand it, specifically denies the significance of the distinction between nature and art. It is to this tradition that we now turn.

III

There are a number of different ways in which one can approach Chinese landscape painting. I propose to begin by looking at the theoretical foundations of the practice of Chinese painting. After introducing these, a brief exposition of the development in theory that resulted from this foundation will help to give a sense of what is aesthetically relevant in Chinese painting. I will conclude this section by offering a brief account of the history of styles of Chinese painting. These three elements will serve as the foundation for making the positive argument of my paper.

Without question, the founding document of the theory of Chinese painting is the *Ku Hua P'in Lu*,⁸ by Hsieh Ho.⁹ This work contains the "six principles" of painting, and nearly all subsequent writers on painting refer back to these principles. The six principles are as follows, and their importance cannot be underestimated:

What are these Six Elements? First, Spirit Resonance which means vitality; second, Bone Method which is [a way of] using the brush; third, Correspondence to the Object which means the depicting of forms; fourth, Suitability to Type which has to do with the laying on of colors; fifth, Division and Planning, that is placing and arrangement; and sixth, Transmission by Copying, that is to say the copying of models.¹⁰

There are three central difficulties, however, in interpreting exactly what the six principles really amount to. First, there is the inevitable difficulty in translation.¹¹ Second, the words of the Six Principles themselves are suggestive: rather than provide an exhaustive analysis of the contents of the principles, the appropriate criteria are merely pointed to. Each law is written with four Chinese characters, each of which represents a single concept. Yet it is not clear exactly how the concepts are to be connected, let alone implemented. Third, even under a particular interpretation of the Six Principles, criteria that are pointed to are themselves not necessarily even capable of exhaustive definition or analysis.

I can explain these issues with respect to the first principle, “Spirit Resonance.” Not only is the first principle the most important, but it provides the most difficulties in interpretation. If the first principle is to be followed, painted images must possess Spirit Resonance. But what exactly is Spirit Resonance? Unfortunately, it is not a property that can be easily quantified, and the history of Chinese painting theory shows that different commentators held different painters to capture Spirit Resonance differently. We can make some vague gestures toward this quality by pointing to a picture and speaking of the image’s dynamism, vivacity, or vitality, but we are right to be skeptical of coming to any consensus of exactly what counts as possessing such a property.

Referring to actual Chinese theorists on the practice of landscape painting offers some, but not conclusive help. In the West, when trying to understand a new concept, we look for an exhaustive analysis of the concept in question. This approach to philosophy has spawned numerous philosophical theories. Consider, for instance, Kant’s aesthetic theory. It begins with a phenomenon—the experience of natural beauty—and ends with a comprehensive theory of the nature of the experience of the beautiful along with a criterion for determining whether an object or work of art is beautiful or not. By contrast, the Chinese approach to painting “theory” is entirely particular, which means that while the approach makes judgments with respect to some principle, the principles in question are defended with reference to particular artists or works of art, and no comprehensive or exhaustive analysis of the principles is undertaken. There is no systematic elucidation or analysis of the terms of the theory; instead, there are terse interpretations of the six principles, followed by rankings or evaluations of various painters. Sometimes, writers exhort painters to utilize various techniques in brushwork but never so much as to exhaustively determine a tight correlation between certain kinds of brushwork and Spirit Resonance.¹²

However, it is possible to illuminate somewhat the concept of Spirit Resonance by understanding its association with broader Chinese metaphysical theories. The outlook of Chinese painting was informed by both

Taoism and Buddhism, as well as the Sung-era Neo-Confucianism that was contemporary with the development of most painting theory. Though these views have some peculiarities that differentiate them, there are some general features that can be utilized to help explain the concept of Spirit Resonance.

