

Translating personality into landscape

Frank Kraushaar

University of Latvia

Abstract. This essay stems from a hypothesis which belongs to a work in progress: an attempt to understand and to make translatable into contemporary conceptions the figure of the *anonymous* 隱者 (*yin zhe*) and its formation into a kind of humanistic cipher or an empty interior space sketched like a human being in classical Chinese poetry and Tang and Song painting. The idea is that the correspondence of personality and landscape in Chinese aesthetics replaces its Western counterpart—the relativity of subjectivity and outer *space*. The first part of the essay delineates differences in the approach to landscape or 山水 (*shan-shui*) and emphasizes that the appreciation of both essentially changes as soon as the cultural information does, which makes similarities of certain approaches—as in romantic landscapes and Chinese *shan-shui*—deluding rather than coherent. The last part focuses on a detail in the construction of the *shan-shui* in relation to concepts of personality which I call distance and framing. This combination of an absolute spatial order obtained by distance and its microcosmical, individual correspondence in a personally shaped frame seems the characteristic Chinese way to translate concepts of personality into an aesthetic reality—almost bare of any relation to the physical presence of the subject.

There is nothing more famous for its uniqueness among the genres of Chinese arts than landscape poetry, including its prolongation, landscape painting. But compared to garden architecture, where the Chinese concept of what is called *landscape* in English was partly adapted by the Europeans, the subtle landscapes created by Chinese classical poets and painters were never imitated and processed into successful styles by Western poets or painters. Even the so-called ‘Chinese garden’ is the result of a process departing from a fumbling Western reflection (an exoticistic exploitation) upon a difference whose counterpart coincided with something on the way to becoming more explicit in Europe, although the customs and tradition of the 18th century lacked or overshadowed concepts necessary to realize it. The most essential elements of the Chinese landscape, the *texts* that transformed ‘natural beauty’ (adored as such by European romanticists) into a ‘cultivated or literary ornament’ (文章 *wen zhang*), were mostly ignored or sometimes awkwardly imitated as mere decoration that was far from their power according to Paul W. Kroll’s formula: ‘Word creates World’.¹ For Westerners the attractiveness of Chinese landscape conceptions has never ceased. But its appreciation, by ignoring the differences that emerge from its close and in-

¹ Kroll 1998, 88.

separable relation to literary texts and often to those who wrote them, sometimes seems astonishingly superficial.²

As outsiders to the milieu of traditional Chinese landscape arts (being Westerners and contemporaries of another world, to which present China also belongs), we may marvel at something and at once truly appreciate it, but the beauty of the unknown is the most exciting one, and the fact that all attempts to describe the principles of beauty end up in paradoxes suggests that it is the only one—beauty based on distance in the mind. This kind of *distance* emerging from *difference* is not the same as the distance that touches someone who believes himself familiar with the work he contemplates or at least with the mode of perception applicable to it. In other words, the space of a landscape might be created by reference to a perspective that fixes and even confirms the eye of the spectator. Thus, landscape becomes a part of the spectator's point of view, of his subjectivity. Westerners who are not yet much acquainted with Chinese landscapes, but seduced to contemplate one painting after the other, almost always reach that certain degree of disappointment in the monotony and colourlessness of those works of art.³ I suspect this is due to an expectation that receives no response: that of the challenge of subjectivity.

Different distances might be created by modes of perception *and* by their absence. From the surface of the poetic vocabulary in romantic landscape-poetry and from technical devices like parallelism—frequently using the form of the couplet to create spatial order—one easily becomes inclined to suppose spatial distance as an intrinsic part of aesthetic structure in a text. What follows now is an English translation of the famous German romantic Joseph v. Eichendorff. It first gives the first stanza of a poem most typical for romantic landscape conception, transforming the outer world into a space where subjective sentiment becomes absolute.

*Moonlit Night*⁴

It was like Heaven's glimmer
caressed the Earth within
that in Her blossom's shimmer
She had to think of Him.