First, it is understood that the universe operates with respect to a central, dynamic force. Under the traditional Taoist view, all of nature—humans included—is one organic whole, developing and changing in accord with its own inner principle. The distinctions we make between different things belie nature's underlying unity. Painting, then, captures Spirit Resonance insofar as it visually represents this universal dynamism. According to the Taoist, when we perceive any natural object, we can perceive it as exemplifying this inner nature, so accuracy in representation ultimately involves exemplifying this aspect of the object in question. This view is evident in Tsung Ping's "Introduction to Painting Landscape," an early and important text that connects the phenomenal world to an underlying metaphysical reality, highlighting this connection's relevance to the practice of landscape painting. According to Tsung Ping, "As for landscape, it is substantial, yet tends toward the ethereal plane . . . Sages model themselves on the Tao through their spirits and the virtuous comprehend this. Landscapes display the beauty of Tao through their forms and men delight in this."¹³

Second, it is crucial to the Chinese painter that one is in the correct frame of mind to bring out this Spirit Resonance. This view is prevalent in traditional Confucian and Taoist theories and was supplemented by the particular Chinese interpretation of Buddhism, Ch'an (Zen in Japanese). This view means that one's mind must be clear so that one does not prevent oneself from acting in accord with the natural forces of the universe. One must not merely attempt to paint in accord with particular rules of the style, but one must allow oneself to be a part of nature itself in order to bring out the appropriate representation of nature.¹⁴

A brief glance at some representative samples of Chinese authors on the practice of painting will make clear these difficulties involved in the traditional Chinese view. First, consider two accounts from the Sung era. The following is from Liu Tao-ch'un, from the work entitled *Shêng Ch'ao Ming Hua Ping*:

Now the secret of understanding painting lies in the knowledge of the Six Essentials and discrimination of the Six Merits.

Of the so-called Six Essentials, that spirit resonance (ch'i-yün) be combined with strength is the first; that styles and rules be fully developed is the second; that innovations be in harmony with natural principles is the third; that coloring have richness is the fourth; that movements be spontaneous is the fifth; that imitation be selective is the sixth.

Of the so-called Six Merits, to seek brushwork in coarse vulgarity is the first; to seek skill in rude roughness is the second; to seek strength in minute craftsmanship is the third; to seek natural principles in wild eccentricity is the fourth; to seek tonality in the lack of ink is the fifth; to seek merit in ordinary paintings is the sixth.¹⁵

The second is from Kuo Jo-hsü:

Generally in painting, as spirit consonance originates from pleasing the mind, so spiritual character (*shen-ts'ai*) is produced by applying the brush. . . .

There are, moreover, three faults in painting that are bound up with the use of the brush. The three are thus described: the first is "board-like," the second, "engraved," and the third, "knotted." In "board-like" [brushwork] the wrist is weak and the brush sluggish, completely lacking in give and take. The forms of objects are flat and mean, and there is no ability to turn and bend. If "engraved," the movement of the brush is uncertain, and mind and hand are at odds. In delineating an outline, one will produce sharp angles at random. If "knotted," one wishes to go ahead but does not or fails to break off when one should. It seems as if things are congested or obstructed, unable to flow freely.¹⁶

Subsequent theorists do not significantly modify this formula. In the Yuan Dynasty, Hsia Wen-yen writes:

Therefore, "spirit resonance [hence] life movement" comes from natural accomplishment, and one whose skill cannot be discovered by others is said to be of the inspired class. When the brush and ink techniques are sublime, the coloring is appropriate, and the expressive quality more than adequate, then one is said to be of the excellent class. One who obtains formal likeness and does not neglect the rules, is said to be of the skillful class.¹⁷

And from another Yuan writer, T'ang Hou:

Landscape is a thing naturally endowed with Creation's refinements. Whether cloudy or sunny, dark or gloomy, clear or rainy, cold or hot, and in morning or evening, day or night, as one rambles and strolls, there are inexhaustible subtleties. Unless there are hills and valleys in your heart as expansive as immeasurable waves, it will not be easy to depict it.¹⁸

One final text by Ts'ao Chao from the Ming dynasty will suffice to capture the unity of the tradition:

Chao Tzu-and asked Ch'ien Shun-chü: "What is scholar-gentlemen's painting?" and Shun-chü answered: "It is the painting of offbeat [amateur] artists." Tzu-and said: "Yes, but look at [the works of] Wang Wei of T'ang and Li Ch'eng, Kuo Hsi, and Li [Kung-lin] Po-shih of Sung; they were all painted by the most eminent scholars and caught the true nature of things and plumbed their depths. Those who do scholars' painting now are utterly deluded."¹⁹

The issue at hand is further complicated by the addition to these lists of principles, merits, and/or faults and rankings of various historical painters. This implies that if we are to look for exemplars of these various merits or faults, we should look to the painters that are most highly praised. However, we know that human judgment is largely fallible and biased, especially with respect to aesthetic judgments, and consequently we see in these accounts what we would expect: different theorists ranking the same painters differently based on similar criteria.²⁰ Indeed, the judgment of some art critics and historians today conflicts with that of the Chinese at the time.²¹

What follows from these representative quotations is a sense of what is important to classical Chinese painting, but little more to exhaustively analyze the concepts in question. And to cite the lack of any strongly unified Western-style theoretical construct from which to approach Chinese painting, we might feel at a loss about whether there is anything coherent to draw from the tradition. Consider the remark above about a defect of brushwork being “board-like” where the “wrist is weak and the brush sluggish.” This suggests that being too deliberate in one’s brushwork is a detriment, insofar as the brush gets caught up. We understand what the principle is referring to because we can easily distinguish a line that is drawn with vitality and one that is drawn slowly and deliberately. But we find brushwork that is aesthetically pleasing (that is, capturing Spirit Resonance) that we might call board-like. The point is not that such pronouncements are cognitively meaningless but rather that they merely point toward features that we might want to consider as possible candidates for aesthetic relevance.

Since I have contended that the best approach to Chinese aesthetic theory depends significantly on the particular elements of particular paintings, it is necessary to turn to the particulars themselves. I will do this by briefly addressing some key art historical developments that will help to solidify a conception of what is important in Chinese painting. Looking at Chinese painting through the lens of art history will help calcify some of the more speculative pronouncements from this writing on Chinese painting.

To many in the West the Chinese tradition of landscape painting often looks to be monolithic. Similar elements and themes are repeatedly used, and the media utilized by the artists does not significantly change either. We see the same themes done and redone, with apparently little to differentiate them. But this claim could not be further from the truth. There is an enormous breadth in the tradition of landscape painting, and armed with the appropriate art historical resources, we can see how it is that individual artists were capable of transcending the apparent limitations of this style of painting.

The first step, however, in approaching Chinese painting is to note the weight that is placed on the use of the brush. This is not only evident in the paintings themselves but also in the writings from Chinese painters and

theorists regarding the connection between painting and calligraphy. This conception of painting is that it is a kind of calligraphy itself, insofar as both were representational methods that carry a particular cognitive as well as aesthetic function.²²

Given that how one uses the brush is central, the next point to note is the different ways in which the watercolor inks can be used. The ink can be applied as a wash, with differing degrees of diluteness, or can be applied in single brushstrokes. In the case of single brushstrokes, the ink can either be applied relatively wet, creating a softer, less dark line, or relatively dry, producing a firmer and harsher line. Further, the individual strokes can be short or long, thin or wide, etc. One of the fundamental changes in styles of Chinese painting has to do with how these brushstrokes are utilized to recognize the traditional subjects of Chinese painting. In addition to the use of brush and ink, Chinese artists also faced decisions about whether to color the painting or not, as well as exactly how to incorporate traditional landscape elements. These traditional landscape elements involve questions such as whether to fill the space of the paper entirely with the picture, to leave a high degree of blank space, or to render painted elements in one style rather than another, etc.