The scheme of a dualistic structure—opposing heaven and earth as male and female to suggest separation and at once absolute unity realized by interaction—comes

² That the appreciation of landscapes among the literati was mainly inspired by its literary spirit and that this literary spirit once again became manifested as a prestigious emblem of personality in a work of art has also been made evident by Ronald Egan in his essay 'Poems on Paintings: Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien': 'But in painting poems there is also another purpose. The borrowing serves as a compliment to the painter. By including an earlier line, the poet, in effect, says to the painter that he has painted a scene worthy of the ancient verse' (Egan 1983, 441).

³ See also Sullivan 1979, Introduction.

⁴ For the full translation and the original German text, see <<http://myweb.dal.ca/waue/Trans>>.

rather close to well known basic elements of classical Chinese landscape-poetry based on cosmological Yin-Yang (陰陽) theories. Some even well-known couplets from famous Tang poets illustrate an obviously superficial parallelism in the literary culture of ancient China and early modern Europe:

野曠天低樹
江清月近人

Sky, hanging over vast plains, touches the trees.
Moon, surging from chilly waters, comes close.⁵

山隨平野盡
江入大荒流

Mountains, following the marge of vast plains, disperse.
River, streaming forward, sinks into wide wastelands.

白日依山盡
黃河入海流

The bright sun leans on the mountain, expiring.
Yellow River, entering ocean, streams forth.

星垂平野闊
月湧大江流

Suspended stars above vast plains, in a wide range.
A swaying moon in the Yangzi waters, rushing forth.

All four couplets are deliberately chosen from well-known poems by famous authors and can be found in the *Tang shi san bai shou* (唐詩三百首), still the most popular anthology of Chinese classical poetry.⁶ The choice was also motivated by the redundancy of the vocabulary and the pattern underlying the imagistic effects. Stephen Owen calls the latter ‘an impersonal cosmological mechanism’ typical of Early and High Tang poetry, but lost by later poets and transformed during the Late Tang and Song into ‘[n]ature informed by purposeful intelligence’.⁷ Thus, what we observe in the previous examples is not the opposition of man and nature/landscape, or, to put it in abstract terms, of subject and object, but a dualism progressing by itself and enclosing the human subject. This is quite apart from what romanticists saw

⁵ To make sure that the dualistic cosmological conception of landscape underlying the syntactical parallelism is emphasized together with the latter by the translation of this and the following couplets, I decided to translate these fragments myself. For the authors and sources of alternative translations, see the following footnote.

⁶ A bilingual translation (Herdan 2000) which offers alternative views on the form and contents of the Chinese verses includes the passages as follows: Meng Haoran (689–740), *Su Jiande jiang* (p. 576), Li Bo (701–762), *Du Jing men song bie* (p. 302), Wang Zhihuan (688–742), *Deng Guanqiao lou* (p. 587), Du Fu (712–770), *Lü ye shu huai* (p. 328).

⁷ Owen 1996, 36.

in nature when they made it the roaming ground of the unearthly human soul. We will now read the remaining two stanzas of Eichendorff's poem to observe how the seeming dualism of heaven and earth fades away to remain only a playful allegory for earthly love and passion lifting up the soul on its way home.

The breeze was gently walking
through wheat fields near and far;
the woods were softly talking
so bright shone ev'ry star.
Whereat my soul extended
its wings towards skies to roam:
O'er quiet lands, suspended,
my soul was flying home.⁸

These stanzas contain even more striking details to continue the parallel to landscape-compositions in Chinese arts.⁹ But all of them remain at the surface, whereas the major dualism *soul-landscape* makes an essential difference. No matter how striking the similarities might appear, any attempt to equal European romantic landscapes with those created by Chinese classical poets and painters soon will run aground. A Westerner can only comprehend the Chinese literary landscape by changing some of the constitutive factors of his native landscapes. I will sketch out some of these factors in a short comparison to show that distance in Chinese landscape-art emerges directly out of 'personality'—in European landscapes the distances extend between a subject and an object opposing it, or, as in von Eichendorff's poem, between 'my soul' and a beautiful but alien world that emerges only to be crossed.