It is also necessary to briefly mention the role that poetry plays in these paintings. Many paintings are inscribed with poems, either by the original artist or by subsequent artists or owners of the painting. Although a fully adequate account of the function of poetry in Chinese painting is beyond the scope of this article, it is enough to note that the images and sentiments that are expressed by these poems serve to amplify what meaning the image is attempting to communicate, as well as shape the viewer's experience of the image.²³

One further development in the art historical tradition has to do with the role that the Chinese literati (educated scholar-officials) played. Scholar-officials who were appointed to serve the government would spend their leisure time composing poetry, writing calligraphy, and painting. It was believed that only one who was not interested in material gain or success in painting could free one's mind sufficiently to achieve the right level of Spirit Resonance. Such painters looked down on so-called professional painters who painted for money. With the demise of the Southern Sung dynasty at the hands of the Mongols (who subsequently established the Yuan dynasty), the literati tradition was all the more firmly established. Many former officials either did not want or were not allowed to serve the new government, and, as such, they were forced into a leisurely retirement during which they continued to paint.²⁴

These historical events helped usher in a new element of Chinese landscape painting: personal style. Many of the painters that came to be respected and imitated were recognized for having developed a particular,

characteristic way of representing landscape—yet more or less within the confines of the elements of the tradition. At various times in the tradition, individual's reactions to such styles varied, from conservative condemnations of these directions to acceptance of differences. From our point of view, however, we can look back with the benefit of hindsight and see how the individual styles of various painters contribute to their uniqueness and aesthetic value.

The changes in style in landscape painting were subtle and various, and there were many of them, so it is impossible to completely address each aspect of the tradition in detail. Instead, I will focus on a general difference between the typical styles of Sung-era landscape painting and that of the Yuan—for the contrasts are readily apparent—and provide resources for looking at paintings of different eras.²⁵ I will compare a work of a Southern-Sung academy master, Kuo Hsi, with that of a Yuan dynasty literati painter, Ni Zan.

Kuo paints in the style that is sometimes referred to as “monumental landscape.” His painting *Early Spring*, the only known extant work of his, captures this concept well.²⁶ The landscape that is depicted appears enormous, especially in contrast to the relative size of the human figures that are portrayed. More importantly, notice how the painting is executed. Most of the available space of the silk is taken up by the image. Secondly, Kuo uses a number of techniques to convey the illusion of monumentality. The elements that are in the foreground are painted with strong, heavy, and dark brushstrokes, while those in the background are much softer. Further, the volume of the rocks in the image are rendered differently with different washes (even layers of wet ink) to convey the illusion of depth. The contours of the mountains in the background are suggested by the various ink washes, while the rocks and trees of the foreground are strongly presented with the dark brushstrokes. These two elements—varying brushstrokes and varying use of ink-wash—combine to construct the image as a whole.

By contrast, consider the Yuan painting *Still Streams and Winter Pines*, by Ni Zan.²⁷ What is immediately noticeable is the relative paucity of the brushwork of the painting as compared with that of *Early Spring*. The trees and mountains are rendered in more simple, straightforward outlines, and there is a noticeable lack of ink washes used as Kuo did. Further, the spaces that are left empty are expressive in a far different way than they are in *Early Spring*. In Kuo's painting, the empty spaces are necessary for two purposes. First, they help to provide a rhythm to the overall painting. One's eye is attracted first to the foreground, and then Kuo's composition leads the eye back sequentially to the middle ground and then to the background. The spaces help to both interrupt one's movement from the foreground to the background and provide a clear way of delineating foreground from background. In the absence of the Western technique of perspective, this

was the Chinese solution to the problem of representing distance in three-dimensional space on a two dimensional surface.

In Ni's painting, however, the empty space does not seem to be utilized for any direct compositional purposes and, absent the space used for the poem written on it, appears to be wasted. There is a small element of empty space that is used to distinguish the foreground from the background, but while the use of this space does suggest distance, it does not suggest monumentality in any way. The large space on the top half of the painting itself does not help distinguish foreground from background, and, if anything, it appears to minimize the relative importance of the elements of the foreground. As a general contrast, we can see Kuo's image as robust, detailed, and "big" in both composition and brushwork, while Ni's is sparse and simple. Both are portraying the landscape; both, in the estimation of many critics, portray Spirit Resonance, but both do so in decidedly and characteristically different ways (painting like Kuo Hsi became a manner of painting, as did painting in the manner of Ni).

IV

It will now help to return to the initial question in front of us: How should we aesthetically appreciate nature or the natural environment? First, I believe that we are reasonably baffled by some of the speculative pronouncements of these Chinese writers and are apt to dismiss what they say as philosophically respectable by virtue of this lack of a unified Western-style account. But to reach such a judgment is hasty, for it could be objected that our demands on a theory as Westerners is itself unnecessary. I do not propose to fully answer this objection, but the following remarks will suffice to show how the Chinese painting can indeed contribute to our appreciation of nature.

If it is the case that there is indeed something worthwhile to be gleaned from Chinese aesthetics, what could it be? My answer is that by attending to such painting, we can ourselves learn how to appreciate nature by acquiring new criteria for seeing nature itself. I observed before how the various writers focused on the notion of Spirit Resonance as an aesthetic feature of works of art, and that there is not much exhaustive analysis of Spirit Resonance provided by these writers. Further, I observed that Spirit Resonance is to be found in the natural world itself, as well as in painted works. What these two features entail is that one of the aesthetic goals of a Chinese painter is a kind of representation:²⁸ to capture the essence of nature by being as much like nature itself. It must be stressed that the capturing of this essence will involve representing those features that are sufficient to convey the presence of Spirit Resonance in the natural world. The following example will elucidate this point.

Assume for a moment that the Ni Zan painting that I discussed captures Spirit Resonance well, even if we do not know exactly what the concept means. Consider the way in which Ni has painted the trees in the foreground. They are sparse, bare, and have a kind of dynamism to them that makes them appear as if they are stretching out toward the mountains in the background. There is something about the trees that is compelling and enjoyable to look at, whether the experience we have is one of the joys of the solitude that the painting expresses, or perhaps the opposite—the isolation and loneliness of the trees. Whichever it is, it is clear that studying the trees of this painting can have an aesthetic effect on us, and such an effect occurs partly by virtue of the sparse and bare way in which Ni has painted them.

Suppose next that we are individuals who have grown up learning that astounding natural scenery is something to be appreciated, and we actively seek it out. Every summer we plan a trip to some National Park to see the famous sights and beautiful scenery. For instance, we go to Yosemite National Park, and take the long drive to the top of Glacier Point. The drive takes a long time (more than an hour each way) but results in a spectacular vista. Given our predilection for scenery, we stare in awe at the view but ignore the path that we took to get there. Why, given the view that awaits, might we stop to appreciate something as simple as a single tree or stand of trees?

Ni's painting shows us precisely why and how we can do something like this. Ni gives us a concrete example through which we can model our own future aesthetic experience. By highlighting through his use of the brush certain essential features of a group of trees, Ni gives us a means by which we can look at trees ourselves. Instead of seeing the tree as we normally see it, as a side feature of a view or as one instance of a large group of things, all of which are essentially the same, we can look at the tree and how it exemplifies these essential features. We can then see trees themselves as dynamic living entities and come to appreciate them aesthetically by means of the devices that Ni offers. Further, note how Ni renders the individual trees in the group. The middle tree appears to be of a different species and, as such, different essential features of the tree are highlighted. These characteristic marks of what is aesthetically valuable in actual trees serve as a model for looking at actual trees.

It might, however, be argued that my approach is question-begging, insofar as I have assumed that Ni gets something right about aesthetic appreciation; indeed, I began with the assumption that Ni's painting does capture Spirit Resonance, whatever that might be. But the point of this argument is not to insist that Ni's work captures Spirit Resonance; rather, it is to provide a point of entry into how the body of classical Chinese landscape art could be relevant to our Western approaches. As we look at more and more paintings in the Chinese tradition, and see the ways in which artists have attempted to capture Spirit Resonance, we get a much better sense of

the relative successes and failures of artists of the tradition. By adopting the resources that are made available by particular Chinese paintings, we can continue to refine and develop our own aesthetic interaction with the natural environment. As we come to learn how different artists have represented the natural world, we can come to see the features of the natural world in their multiplicity, variety, and particularity.