Constitutive factors of landscapes

The way a Tang poem reveals spaces and layers of time shares only superficial similarities with modern habits of perception. The expressiveness of landscapes in classical poetry and landscape painting is bound to an almost immediate unity of the creator and the created, hard to grasp by someone not learned in terms of the absoluteness of *dao* 道 and the universality of *qi* 氣. Yet, neither of the two well-

⁸ The text of the German original poem: *Mondnacht. / Es war als hätt der Himmel / Die Erde still geküßt, / Daß sie im Blütenschimmer / Von ihm nun träumen müßt. // Die Luft ging durch die Felder; / Die Ähren wogten sacht, / Es rauschten leis die Wälder; / So sternklar war die Nacht. // Und meine Seele spannte / Weit ihre Flügel aus, / Flog durch die stillen Lande, / Als flöge sie nach Haus.* See in Joseph von Eichendorff, *Werke*, Bd. I (München, 1982), p. 285.

⁹ One would have to discuss not only 'imagistic details'—such as the wind as a medium in the erotic tension bounding heaven (he) and earth (she), the emphasized motive of homecoming at the end of the poem—but also the appearance of an individual voice in the last stanza, facing the aforementioned landscape scenery.

known terms has a sufficient equivalent in any Western language. Both of them were indispensable factors in aesthetic discourses of literati throughout the centuries. The intangible and unfeasible *dao*, given as the ultimate condition of any manifestation in life and in the arts, may be appreciated and experienced immediately by the poet or painter as well as by the connoisseur of each work of art. The borderline between imagination and reality—so much present in contemporary aesthetical discourses—does actually not exist within this cultural practise. Creating a landscape means to disclose *dao* at an unlimited reality in the sensually limited, visible world.

According to François Jullien in his essay ‘La grande image n’a pas de forme’ (‘The Great Image Has No Form’)¹⁰ the second term, *qi*, in classical Chinese aesthetics substitutes for the function of perception in European/Western discourses: ‘The Chinese identify this common swelling source from which each actualization emerges as ‘energy-breath’: *qi*. And: ‘From the fact that I am alive by inhaling and exhaling, going in and out (interior-exterior), it may be suggested that there is a principle of regulative alternation from which the process of the world arises’. Thus, it is the contemplation (or the intuitive awareness) of ‘energy-breath’ (*qi*), present at once in the poet/painter and in the landscape, that brings forth the shape and shadowing of the latter.

Jullien draws upon a semantic differentiation of *landscape/Landschaft/paysage* in European languages and *shan-shui* 山水 (mountains-waters) in Chinese. The European landscape is a cut-out identified as a ‘view’ of a space and becoming the object of that view. The initial episode of European landscape painting by the Flemish masters (1520–1700) coincides with the birth of still lifes (1550): in both subgenres the subjugation of nature as an external object crystallized. In the tradition of the Petrarkian poets, the romantic poet considered landscape a ‘mirror of the soul’—which is evident in Eichendorff’s stanza quoted at the beginning. Consequently, landscapes as motifs in art (of minor importance during previous centuries) clearly rose in reputation, but as ‘mirrors’ they remained inferior objects to the ‘soul’, whose status was still that of an absolute essence, somewhat detached from the mortal world. In contrast, landscapes as ‘mountains and waters’ are not opposed to any subject, nor are they perceived as particular parts. The *shan-shui* is an imagistic dualism involving an artful choice of stylistic details which make the work an individual process and at once an affirmation of the universal ‘energy-breath’. The freshness and depth of wide, spacious landscapes is created by using almost monotone words, as in the four couplets of Tang poetry quoted above. In the mind of the Chinese literati, the *shan-shui* constitutes a reality that is to be valued higher than other realities, a revelation

¹⁰ Having no English translation at hand, I refer to the German one. See Chapter 9 ‘Der Geist der Landschaft’ in Jullien 2005, 150–69.

of the virtual strength of one's personality, not as a gift from god but as one's own personal achievement and the success of the training of one's mind. To minds rooted in Christian/humanistic terms according to which *personality* sometimes appears as a critical and even revisable adaptation to the quasi mystic *self*, the seemingly smooth and tight union of the Chinese literary personality with the absoluteness of the *shan-shui* ('landscape') might seem impressive, arrogant and, therefore, morally doubtful at once.¹¹ Eichendorff's *soul* wakes up to come to itself at the very moment the shapes of the landscape disperse in moonlight, immediately taking the almost allegorical form of a *bird to fly home*. The distance grows while visible forms diminish and within the growing distance—the reader might anticipate—the soul-bird becomes more and more detached from the landscape that had already inspired it to *extend its wings*. This is a kind of detachment often found in the perspectives of traditional European romantic landscape painting. Single objects grow away from the spectator, and the latter discovers empty distance as a growing awareness of the self.