V

It remains to be seen how this interpretation of the Chinese tradition of landscape painting can address the contemporary Western debate on the aesthetic appreciation of nature. I will consider two current views on the aesthetic appreciation of nature: Allen Carlson's "natural environment" model of aesthetic appreciation, and Emily Brady's "metaphysical imagination" model of aesthetic appreciation. Both ask how we ought to aesthetically appreciate nature, and both offer views that, while not necessarily incompatible, are opposed to one another. In short, Carlson argues that nature ought to be appreciated under the category of natural science, for that is what captures what nature truly is and, hence, provides the appropriate conceptual constraints on appreciation.²⁹ Brady, on the other hand, contends that there is much in nature to appreciate without the influence of the concepts and categories of natural science, and she argues that we use the elements of the natural environment to generate imaginative experiences.³⁰ Brady argues that science unnecessarily limits our aesthetic appreciation of nature. However, by introducing the notion of metaphysical imagination, she appears to leave the door open to whatever anyone might want to count as aesthetic appreciation. Brady recognizes this potential liability and attempts to meet it, writing that "I do not think that all imaginings are appropriate."³¹ To defend this claim, she offers two criteria that limit the range of appropriate imagination: disinterestedness and the requirement to "imagine well."

This is not the place to provide a full critique of either Carlson's or Brady's view. Rather, I want to point out that this notion of "imagining well" is left open and might be considered to be vague.³² Brady writes that "[i]magining well' involves spotting aesthetic potential, having a sense of what to look for, and knowing when to clip the wings of imagination."³³ But this criterion is bound to be unhelpful if we don't already have a strong sense of where to find aesthetic value. The dilemma that is presented is that we have on the one hand a theory that is too narrow (Carlson's) and on the other one that is too broad (Brady's). The way out of such a dilemma is to look to the way in which the Chinese have promulgated an aesthetic theory that focuses not on something that is abstracted from nature but rather on nature itself, as we might experience it directly. By using our own experiences of the natural environment informed by the paintings themselves, we

can converge on a more robust and sensitive approach to our experience of nature. The elements of classical Chinese painting provide representations of what the Chinese take to be the most important and significant features of the natural environment. By looking at what these features are, we can come to look for them in the world that we experience, and the scope of our aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment can thereby be significantly increased.³⁴

NOTES

1. For a good general introduction to issues in environmental aesthetics, see the special issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1998). Many of the papers in this journal are published, with others, in Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, eds., *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (Toronto, ON: Broadview, 2004). For a comprehensive collection of Allen Carlson's work—a leading figure in the environmental aesthetics movement—see Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000).
2. For one account of the aesthetic appreciation of unscenic nature, see Yuriko Saito, "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (1998): 101-12.
3. Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape*, rev. ed. (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1996); Jay Appleton, *The Symbolism of Habitat* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990).
4. Donald W. Crawford, "Review of Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 3 (1976): 367-69. See also Allen Carlson, "Review of Jay Appleton's *The Symbolism of Habitat: An Interpretation of Landscape in the Arts*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50, no. 1 (1992): 79-80.
5. Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape*, 196. See also Crawford, "Review of Jay Appleton *The Experience of Landscape*," 369.
6. Appleton, *The Symbolism of Habitat*, chap. 1.
7. Though I cannot defend the claim adequately here, what I have in mind is the claim that much current environmental aesthetics is motivated partly by a reaction to the modernist-inspired aesthetic theories of art. As such, current theories are concerned to dissociate art from nature, as well as explore the considerations that aesthetic experience is not solely grounded in some particular aesthetic property, for example, beauty.
8. A quick note about Romanization of Chinese names: I have retained whatever system my sources have used, which happen to utilize Wade-Giles predominantly.
9. Reprinted in Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963). For a different translation, see Susan Bush and Shih Hsio-yen, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1985). Another translation that illustrates well the conceptual issues in translating the Chinese characters can be found in Mai-Mai Sze, *The Tao of Painting: A Study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting*, 2 vols., (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), vol. 1.
10. Bush and Hsio-yen, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*.
11. For a brief account of this difficulty, see the introduction to Bush and Hsio-yen, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*.
12. To forestall an objection: I'm in no way making or implying a negative judgment on this method of developing the Six Principles or Chinese painting theory.
13. Susan Bush, "Tsung Ping's Essay on Painting Landscape and the 'Landscape Buddhism' of Mount Lu," in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and