It is well known that European landscape paintings evolved from the backgrounds of portrait, crucifixion or history painting,¹² first simply needed to fill empty spaces on the canvas and step-by-step correlated with the foreground and structured into depth by the perspective. When the thematic foreground disappeared, the perspective remained and after abandoning the thematic objectivity, only the deliberately chosen yet singular *perspective* remains to inspire the landscape. Personal expression in European landscapes remains inseparable from the singular view and questionable as a reality. This is not the case with the *shan-shui*.

Dao and *qi* are key terms related to the representation of a universal cosmological order wherein *shan-shui* represents the potential of the macrocosmos within the forms of a microcosmos. But *shan-shui* also has personal attitudes that cannot simply be evaluated as the mirror images of a spectator's consciousness. Such personal attitudes are the same as those ascribed to human beings by the moral or religious thinkers.

¹¹ But in his study *The Construction of Space in Early China*, Mark E. Lewis, devoting a longer passage in the latter part of the book to 'Mountains and World Models', investigates the world of the *Shan hai jing* (山海經) as the creation of an archetypal and totalized Chinese landscape and finally arrives at this conclusion: 'In this manner the monstrous peoples in the later sections of the *Shan hai jing* are the ultimate markers of barbarism. The role of the ruler is also emphasized by describing the peripheral people as descendants of the early sages who served as mythic prototypes for the rulers of the day. Finally, the ruler appears in the later sections in tales of wars between the early sages and evil rebels. The victory of the sages created or preserved the spatial order of the world, and the text shows how physical traces of these victories define the landscape. The greatest of these victories, which marks the end of the *Shan hai jing*, was Yu's conquest of the flood which made possible ordered human space' (p. 305). His interpretation clearly underlines that the *world as landscape*, even in its earliest literary conception, is at once the work and the personal achievement in which a saint's personality realizes itself.

¹² Jullien 2005, 153.

Doubtlessly, the most renowned quotation to document this constitutive fact of the traditional Chinese appreciation of landscapes is attributed to Confucius:

知者樂水。仁者樂山。知者動。仁者靜。知者樂。仁者壽。

The wise enjoy water; those authoritative in their conduct enjoy mountains. The wise are active; the authoritative are still. The wise find enjoyment, the authoritative are long-enduring.¹³

Here, enjoyment in nature (樂山 *le shan*—樂水 *le shui*) does not emerge from metaphoric sensation; it is a sympathetic act attributed to both the wise and the authoritative. But each of them personifies only *one aspect* within the complete harmony of human nature with nature as a whole. The sentence might even be interpreted as superimposing the abstract cosmological dualism of Yin and Yang with concrete natural images like *earth* (地 *di*) and *heaven* (天 *tian*) and the correspondent landscape elements *water* (水 *shui*) and *mountains* (山 *shan*). To follow this logic would mean that the sage Confucius recognized the problem innate in the human mind: its incapability to fully embrace the world's entity, instead remaining always inclined to one side. Nevertheless, both the wise and the authoritative share the superiority of human nature towards the nature of other beings. Directly facing the ultimate manifestations of space and time in the triangle of the three potencies (三才 / 三材 *san cai*)—*heaven* (天 *tian*) *earth* (地 *di*) and *man* (人 *ren*)—the human being at once produces and bridges spatial distances.

Distance and framing

But if the mind remains 'inclined'—meaning that it is followed by the danger of losing its inner balance that ensures the circulation of *qi* and characterizes the 'true man' (真人 *zhen ren*) who has attained *dao*—how can it face nature as a whole without distorting it? In other terms: how to find a way for the exemplary (superior) person to 'articulate his intention' (言志 *yan zhi*) and teach others? We know this is one of the central questions in Chinese classical poetics, but to put it closer to the topic of this essay, we might also formulate: *how to translate the full personality into landscape and avoid the latter appearing as a clumsy cut-out of what is accessible by the senses?*