- Christian Murck (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 144-46. The translation here is Bush's, and she highlights the difficulties in translating this passage, offering some alternatives in her notes 58 and 61. Another translation is given by Wing-tsit Chan in Zong Bing, "On Landscape Painting," in *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations, Volume I: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty*, ed. John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Chan's translation reads: "As to landscapes, they exist in material substance and soar into the realm of spirit." (Zong Bing is the Hanyu-Pinyin Romanization of Tsung Ping.) Although the use of the word "Tao" would initially suggest that Tsung's view is Taoist, it has been argued that his point of view is predominantly Buddhist. See 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, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981). My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the importance of this text.
14. There is an issue in interpreting the precise depth of Chinese metaphysical theories, especially with respect to their implications for painting. In classical Chinese philosophy there are, similar to the tradition in the West, competing strains of naturalism (that is, realism) and idealism. For the present, we can safely ignore how these theories might be played out in theories of Chinese painting. For an account of a naturalistic metaphysics in Chinese painting, see Francois Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, trans. Paula M. Varsano (New York: Zone Books, 2004). For an idealistic account, see the chapter on Ch'an Buddhism's influence on Chinese painting in Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*. See also the previous note.
 15. Bush and Hsio-yen, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 98-99. For a different translation of this passage, see Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 73-74.
 16. Bush and Hsio-yen, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 97. See also Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 79-80.
 17. Bush and Hsio-yen, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 246. The date of this text is ca. late fourteenth century.
 18. *Ibid.*, 247-48. The date of this text is ca. 1320-1330.
 19. Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 165. The date of this text is 1387.
 20. Such issues are further enlarged by the development of the so-called Northern and Southern Schools of Painting, a theory initially advanced by Tung Ch'i-ch'ang in the seventeenth century. For an account of this theoretical basis for classifying painters, see Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*; James Cahill, *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty, 1570-1644* (New York: Weatherhill, 1982); and Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 123 ff.
 21. See James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), esp. chap. 1. Cahill argues that the painter Chang Hung, responding to exposure to Western styles of representing landscape, incorporated similar elements into his own watercolors. Such a different mode of representation was too different to be readily subsumed under Chinese orthodoxy, and as such, he was judged by many to be a poor painter.
 22. See Bush and Hsio-yen, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, passim.
 23. See, for instance, Jonathan Chaves, "'Meaning Beyond the Painting': The Chinese Painter as Poet," in *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, ed. Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
 24. James Cahill, *Hills Beyond a River: Chinese Painting of the Yuan Dynasty* (New York: Weatherhill, 1976), chap. 1.
 25. For a history of the tradition from the Yuan to the Ming, see Cahill's three volume work, which includes James Cahill, *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty, 1570-1644* (New York: Weatherhill, 1982); James Cahill, *Hills Beyond a River: Chinese Painting of the Yuan Dynasty* (New York: Weatherhill,

- 1976); and James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1580* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978). For a shorter history of each period, written by different authors, and including many color plates, see Yang Xin et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1997). Another classic work is Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles*, 7 vols. (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1973).
26. For an image, see <http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/painting/4lndguox.htm>.
 27. An image can be found at <http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/painting/4yuanlnc.htm>.
 28. Note that this is not the *only* goal. Paintings can be and are interpreted along many other lines. Some paintings can be successfully interpreted as representing the proper relationship between state and individual along the lines of Confucian philosophy, while others can be interpreted as representing particular human emotions—loneliness, for instance. In this essay I am only focusing on the way that nature itself is represented.
 29. Allen Carlson, "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity," in *Aesthetics and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000).
 30. Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (1998): 139-47. See also Noël Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004), 89-107.
 31. Brady, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," 144.
 32. Allen Carlson, "The Aesthetics of Nature," in *Aesthetics and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 11.
 33. Brady, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," 146.
 34. Perhaps one way to understand the overarching point of my account is as an account that seeks to solidify the domain between religion and natural history, as suggested by Carroll in "On Being Moved by Nature."