The answer given by the history of Chinese culture seems somewhat paradoxical. To explain its basic contents, we shall now proceed to the reading and a concise interpretation of an example from the prose of Ouyang Xius (1007–1072). The choice of this author is due to a lucky *trouvaille* among his works of prose. Any among the

¹³ Ames, Rosemont 1998, 108–9.

milestones of landscape prose—take for example Liu Zongyuan’s ‘Eight Records from Yongzhou’ (*Yongzhou ba ji*) or Fan Zhongyuan’s ‘Record on Yueyang-pavillon’ (*Yueyang lou ji*)—would be a better *expression*, but perhaps not a better explanation of what I discuss here. In his own best landscape prose, Ouyang follows the same track of expressing a personal, sympathetic experience facing a landscape. The following text, however, seems dedicated to his older brother, who was by far not as lucky in his career as the author himself. Ouyang Xiu might have first of all intended to promote his brother, but in doing this he explains to us how the spirit of the *shan-shui* sympathizes with the spirit of a personality and how the latter creates its *position* 局 (*ju*) in a harmonic and ‘true’ reality:

游 條 亭 記

禹之所治大水七.岷山導江其一也.江出荊州.合沅湘合漢沔以輸之海.其為汪洋誕漫蛟龍水物之所憑.風濤晦冥之變怪.壯載.是為勇者之觀也.

吾兄晦叔為人慷慨.喜義勇而有大志.能讀前史.識其盛衰之跡.聽其言豁如也.困於位卑.無所用以老.然其胸中亦已壯矣.

夫壯者之樂.非登崇高之丘.臨萬里之流.不足以為適.今吾兄家荊州臨大江.捨汪洋誕漫壯載勇者之所觀.而方規地為池.方不數丈.治亭其上.反以為樂何在.蓋其擊壺而歌.解衣而飲.陶乎不以汪洋為大.以為方丈為局.則其心豈不浩然哉.夫視福貴而不動.處卑困而浩然其心者.真勇者也.

*Record to the Pavillon of Roaming Fishes*¹⁴

Ouyang Xiu

There are seven great [sites] of streaming waters that had been regulated by Yu the Great. And one among them is where the Min Mountains guide the Yangzi. The Yangzi leaves Jingzhou, unites with the Ruan and the Xiang, and with the Han and the Mian carries them into the ocean. *This makes him the* immeasurable swelling carrier of water dragons and other beings belonging to the depths, the miraculously changing surface of windy waves in brightness and darkness. How vigorous! This, indeed, is the aspect of the heroic!

My elder brother Huishu is a person full of noble passion (慷慨). He likes morally motivated heroism and follows high aims. Capable of reading old dynasty chronicles, he analyzes [the reasons for] progress and decadence and, while listening to his words, one suddenly becomes enlightened. The inferiority of his official posts is embarrassing, so that he has not even enough to consume until his old age. Nevertheless, in his bosom he stays vigorous!

But, isn't it the joy of the vigorous that without ascending to the eminent lofty mountains or approaching the streams of ten thousand li nothing could be enough to delight them? Thus, my elder brother, living with his family not far off from the Yangzi in Jingzhou, measured a piece of ground for making a pool to bestow [himself] with what would be an aspect of the immeasurable swelling vigour of the heroic. Limited to just a couple of square zhang,

¹⁴ Ouyang 1994, 457.

a pavilion was placed on its side—so what could keep him from enjoying [the place]! Whenever he “hangs his goblet [on a branch] to sing” or “loosened [the belt of] his robe to drink” he was happy and serene not by making the Immeasurable the Greatest, but by bending to what he had made his own measure [yi wei fang zhang wei ju]. And—departing from the latter—how could his soul not become unlimited! Indeed, only those who stay unmoved facing wealth and luxury and keep their unlimited soul while placed below [their capacity] on embarrassing [official posts], only those are the true heroes!

Following a general scheme in Chinese literary style, Ouyang Xiu first parallels the lore of landscape scenery—the Yangzi not far from his brother’s family residence—with praise of a personal character. In striking clarity the characteristics inherent in both landscape and personality are named: *vigour* 壯 (*zhuang*) and *heroism* 勇 (*yong*). The parallels become more subtle and suggestive as soon as we go into the details of the first two paragraphs (in the translation): the Yangzi enriches its vigour and irresistible energy fed by the other rivers, but thanks to his ‘individual’ and overwhelming will to stream forth—so does the brother by concentrating on *morally motivated heroism* 義勇 (*yi yong*) and by following *high aims* 大志 (*da zhi*), enriching his personal vigour by studying and discussing language and examples of the historical classics. The landscape of the river, an image of time as a continuum, coincides with the intellectual ideal of Song literati to close the broken chain which connected them with their ancestors in bygone ages.

But the river doubtlessly took the prominent place it deserves in nature, though brother Huishu did not succeed in doing so in the bureaucratic hierarchy. This is where the problem starts. Struck by his own fate, a man might become inclined to lamentation. Losing all balance, he would pathetically enchant others and suffer a tragic end, as exercised by Qu Yuan, the early poet whose singular influence sprinkled Chinese classical poetry with many reminiscences on the more Western theme of disruption between soul and world, also introducing decadence and disease as possible and sometimes unavoidable characteristics of personality even before they were smoothed to fit into the classical styles of later ages.

At this moment the paradox happens: landscape and personality are reintegrated in a frame, the infinite (landscape) and the individual (character) are reunited in a restricted scheme—in this text it is the pool-pavilion-garden. For Ouyang, this is the frame measured out to situate the individual person in infinite space. In this ‘situation’ [one possible meaning of the character 局, translated in the context of the sentence 以為方丈為局 as ‘by bending to what he had made his own measure’], the esoteric breath-based balance and harmony of mind and environment is recreated. The same frame fixing not a perspective from subject to object but a ‘situation’ from which the individual character pervades and a landscape reappears in the reduced text-forms of Tang and later regulated verse or in the selected vista and strictly reduced

elements of Song landscape paintings.¹⁵ Even in less restricted forms of verse, distance is usually created by framing a certain aspect of landscape into the restricted metre of a couplet, which is placed like a window into the less restricted text. Seen from this side, the author's brother Huishu, although not described as a poet or painter, creates landscapes in the same way as poets or painters did: he ventures *to bestow* [himself] 捨 (*she*) with an *aspect* 觀 (*guan*) of vigour and greatness that is as much an intrinsic part of his personality as it is discoverable (and even measurable!) in nature and landscape. Doubtlessly, the practice of fine arts as individual mental therapies had become customary among Chinese literati long before the idea appeared in the West.

Conclusion

Why call the title of this essay the act of bringing together landscape and personality and the way its practise was developed within the narrow circles of the traditional literati elite a *translation*? We can be sure that this idea would have stayed completely absent from the minds of simultaneous cultivators of landscape and personality such as Ouyang Xiu and his brother. But the task is not to communicate with them in an open common language. It is to understand their art in our own terms of understanding cultural processes. Translation supposedly works between two languages as different and complex systems of signs. But more important for my choice was a presumption without which any translation would be an effort in vain: that the work is worth a translation and that both systems equal each other in their potential to serve an individual and unique work of art. By *not* understanding landscape (or better *shan-shui*) as an object to be described but primarily as a *system of signs that can be read or deciphered*, landscape comes close to language in the sense that it becomes speech—even without employing any words, as in paintings. 'Translating' the real manifestations of a human character into the reality of a landscape means also to prove the potential of this landscape by relating it to the ethic and cultural potential of the human character. This relation, of course, never seems to be a deliberate and subjective act and probably never is. Before the character is translated into landscape, landscape translates itself into human sentiment as Valérie Lavoix formulates: 'l'avènement (ou variation) du sentiment est produit par le transport de l'esprit animé vers et par les figures des choses du monde (*xiang*)—par leur communication, selon un traduction alternative'.¹⁶ The art work itself discloses both at once: the superior human character as well as the unique *shan-shui*, as harmonious and enduring manifestations of the *dao*.

¹⁵ Hu-Sterk 2003, 179–200.

¹⁶ Lavoix 2004, 51.

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Frank KRAUSHAAR, Ph.D (fkraushaar@hotmail.com), Director of the Research Institute of Asian Studies at the Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Latvia

✉: Āzijas pētniecības institūts, Visvalža iela 4a, LV-1050 Rīga